



Through the spokes of a wheel: view of Kabjisa and the Pangrizampa Lhakhang

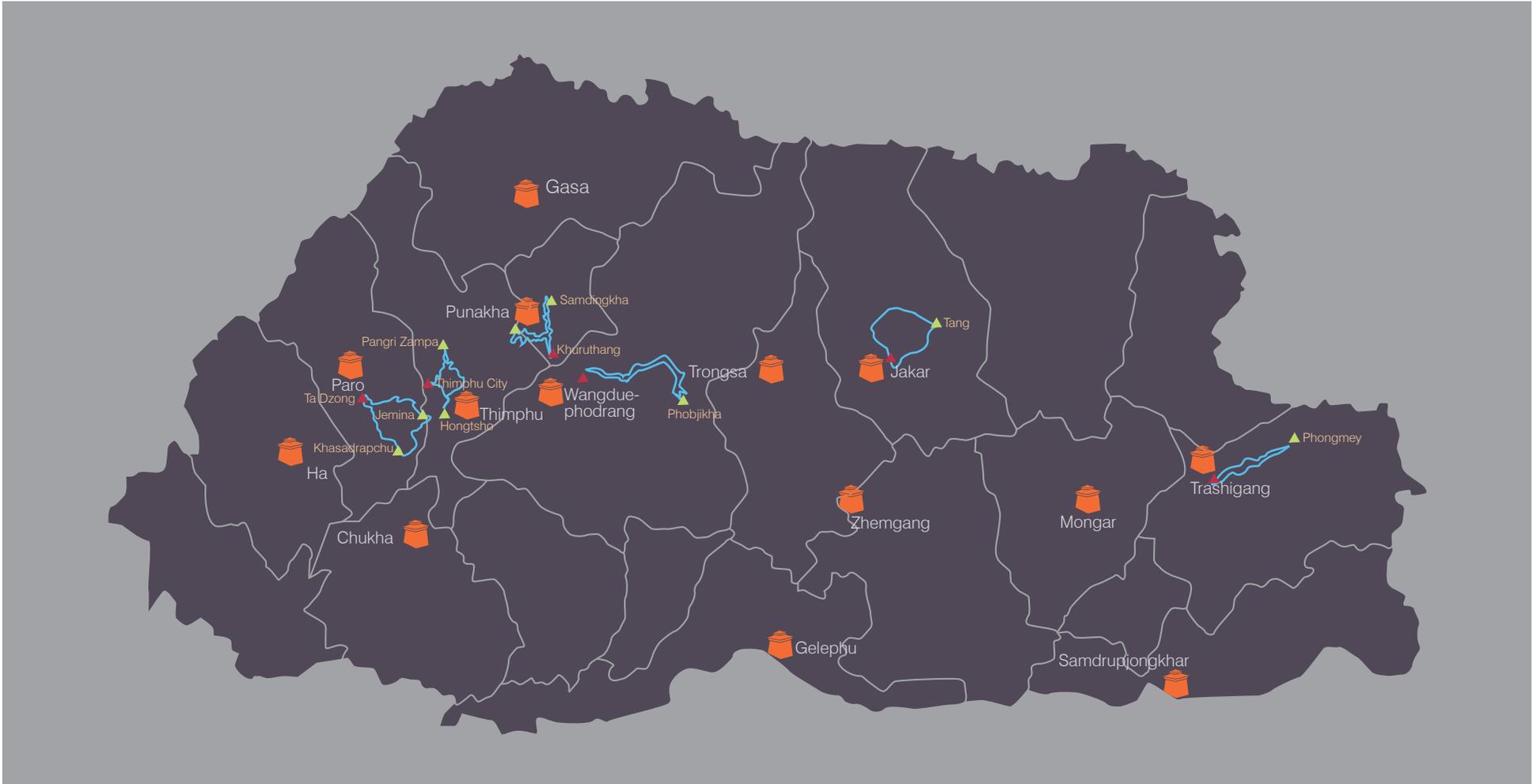
Mountain Biking in Bhutan

Mountain biking in Bhutan is a whole new sport that is steadily gaining popularity amongst the Bhutanese and visitors alike. The country's topography, especially in the western, central and eastern regions, are not the most cycle-friendly but that is precisely why mountain biking is gaining momentum amongst more and more visitors. The mode of transport itself calls for a certain intimacy seldom experienced in vehicles.

With better roads replacing the old and the increasing number of off-road roads, biking is now becoming a very unique and original way of seeing and interacting with the country, people and the Bhutanese environment.

Most biking trips go through well paved roads while others trail on to dirt roads and trails. The traffic is still relatively very light and the experience very intimate. This is the "Road Less Travelled." The

Some of the identified mountain biking trails



Established and potential biking routes

- 

Thimphu City Clock Tower Square
- Pangri Zampa - Hongtsho
 - 

Khuruthang Town- Samdingkha -
Punakha
 - 

Jakar Town - Tang
 - 

Ta Dzong Museum - Jemina -
Khasadrapchu
 - 

Wangduephodrang Town - Phobjikha
 - 

Trashigang Town - Phongme
- ▲ Start/End point ▲ Major Town/Village

more adventurous have the option of making side excursions for more “off-the-road” ventures if preferred. The surface accommodates most types of frame styles: from MTB, Hybrid, and Road, depending on your cycling style and experience. Biking trails mostly meander through small towns and villages and rural areas; it's just you, your bike, the tour group and the agrarian and natural scenery. Biking in Bhutan allows you many opportunities for self reflection along with the absorbing, rich environment. There are also numerous opportunities for optional hikes with a bit of climbing thrown in.

There are some challenging climbs with one in particular that is more than seven hours. You peddle the pads over two miles (3,400 meters) above sea level. The effort made is equally rewarded with a view and an experience that is as rare as anything in this increasingly globalizing and monotonous world. Riders should have an adequate level of fitness and stamina and be experienced enough in the art of mountain biking.

Tours are fully supported by a van following riders. The van allows riders the option to sit in and take a break.

Description of Trails

Thimphu - Pangrizampa - Hongtsho

Physical Description

The Pangrizampa – Hongtsho trail starts from the Thimphu Town Square (known locally as the Clock Tower) and continues biking along the Thimphu - Dechencholing highway until the junction at Dechencholing – Pangrizampa and Dechencholing – Tango/Cheri road. From here we follow the dirt motor vehicle road until Pangrizampa (the bridge of Pangri). From Pangrizampa the biking ascends along the logging road until Taba Top at an average gradient of 11%. The logging road ends here.

We continue biking until Thimphu City to make a loop. A map illustrating the trail is provided in the following page under the title “Pangrizampa – Hongtsho Mountain Biking Trail”.

The trail falls between an altitude of 2,300 and 3,700m above sea level. The total length of trail loop is 46 km.



Blue pine - coniferous forests along the Thimphu - Pangrizampa – Hongtsho Trail



Physical details

Chainage (km+m)	Location	Altitude (Meter)	Average Gradient (%)
0+000 – 8+000	Thimphu City – Pangrizampa	2350 – 2420	+5
8+000 – 15+000	Pangrizampa - Taba Top	3090	+11
15+000 – 18+621	Taba Top - Sinchula Road Forest Junction	3500	+10
18+621 – 22+621	Sinchula Road Junction – Sinchula Pass	3650	+7
22+621 – 31+621	Sinchula Pass – Hongtsho	2920	-10
31+621 – 39+621	Hongtsho – Semtokha	2250	-9
39+621 – 45+621	Semtokha – Thimphu City Square	2350	-3

Flora and Fauna

The trail is home to vegetation ranging from blue pine forests in the lower valley to mixed coniferous forest at higher altitudes. The forest type is basically coniferous in nature which supports less wildlife than broad leaf forests. The main vegetation found here are Blue Pine, Poplar, Oak, Hemlock, Spruce, Fir, Larch, Juniper, Rhododendron et al.



Natural gradients on most off-road trails pose quite a challenge



Pangrizampa Lhakhang is a few minutes ride away from Thimphu Town

Socio-cultural glances

Some important cultural entities that can be viewed by biking along the Thimphu -Pangrizampa – Hongtsho trail are the Tashi Chho Dzong, the Parliament building, Dechenphodrang Lhakhang, Dechencholing Palace, Pangrizampa Lhakhang and Kabjisa village. From the Taba Top, a bird's eye-view of the following monasteries are visible: Dodedra, Tango and Cheri monasteries. From Sinchula Pass a glorious vista awaits the rider in the form of the snow capped Himalayan eastern range, including Jhumolhari. As the trail descends towards Hongtsho, clear views of Hongtsho valley overlooking the Trashigang monastery across the valley can be seen. As the journey ends, you come across Semtokha Dzong, the oldest in Bhutan and after about 5 km ride from here, you will be back at the Clock Tower Square.



Punakha



A vantage view of Khuruthang Town, Punakha

Punakha, the old capital, is a pleasant sub-tropical valley. It is home to the impressive Pungthang Dewachenpoi Phodrang Dzong- the administrative and religious centre of the district. In winter it is home to the Bhutanese Central Monk Body. Since the 1680s the dzong has also been the site of a continuous vigil over the earthly body of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founder of the country, which lies in a special chamber in the dzong. Built by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century, the fortress stands at the confluence of two rivers- the Pho (male) Chhu and Mo (female) Chhu Rivers.

Khuruthang – Samdingkha – Punakha

Physical Description

Although the proposed biking journey is over 17 km, the new trail construction is slightly over 7 km. The proposed journey will take off at Khuruthang and stay along the feeder road until the footpath suspension bridge at Samdingkha.

From Samdingkha the new trail mostly follows along the footpath at an average gradient of 10% until Punakha Dzong where the trail connects to the road. The terrain topography of the new trail is generally steep exceeding 100% in some stretches. However, the trail is an up-gradation of the footpath.

After reaching Punakha Dzong, you keep following the asphalt road along the Mo Chhu till Khuruthang town, a place to stretch the arms and spend a night at the cosy hotels.

Topographical details on the proposed new trail construction is provided in Table 3-15.

Table 3-15. Side slope (Topography) details along the proposed construction

Chainage	Altitude (Meter)	Average Gradient (%)	Average Side Slope (%)	Remarks
0+000	1280			Samdingkha Suspension Bridge
2+600	1280	+9, -5	40	Start of Critical Gorge Area
2+730	1280	+17, -9	70	Critical Gorge Area
6+330	1290	±7	56	Top of the Rocky Cliff
7+230	1240	-15	67	Near Crematorium



Flora & Fauna

Chir pine is the dominant forest with very little undergrowths. These forests are poor in terrestrial birds. However, along river courses plenty of water birds can be spotted especially during winters. Some of the resident water birds are: Ruddy Shelduck, Common Shelduck, Mallard, Crested Kingfisher, White-throated Kingfisher, Great Cormorant, River Lapwing and Ibisbill.



The Punakha Dzong is a rich visual splendour. A calm Mo Chhu glides by



High on the mountains: Bikers along a typical Bhutanese road

Socio-cultural Glances

Punakha is the ancient capital of Bhutan and the winter residence of the Central Monastic body. The Punakha Dzong is one of the most impressive in Bhutan- built at the confluence of the rivers Pho Chhu and the Mo Chhu. It has survived many natural disasters (the most recent were floods caused by glacial lake outburst upstream of the Pho Chhu.) The trail passes through several villages: Jimithang, Manakha, Jara, Samdingkha, Jangkhorlo and Tempakha.

Physical details: The Khuruthang – Samdingkha – Punakha Trail

Chainage	Location	Altitude (Meter)	Average Gradient (%)
0+000 – 6+000	Khuruthang – Manakha	1240 – 1240 m	+2
6+000 – 14+000	Samdingkha	1280 m	+2 (Except the few zigs before Samdingkha is around 8%)
14+000 – 21+256	Punakha Dzong	1240 m	±10
21+256 – 27+256	Khuruthang	1240 m	±1



Side slope (Topography) details

Chainage	Altitude (Meter)	Average Gradient (%)	Average Side Slope (%)	Remarks
0+000	1280			Samdingkha Suspension Bridge
2+600	1280	+9, -5	40	Start of Critical Gorge Area
2+730	1280	+17, -9	70	Critical Gorge Area
6+330	1290	±7	56	Top of the Rocky Cliff
7+230	1240	-15	67	Near Crematorium

Paro Dzongkhag



Paro Dzong with Ta Dzong (the National Museum) in the background

There are two potential biking trails: Jemina (in Thimphu) – Ta Dzong (in Paro); and Wochu – Dzongdrakha – Bondey trails. The trails snake through pastoral landscapes and stunning sceneries.

Jemina – Ta Dzong

©Tashi Loday



The Ta Dzong is Bhutan's National Museum. It is noted for its peculiar conical structure and displays such as the "Horse's Egg"

Physical Description

The Jemina – Ta Dzong mountain biking trail lies between an altitude of 2280 – 3600m above sea level. To make a loop, it is suggested that the journey trail start from the Paro Town Square and continue bike along the Paro – Thimphu Highway until Khasadrapchhu. From here, you bike across the bridge at Khasadrapchhu and follow the asphalt road through the narrow Jemina valley. The logging road to Jedekha starts from the industrial estate.

The logging road ascends at an average gradient of 11% till Jedekha, where the actual biking trail begins. From Jedekha the trail until Jele Dzong Pass climbs at an average gradient of 8%. The topographic terrain is mild till the Jele Dzong Pass. It does not exceed 70%.



Tachoe Lhakhang along the Paro - Thimphu highway. (right) Ruins from another time

From the pass the trail descends continuously and in some places the trail bends sharply at an average gradient of 15% until it meets the farm road. The farm road ends near the Ta Dzong gate. You follow the asphalt road to get back to the starting point. The topographic terrain from the pass till Ta Dzong is very mild with an average side slope of 40%. In occasional bends the side slope goes up to 80% to a stretch of about 50m. The map illustrating the trail is provided below.

Physical details: The Jemina – Ta Dzong Trail

Chainage (0km+000km)	Location	Altitude (Meter)	Average Gradient (%)
0+000 – 4+000	Paro City Square – Bondey	2280 – 2230 m	0
4+000 – 24+000	Bondey – Chuzom	2160 m	±2
24+000 – 39+000	Chuzom – Khasadrapchu	2240 m	+5
39+000 – 44+000	Khasadrapchu – Jemina	2450 m	+6
44+000 – 57+500	Jemina – Jedekha	3235 m	+11
57+500 – 61+443	Jedekha - Jele Dzong	3560 m	+8
61+443 – 67+563	Jele Dzong – Damchena	2915 m	-15
67+563 – 72+563	Damchena - Ta Dzong	2740 m	-11
72+563 – 77+563	Ta Dzong - Paro City Square	2280 m	- 8

Side slope (Topography) details along the proposed construction

Chainage	Altitude (Meter)	Average Gradient (%)	Average Side Slope (%)	Remarks
0+000	3235	0	31	Jedekha Junction
3+943	3560	+ 8%	29	Unitl Jele Dzong
5+194	3300	- 15%	44	Slide prone area
6+269	3220	- 15%	36	
8+146	2915	- 15%	end	Junction with farm road

Flora & Fauna

There are four type of vegetation along the trail. The vegetation changes as the altitude elevates. Blue pine forest is prominent in the lower altitude, mixed coniferous forest in the middle range, fir forest and Juniper forest around the pass. The main tree species are Blue pine, Poplar, Walnut, Oak, Hemlock, Spruce, Fir, Larch, Juniper, Rhododendron et al.



A lush clearing along the Blue Pine forests on the Jemina trail



In Bhutan, it is Mountain Biking and the art of maneuvering meandering roads

Although the forest type is not home to bird life, a few bird species that roost here are Nutcrackers, Yellow-billed Magpie, Whistling Thrush, Darjeeling Woodpecker, Kalij Pheasant, Blood Pheasant, Coal Tit and Wood Snipe. Wild animals are elusive but droppings confirm the presence of Wild cats, Deer, and Leopards.