Dzongs

The Treasure Vase (bumpa) represents the contents of Buddhist teachings and stands for long life and prosperity.

The dzong is one of the most unique architectural forms in Bhutan. Built mainly in the seventeenth century as fortresses and the principal centers of temporal and religious authority, dzongs were usually located in places of great strategic importance. Today, they continue to serve as important administrative and monastic centers.

While every dzong is different, most are divided into two main areas: one for religious purposes and one for government offices. There is often a main courtyard paved with stones, surrounded by multistoried rooms for monks’ living quarters and classrooms. At the center of the dzong is usually a prominent tower-like structure that contains many rooms for religious and other purposes.

Because the dzongs were built as fortresses, there is often a watchtower (ta dzong) nearby. The Ta dzong in Paro, built in the 1640s on the hill above Paro dzong, now houses Bhutan’s National Museum.

(Above) Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel built Punakha dzong at the confluence of Bhutan’s Pho and Mo rivers in 1637. He died while in meditation at the dzong, and his body is preserved in one of its temples. The dzong was the site of the 1907 coronation of the first Druk Gyalpo His Majesty King Ugyen Wangchuck and remains the winter residence of Bhutan’s central monastic community, led by the Je Khenpo. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism.

(Right) Bhutan’s National Museum is housed in the historic Ta dzong (watchtower), which is nestled in the hills above Paro’s Rinpung Dzong. Its rounded, shell-shaped walls are an impressive accomplishment of seventeenth-century Bhutanese architects and builders. Photo copyright Michael Tobias.

The dzong was the site of the 1907 coronation of the first Druk Gyalpo His Majesty King Ugyen Wangchuck and remains the winter residence of Bhutan’s central monastic community, led by the Je Khenpo.