**Press Announcement**

**Bhutan’s annual Royal Highland Festival to be held from October 23-24, 2023 in Laya**

***The two-day festival celebrates the culture and traditions of the nomadic highlander people of Bhutan, and features animal displays, song and dance, medicinal herbs and more…***

**(Thimphu, May 12, 2023):** Bhutan’s [Department of Tourism (DoT)](http://www.bhutan.travel/) has confirmed that the annual Royal Highland Festival will be held from October 23-24, 2023 at Laya in the Gasa district. The festival, which is held at 4,000m above sea level, aims to celebrate, promote and preserve the life and culture of the nomadic highland people of Bhutan, support their economy, exhibit the beauty and wonders of the highlands, and laud their resilience.

Guests attending the two-day festival can enjoy the breathtaking sights and sounds of the high Himalaya, as well as games, parades and competitions showcasing highland animals including yaks, horses and mastiff dogs. Some of the animals are dressed in expensive fabrics with colored hair and adorned bells.  In addition, a variety of cultural programmes will be performed by the Layaps, the indigenous people inhabiting Laya, including traditional songs, dances, poetry recitations and gift offerings. Layaps refer to their homeland as Be-yul – "the hidden land.”

The festival will also feature stalls selling local produce as well as showcasing highland agriculture technology, medicinal herbs and plants, among other things. The festival attracts communities from all over Bhutan and many tribes come down from the High Himalayas to compete in races and showings of their animals. The festival will also feature textile and souvenir stalls, and food stalls displaying local cuisines such as dried yak cheese, butter and alcoholic beverages.

Located in the extreme north-west of Bhutan, Gasa district is home to some of the highest mountain peaks in the country. Over a hundred glacial lakes found at the foot of these mountains feed some of the biggest rivers in the country, including the Phochu and Mochu rivers. With an elevation ranging between 1,500 to 4,500m above sea level, the whole district falls under the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Park and is home to various species of birds and animals such as yak, musk deer, blue sheep, snow leopard, red pandas, snow pigeons, Himalayan black bear, and the national bird and animal of Bhutan, the raven and takin.

Gasa is home to some of the most beautiful and breath-taking high mountain trails in the country, from wide stretches of the famous Snowman trek to the high-altitude trails that take you close to the glacial lakes. The beautiful alpine ecosystem in this region is rich in many species of medicinal plants and herbs used in traditional medicine, including the famous cordyceps. It also has abundant natural hot springs and menchu (medicinal water) that are famous for their healing and medicinal properties.

It’s an adventure to reach the festival ground in Laya; a 6-hour drive from Thimphu till the Tongshida base camp followed by a 4-hour hike up to Laya, alongside an aqua green glacial river. Visitors also have an option of availing a helicopter service to reach the location, but these should be booked well in advance due to limited seats.

One of the highlights of the festival is the 25-km Laya Run that begins from Ponjothang, the point where the motorable road ends. The participants run along the banks of Mochu river till the festival ground. Visitors attending the highland festival have the excellent opportunity to stay at a farmstay with a Layap family; they can wear the Layap dress, eat authentic highlander food, and attend the festival with the family. Visitors can also hike up the mountains surrounding the festival ground to see the stunning, untouched glacial lakes.

“The Royal Highland Festival is one of the most popular annual festivals in the country. Every year, hundreds of people from across the country as well as foreign visitors trek the stunning trails among the Himalayan mountains to attend the festival. Two days of dancing, music, local arts and crafts, and animal parades, the festival celebrates the culture and lifestyle of people who live in the beautiful highlands of Bhutan. Our hope is to raise awareness of Bhutan’s commitment to conserve the glacial mountains, and for visitors to learn and experience the unique culture, traditions and daily lives of the highland people,” concluded Dorji Dhradhul, the Director General of the Department of Tourism.

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**About the Department of Tourism**

The Department of Tourism of Bhutan is responsible for the development and promotion of sustainable tourism in Bhutan. It works to share the Kingdom’s remarkable places, people and experiences with conscious travellers, guided by the principles of high value, low volume tourism.

**For media enquiries please contact:**

Carissa Nimah, Chief Marketing Officer, Department of Tourism

cnimah@moice.gov.bt