



## Bhutan's Snowman Trek

**N**o, it's impossible to write that, the Snowman Trek is much more. It is generally presented as the "Legendary Snowman Trek", as the hardest trek in the world. It is even said that more climbers have reached the summit of Everest than have completed the entire trek. This last statement is obviously very close to the truth. In 2022, the number of summiters for the roof of the world is approaching 7,000. As Bhutan has only been open to tourism since 1974, and only in dribs and drabs, if we focus solely on the Snowman trek, with 30 people per year managing to reach both ends of the trek, we are a long way from the Everest figures.

But what makes this trek so complicated?

The number of days, isolation, and altitude are factors to be taken into account as with many other Himalayan journeys. So, why so little success on this one? The answer is quite simple, trivial some would say: the weather.

Too early, the monsoon will put a lot of trails to the test and may cover some passes over 5000m with snow. Too late and the slightest depression coming from the Bay of Bengal will block all the passes. This trek can sometimes be seen as a great Himalayan lottery.

Once you take into account the relentless terrain data, the Snowman Trek remains one of the trips that any Himalayan lover can dream of, a long-distance trek to discover a country on foot. All that re-

mains is for you to make a choice, that of the end point of your trek. Indeed, there are two branches that are recognised as Snowman Trek. The first one is in the east and leads to the Bhumthang region and the second one is in the south towards Nikachhu and favours the old glacial valleys where a myriad lakes bloom.

As everywhere in the world, roads are progressing, as is electricity, and one must come to terms with the fact that nothing is carved in stone. Certain modernity allows the inhabitants of the most remote valleys of the Himalayas to enjoy a certain comfort. However, this large-scale trek meets all expectations.

During these 24 days of walking, monotony never sets in. From 3,200m to more than 5,000m, it is in a rich vegetal and mineral layering that we evolve. From the densest forests to the most austere moraines, the hiker discovers a landscape that never ceases to evolve with each valley and each pass. The itinerary takes us to the most remote villages of this part of the country, allowing us to appreciate the authenticity of Bhutanese culture.

The Snowman Trek, cutting across towering passes, takes us some of the forgotten villages in the fold of the mighty Himalaya.

Laya is the first. Here, the change of scenery is total. The Layaps have their own language, their own customs and their own traditions. The women wear strange pointed bamboo hats, only those of a certain age use them on a daily basis. But don't be pessimistic;

the young are taking over. We must let history be made.

As for me, I have a soft spot for the village of Thangza, the remotest of all, the last one before passing the life-saving passes. The one that marks the entrance to the great glacial cirque of 7,315m Jhomolhari, a village where only caravans arriving from Woche supply this hamlet at the end of the world.

In this late autumn, life is hectic. The women thresh the barley ears to recover the grains. The resulting tsampa (flour) remains the food necessary for survival at over 4,000m, as in the whole Himalayan arc. No winnowing here. Once the barley is brought to the threshing floor, it must be threshed, then the grains separated and sorted from the husk (the impurities). Then the last action is to call the wind. That is to say, whistle to make it rise in power. This last separation is essential to recover only the grains. Bringing the loaded bags back to the storage place for the winter will be the last effort of the day. And later, the last step, the grains will be roasted to grind them. All that remains is to taste the flour with its nutty flavour.

It is, therefore, with pleasure that we wander through the different hamlets that make up the village of Thangza. Participating in the local life before returning to the camp is a privilege for the trekkers who have committed themselves to the Snowman Trek.

Two small walls close the valley. A small wooden board with a target is stuck in the ground just below them, 150m apart. Customs have a long

life. Indeed, this is the archery stadium that every village in Bhutan has. Even if the bows have evolved (they come directly from the USA), the goal is the same: to hit the target.

Competitions are numerous and are an excuse to meet, to get together and to exchange from one village to another. The bets are small, but the winners remain proud.

The yaks are rounded up to be taken down to the valley. The big males will manage and come down if they decide to, only if.

But Thangza has another special feature. This is where the Snowman Trek will be a success or not. If the next pass is snowed in, trekkers will have to find an alternative. In fact, there are two. Return to the village of Woche and try a rather complex cut to join the track that goes to Gasa, hoping that the Gonju pass can be crossed or (and this is less poetic) call a helicopter. There is still the possibility of spending the whole winter waiting for the spring, but there will be a rather (very) important additional cost.

In 2022, we must acknowledge that the spirit of Tsangpa Gyare has certainly been on our side. It was this lama who inspired the birth of the Drukpa Kagyu religion. He is said to have heard nine dragons (druk) in the sky while he was looking for the ideal location (in the 12th century) for his monastery.

Indeed, a caravan of yaks that had just left their mountain pastures arrived at Thangza a few days before us. They crossed all the passes

that we must also. And without these extreme bovids, there is no success. Three more passes of more than 5,000m to cut, following their tracks. But in the snow, it is a formidable task. The Snowman Trek remains difficult and you must always keep in mind the final objective. Numerous lakes are scattered at the end of the route, the vistas are splendid and the biting cold eats into the bones.

We left behind us the summits of Jhomolhari and Kangchen Ta (Great Tiger Mount, 6,840m), but those of Teri Gung (7,125m), Jeje-kanphu Gang (7,100m), and Gangche Singye (7,085m) are still visible.

The last summit, Gangkar Puensum (the highest unclimbed mountain in the world (7570m), because climbing is forbidden) and we plunge into the life and vegetation of the lower valleys. The majestic cedars welcome us with serenity before we find the first houses. A tea, a beer, a piece of cake, and we taste with joy this small miracle that concluded Bhutan's famous Snowman Trek.

Any regret? We did not see any Takin. The mountains beckon. Bhutan still has many treasures to be discovered.

*Contributed by  
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