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DESTINATIONS  
TO VISIT

# HAA

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UNRAVELING A MYSTERY



# WELCOME TO HAA

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Haa unravels like a mystery...a distant lore. The last district in Bhutan to open to tourism, Haa takes its place as a destination for true explorers, those willing to tread onto ancient trails - in a quest for raw, untouched natural landscape and stories. Here, the realms of nature and the ancient meet on ethereal mountain peaks, find each other in the calls of yak herders in the highlands, and immerse in a cultural realm that truly positions Haa as Bhutan's Last Frontier.



Haa's history is deeply intertwined with Bhutan's spiritual and cultural evolution, dating back to ancient times when it was regarded as a sacred valley.

The region has long been a site of Bön and Buddhist traditions, with some of Bhutan's earliest religious structures built here. The great Tibetan master Drubthob Thangtong Gyalpo mentioned Haa in his biography, calling it "Hay," a word denoting breath-taking wonder. The valley is also home to legendary protector deities, most notably Aup

Chundu, who was once a formidable spirit but later pledged allegiance to Guru Padmasambhava, becoming Haa's guardian.

Ancient temples such as Lhaxhang Karpo and Lhaxhang Nagpo, said to be established in the 7th century by Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo, symbolize the valley's deep spiritual roots. These sacred sites, along with a network of hermitages, monasteries, and chortens, have shaped Haa's identity as a center of mysticism and devotion.



Over the centuries, the Haaps have maintained their rich traditions – festivals like Bönkor and Lomba, highland yak herding, and a strong connection to nature – ensuring that their cultural heritage remains alive and integral to the valley’s future.

Haa is not just another scenic valley – it is a living archive of Bhutanese identity, spiritual resilience, and ecological harmony, where myths like that of Ap Chhundu, ancient shamanic traditions,

and remote hermitages continue to thrive, largely unrecorded in mainstream narratives. This brand strategy was designed to retell Haa’s story through a modern yet culturally respectful lens, with the goal of attracting a new generation of mindful travelers seeking authenticity, quiet exploration, and deeper connection.





# THINGS TO DO *in Haa*







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## Scenic drive to Tergola

Located about an hour's drive from Haa town, Tergola pass sits at approximately 4,135 meters (13,566 ft), making it one of the highest mountain passes in the country. The route winds through dense rhododendron and juniper forests, occasionally opening up to reveal sweeping views of the Himalayan range, including the world's third-highest peak, Mt. Kanchenjunga. Often referred to locally as the "hidden treasure door," the area around the pass is steeped in spiritual significance and remains largely untouched by mainstream tourism- you may only encounter local yak herders.

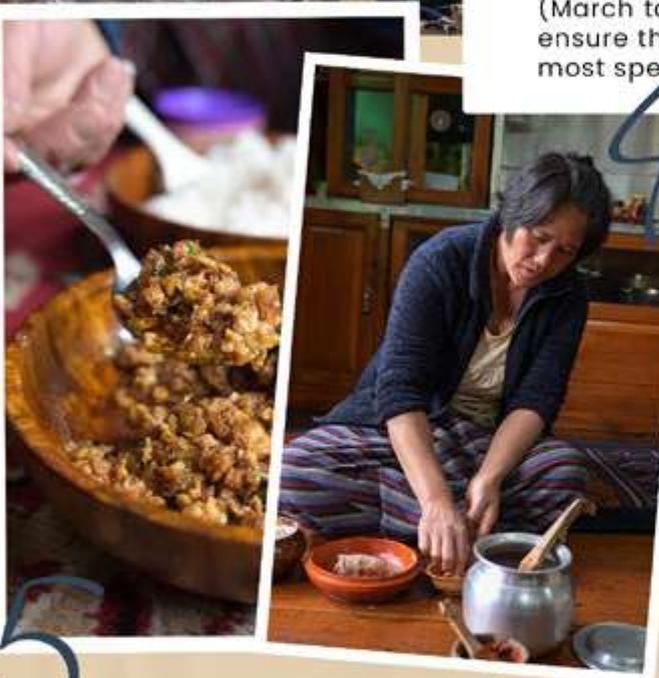
Enjoy a picnic lunch at the top of the pass or use it as the starting point for the famous Tergo-La Trek, a multi-day journey that explores the surrounding alpine meadows and sacred lakes. When planning your visit, aim for the spring (March to May) or autumn (September to October) months to ensure the roads are clear and the mountain views are at their most spectacular.



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## Hospitality in Haa

Experience the warmth of Bhutanese hospitality through your home or hotel stay in Haa. The best place to try authentic, homemade cuisine as it is made everyday is undoubtedly a homestay! Often nestled amidst terraced fields and surrounded by nature, these traditional homes give you a solid taste of rural life. Comfortable rooms and amenities round it out to make it feel like home. If you're looking for an accommodation option more on the classical side, check out the plethora of top hotels that have blossomed in Haa, from three star options such as Haa Heritage Hotel and Risum Resort to the riverside Jimmys Lodge and centrally located Layul Hotel. Hotels have room options extending from single to double deluxe, and often feature an on-site restaurant.



## Star-gazing in Chelela

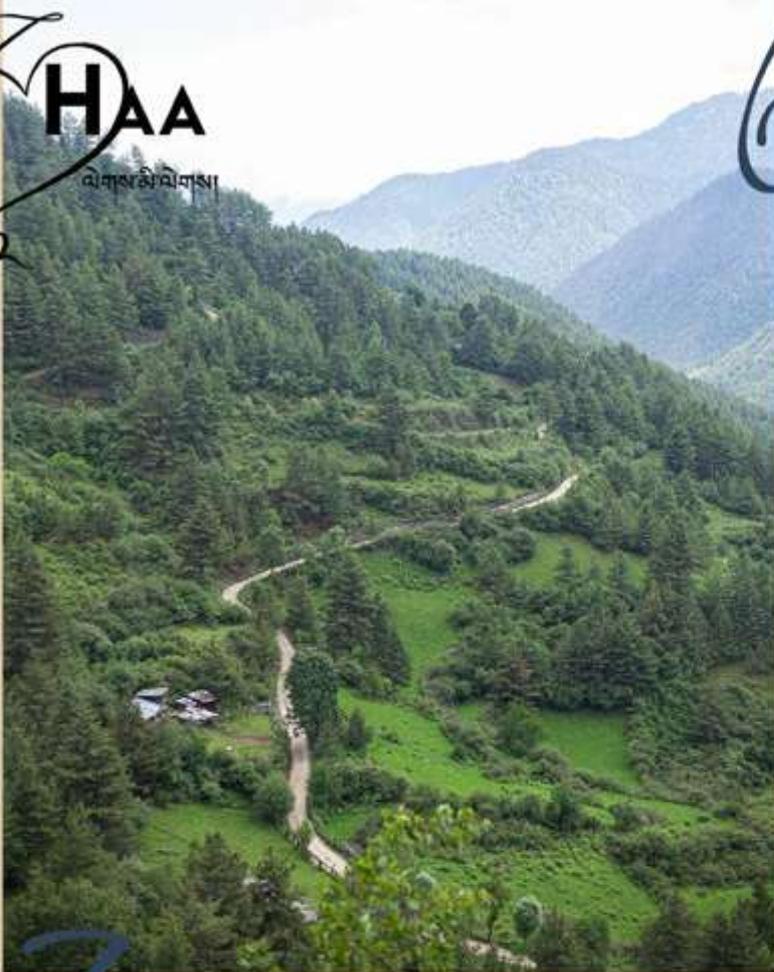
At an elevation of 3,988 meters (13,083 ft), Chele La Pass is the highest motorable point in Bhutan, providing an unparalleled vantage point for stargazing. Located about an hour drive from Haa town, the pass sits far above the light pollution of the valleys, offering a sky so clear that the Milky Way often appears with startling definition. Because it separates the Paro and Haa valleys, the pass offers a 360-degree horizon where the silhouettes of sacred peaks like Mt. Jomolhari and Jichu Drake frame the celestial display.

To experience the stars here, ask your guide to arrange an evening stargazing session- catch a sunset on the drive up to Chelela, and dress in heavy layers. Temperatures at this altitude can drop well below freezing once the sun sets. Bringing a headlamp and a tripod for long-exposure photography. Top it off with a thermos of warm butter tea or hot chocolate.



# HAA

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## *Panorama and other hiking experiences in Haa*

Explore Haa's pristine beauty through its often untouched hiking trails. From serene hillsides to challenging mountain paths, trails cater to all levels of hikers. Breathe in the fresh mountain air as you traverse through lush forests, revealing panoramic views that will leave you in awe. Speaking of panoramic, don't miss the signature Haa hike: Haa Panorama Trail.

Overlooking a splendid view of Haa valley and four major Goempa's in upper Haa, the Haa Panorama trail passes through Juneydrag and Katsho Goempa. Get the best view of the three Meri Puensum peaks while meandering through a well kept, well marked trail in the vicinity of Haa Town. This 11-kilometer, 6-hour hike goes through pine forests and has a maximum elevation of 3150 meters. The trail begins from Yangthang Monastery and ends at Wangtsha village. Enjoy a mid-hike lunch at the pastures of Kathso Eco Camp or under a rest canopy after the first segment.

If you want to test your endurance, embark on the multi-day Nubtshonapata trek or the Jobay Tsho Trek.

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## *Try unique Haa cuisine like Phillu and Maasha*

Haa Valley offers a culinary experience that is the epitome of Bhutanese indulgence, centered on organic, highland ingredients that echo ancient traditions. Because yaks are integral to life in these high altitudes, much of the local cuisine is built upon rich milk and cheese. Among the most unique offerings is Phillu, a rare fermented cheese that surprises even the most seasoned connoisseurs. It is painstakingly crafted by pouring boiled milk over stripped birch twigs three times a day for two weeks until a creamy residue builds up. The resulting stringy, bitter cheese is scraped from the branches and sold as a high-value delicacy, sometimes fetching nearly 10,000 Nu per bottle.

For those with adventurous palates, Maa Sha represents perhaps the most specialized of all Haap dishes. This delicacy consists of yak meat that has been slow-dried and fermented in cloth for several months. This lengthy process allows the meat to develop a pungent, intense flavor that is highly sought after by locals. Reserved primarily for special occasions, Maa Sha reflects the resourcefulness of highland culture, where fermentation was historically essential for preserving nutrition through the long Himalayan winters.



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## *Witness the Meri Puensum mountains*

Dominating the skyline of the Haa Valley are the Meri Puensum, three remarkably similar conical hills that are considered the "Sister Hills" or "Three Brothers" of Haa. According to local belief, these peaks represent the three great Bodhisattvas: Manjushri (the god of wisdom), Vajrapani (the god of power), and Avalokiteshvara (the god of compassion). These sacred landmarks are not just a geographical feature but are the spiritual guardians of the valley, deeply woven into the identity of the Haa people. Visitors often find that the best views of these peaks come from the valley floor or during the ascent to nearby monasteries, where the symmetry of the hills creates a striking visual harmony against the sky.

Hike the Meri Puensum trail or the Haa Panorama trail to get up close and personal with these peaks. Whether you are viewing them through the morning mist or at sunset when the peaks glow with golden light, Meri Puensum offers a sense of profound serenity.

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## *Try Kaapchi Jaapa for breakfast in Haa*

A quintessential way to begin a chilly morning in the Himalayas is with a bowl of Kaapchi Jaapa, a traditional Haap breakfast that provides the energy needed for high-altitude living. This hearty dish consists of roasted wheat dough that is kneaded by hand to a consistency similar to the famous Hoentey dumpling. Historically used as an energizing snack for travelers and farmers, it has evolved into a beloved morning staple that emphasizes the region's reliance on hardy mountain grains.

To eat like a local, you should enjoy your Kaapchi Jaapa served with freshly prepared cottage butter or warm milk. It is best paired with a piping hot cup of Suja (Bhutanese butter tea), which complements the earthy flavors of the roasted wheat.



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## *Visit Juney Drak (the Tigers Nest of Haa)*

Located on a dramatic cliffside overlooking Bhutan's Haa Valley, Juney Dra is a significant hermitage accessible via a scenic hike through pine forests or a rugged drive from Katsho village. The journey to the site involves passing through traditional mud archways and across small bridges, culminating in a gentle climb that rewards visitors with breathtaking views of the valley floor and surrounding ridges. Known as "the Tigers Nest of Haa," the hermitage serves as a tranquil space for contemplation, currently maintained by a small group of nuns who live nearby in quiet devotion and prayer.

Spiritually, Juney Dra is deeply revered for its connection to Guru Rinpoche, who is said to have subdued a demon at this very spot, leaving behind physical impressions on the cliffside as a testament to his triumph. The site also holds a unique link to the Tibetan tantric master Machig Labdrön, housing what is believed to be her right footprint. By blending these rich religious legends with the natural beauty of the landscape, Juney Dra remains a vital cultural landmark that embodies the harmonious relationship between faith and nature in the Haa Valley.





# RONGTSE TSHECHU

## Have you ever heard of a Tshechu festival in a forest?

Hidden deep in the forests of southern Haa, Rongtse Tshechu feels like a secret gently revealed to those willing to journey off the familiar path. Unlike most tshechus in Bhutan - celebrated within the stone courtyards of monasteries and dzongs - Rongtse Tshechu unfolds in the heart of nature itself. Set beside dry riverbeds and surrounded by towering trees, the forest becomes both sanctuary and stage.

As dawn breaks, soft rays of sunlight filter through the tall pines, illuminating masked dancers who emerge as if from the forest itself. The rhythmic beats of drums echo through the woods, blending seamlessly with birdsong and the rustle of leaves. In this setting, the dances feel ancient and elemental - performed not just for spectators, but for the land, the spirits, and the unseen guardians of the place. Here, the forest breathes with the festival. Prayer flags flutter gently among branches, devotees sit on the earth itself, and tradition feels inseparable from the land. Rongtse Tshechu is not merely witnessed; it is experienced - an ethereal convergence of culture, devotion, and nature, where Bhutan's spiritual heritage reveals itself in its most raw and magical form.





## Introduction

Inaugurated by His Majesty The King on 23 December 2017, following the 110th National Day celebrations in Haa, the Rongtse Nye Tshechu has since grown into a profound spiritual occasion. The event is conducted jointly by the Dzongkhag Administration and the Gewogs of Sangbaykha and Gakiling. Since 2023, local mask dancers and performers have been from the two Gewogs. The annual Rongtse Nye Tshechu is held coinciding with the 10th day of the 10th Bhutanese month, as it has unfailingly been observed every year. Hundreds of devotees gathered to offer prayers and receive blessings at this sacred site. One of the key highlights of the festival is also the blessings from the Guru Thongdrel.

## Getting There

If you're starting from Haa town, it takes a 3 hour drive ascending to Tergola and a speedy descent

to southern Haa to reach this destination. The farm roads are bumpy and dilapidated due to the recent flash floods. The altitude is much lower here (around 800 ms) and the air is warmer. You can choose to either stay at the Soembaykha Eco Camp, a brand new ecotourism initiative by locals here or at local guest houses at Soembaykha Dungkhag.

The festival ground is another 20 minute drive along precarious cliffs that takes you to the starting point of the mild hike to the ground. The mild 30 minute hike takes you along the Nyachhu (stream) dry river beds during this time of the year. Locals say it's difficult to visit Rongtse Ney during the summers because of the swollen streams. The walk is enjoyable crossing the boulders on the dry river beds and slowly the sound of people at the ground fill the forest.



### **The Tshechu in the Forest**

Arriving at Rongtse Ney Tshechu feels like stepping into a living tapestry of faith, culture, and nature. Set deep within the forests of southern Haa, the festival unfolds in a clearing beside dry riverbeds, where towering trees stand as silent witnesses to centuries of devotion. As dawn breaks, villagers and pilgrims gather on the forest floor, wrapped in their finest kira and gho, sharing food, laughter, and stories before the sacred performances begin.

Throughout the day, visitors witness a rich sequence of masked dances and cultural performances, each carrying layers of spiritual meaning and local tradition. The rhythmic beat of drums, the swirl of brocade costumes, and the echo of cymbals blend seamlessly with birdsong and rustling leaves, creating an atmosphere that feels both intimate and transcendent.

The heart of the festival, however, is the awe-inspiring Guru Rinpoche Thongdrel. Hung amidst the forest, facing the festival ground, this gigantic sacred image draws devotees into quiet reverence. Receiving blessings beneath it, framed by sunlight filtering through the trees, is an experience both humbling and unforgettable.

Rongtse Ney Tshechu is also a powerful social gathering, bringing together communities from across Haa and showcasing the region's remarkable cultural diversity. Beyond the festival, visitors often make a pilgrimage to the nearby Rongtse Ney cave, believed to be the meditation site of Guru Rinpoche and Khandro Yeshey Tshogyal. Walking through these forests, one realizes that Rongtse is not just a destination—it is a journey into Bhutan's

living spiritual landscape. The meditation cave of Guru Rinpoche has seven doorways - each with unique rock formations with sacred significance. The deeper you go into the cave, the narrower and more rugged the cave becomes. If you're visiting Rongtse Ney for the first time, take a local guide with you as the narrow passageways can be quite confusing for first-timers. The seeping waters have also made the ground slippery and the jagged rock protrusions can be dangerous especially without proper torches. Rongtse Ney is a sacred site that holds great historical and religious significance. It is believed to be the secret abode of Guru Rinpoche and Khandro Yeshey Tshogyel, who meditated at the site and left their imprints on the rocks inside the cave.

In Lodruk Chojung, written by the late 69th Je Khenpo Geshe Geden Rinchen, it is stated that a sacred place of Guru Rinpoche called "Rinchen Shong" in southern Haa is Rangtse Ney. The name Rangtse Ney is derived from the prophecy of Guru Rinpoche. The sacred site is also known as Sangbay Ney, which translates as 'the site which is concealed', and sometimes, it is also called Mochu Ney as it is located near the river, Amo Chu.

There is something deeply ethereal about Rongtse Tshechu. The forest becomes a living temple, the earth its courtyard, and the sky its ceiling. Here, tradition breathes in harmony with nature, offering a rare and magical glimpse into Bhutan's spiritual heart, where culture and wilderness exist as one.





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