

# Sìchuān 四川



Its capital city pulses with entrepreneurs and bohemians, while mere hours away its grasslands thunder under the hooves of nomadic horsemen and herds of black yaks. This is exactly the sort of mad diversity you'll find all over Sichuān and part of what makes travel to this province so addictive. There's a mind-whirring number of places to explore and experiences to chase, and no matter how often you come or how long you stay, it always feels as though you've barely managed to scratch the surface. Even the range of cultures is varied, with Tibetan villages tucked among the west's treacherous and frigid mountain terrain eventually melting into comparatively balmy Yi territory in the province's south. This rugged terrain kept Sichuān isolated for so much of China's history, allowing it to develop its own identity, art forms, unique dialect and world-renowned, tongue-searing cuisine. Writers and painters have celebrated Sichuān's charms for centuries.

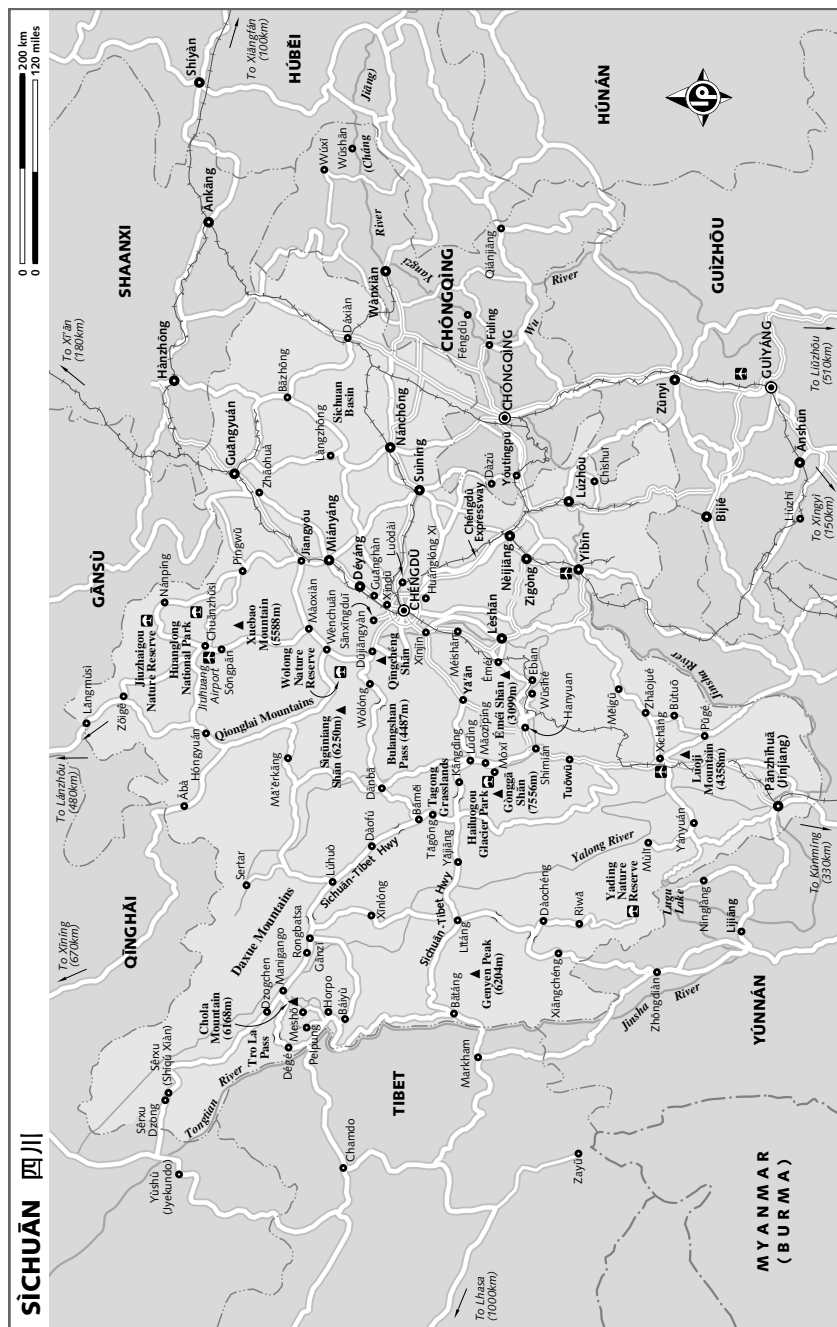
The province's name means 'Four Rivers', a homage to the biggest of the 1300-plus rivers that cut up this massive landmass. The province is also home to the Chūnxī plain of the fertile Sichuān basin, which supports one of the densest populations on the planet. Investment and exploitation of its vast natural resources are both contributing to Sichuān's boom, making it one of China's wealthiest provinces and an economic engine of western China. Whatever your passion – nature, culture, adventure, or a mix of all three – you'll be able to indulge it somewhere in Sichuān.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Lose your breath (both literally and figuratively) among the imposing peaks and Tibetan villages of the **Sichuān–Tibet Highway** (p393 and p402)
- Take on the vast grasslands of Northern Sichuān on a horse trek around the remote village of **Lǎngmùsì** (p421)
- Fall under the spell of the rambunctious newborn pandas at Chéngdū's **Giant Panda Breeding Research Base** (p362)
- Get in a ferry and bob past Grand Buddha, the world's largest Buddha statue, in **Lèshān** (p383), before scrambling for an up-close view on dry land
- Ogle the extraordinarily beautiful archaeological exhibits at the most awe-inspiring museum in China's Southwest: **Sānxíngduì** (p373)
- Traipse from temple to temple on **Èméi Shān** (p378) for a sunrise you'll never forget



■ POPULATION: 84 MILLION



## HISTORY

Not until 1986, with the major archaeological discovery of the late-Shang dynasty culture of Shu at Sānxīngdū, northeast of Chéngdū, was the Sīchuān basin's importance to Chinese history fully realised. Never really a backwater as long assumed, it has been the site of various breakaway kingdoms, ever skirmishing with central authority. It was finally wrestled into control and established as the capital of the Qin empire in the 3rd century BC and it was here that the kingdom of Shu (a name by which the province is still known) ruled as an independent state during the Three Kingdoms Period (AD 220–80). The Kuomintang spent its last days in Sīchuān before being vanquished and fleeing to Taiwan. Most recently Chóngqing split from Sīchuān when it was promoted to the status of municipality in 1997.

During the Warring States period (475–221 BC), a famed engineer, Li Bing, managed to harness the Du River (Dū Hé) on the Chuānxī plain with his weir system, allowing Sīchuān some 2200 continuous years of irrigation and prosperity. Without exaggeration, this breadbasket region helped to unify (and feed) the nation. Sadly, the Great Leap Forward dealt Sīchuān an especially cruel blow: it's believed that one in 10 people starved.

In 1975, Zhao Ziyang, governor of Sīchuān and the province's first Communist Party secretary, became the driving force behind the agricultural and economic reforms that put Sīchuān back on the map (before he fell from grace and into lifelong house arrest for opposing the use of troops during the 1989 Tiananmen Sq demonstrations). His system (the 'Responsibility System'), whereby plots of land were let out to individual farmers on the proviso that a portion of the crops be sold back to the government, was so successful that it became the national model and was later applied to the industrial sector. As of 2006, this fertile land of 'Heaven's Granary' was still producing over 10% of the nation's grain, soybeans, pork and more.

## CLIMATE

Chéngdū and the east have a subtropical, humid monsoon climate with temperatures ranging from 3°C to 8°C in winter (December to February) and 25°C to 29°C in summer (June to August). The Qīnghǎi–Tibet plateau in the west experiences intense sunlight and low temperatures most of the year with tem-

peratures dropping to -9°C in winter and reaching highs of only 17°C in summer.

## LANGUAGE

In addition to Mandarin, which is spoken by the Han and the Hui, the other major languages in Sīchuān belong to the Tibeto-Burman family and are spoken by Tibetans and the Yi. Sīchuānese is one of the Mandarin dialects; however, the pronunciation is so unique, Sīchuānese is near impossible for outsiders (even if they do speak standard Mandarin) to understand.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

For more details about travelling between provinces see Getting Around in the Transport chapter, p486.

## Air

Chéngdū's Shāngliu Airport is the largest international airport in China's Southwest. Air China and Sichuan Airlines link Chéngdū with all major Chinese cities and fly direct to Lhasa in Tibet. Currently international flights serve Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Macau, Kuala Lumpur, Kathmandu, Japan, Vienna, Amsterdam and Seoul (and more are always in the pipeline).

Jiuhuang Airport in northern Sīchuān closed in May 2006 for expansion to allow for flights from other major Chinese cities, but should be reopened by the time you read this.

## Bus

Sīchuān's provincial government has been throwing hundreds of billions of yuán into highway construction since the mid-1990s as part of China's 'Develop the West' migration plan. High-speed expressways link Chéngdū with Chóngqing and Lěshān, and the construction of highways to link Chéngdū with Shànghǎi, Běihǎi in Guǎngxī province and Tibet are underway (although to get to Tibet as yet requires superhuman endurance).

Travel to Gānsù is possible via Jiūzhàigōu and Zōigè. To get to Yúnnán you can travel south via Lěshān, Èméi Shān and Pānzhīhuā on the border, or travel along the southern route of the Sīchuān–Tibet Hwy through both Lítáng and Xiāngchéng to Shāngri-la (Zhōngdiàn).

## Train

Chéngdū is an important railway hub in China's Southwest. Direct trains run to cities such

as Běijīng and Shànghǎi. Travel to Kūnmíng in Yúnnán and Xī'ān in Shaanxi tend to be the most popular options, although Chéngdū will eventually have a direct train to Lhasa that will likely be wildly popular. To get to Gānsù you need to change in Hānzhōng, Shaanxi province.

## GETTING AROUND

Jiuhuang Airport connects Chéngdū with Sōngpān and Jiūzhàigōu. The airport was closed for renovation in 2006 but it should be reopened again by the time you read this. New expressways connect Chéngdū with the eastern part of the province, including those from Chéngdū to Lèshān/Chóngqīng. The buses on this side of the province are generally modern and comfortable. Trains in the east have generally been slow and irregular, but in 2006 new high-speed lines to Miányáng, Lèshān and Chóngqīng were being finalised.

Travel in the west of the province can only be done via bus. But make sure you have enough time (and pain medication) – the roads in this part of Sichuān remain in butt-breakingly awful condition and the buses are, if possible, even worse.

## CENTRAL SICHUĀN

### CHÉNGDŪ 成都

☎ 028 / pop 4 million / elev 500m

Chéngdū is a great city not just because it's a hub for some of Southwest China's great sights, but also because of the interesting mix of people it's attracting these days.

Chéngdū wears its title as the South-west's economic engine well (though some in Chóngqīng would claim that honour for their city). Investment is not only turning its downtown into a jungle of glimmer with fancy shops and office buildings, but it's also attracting Chinese and expats alike looking to stake out a piece of the pie – many are from the booming east coast looking for the same professional dynamism but with a more relaxed, laid-back lifestyle and less expensive cost of living.

Though Chéngdū is China's fifth most populous city (the greater metropolitan area has just reached 13 million and is growing fast even by China's hyper-standards), it's maintained a certain charm and was rated by

several Chinese media as the nation's second most liveable city in 2006.

It's also one of the nicest places for travellers at the moment. Chéngdū is pushing hard for the title of 'Best Tourism City in China' and the mayor is campaigning to get the entire city behind him in welcoming travellers and getting tourist infrastructure and service up to scratch. Billboards and advertisements are everywhere rallying people to the cause and urging them to learn English. Regular visitors to the city will notice a huge increase in people's helpfulness and effort to speak English, from street sweepers to even taxi drivers.

But there are downsides to the boom. The city is choking in exhaust fumes and there are more cars than the streets can comfortably handle. In many ways the growth seems to be faster than what the city can cope with.

Yet there are still pockets of calm. You'll stumble upon markets, countless tiny restaurants specialising in Sichuān snacks, and parks where old men walk their song birds or hunch over a game of chess (as auburn-haired seen-on-the-scene hipsters yapping on their mobile phones stroll nearby). Add a dash of old-time artisans – cobblers, weavers, itinerant dentists and the like – and you've got your lively yet relaxed Chéngdū.

### History

Chéngdū, or 'Perfect Metropolis', has seen the rise and fall of nearly a dozen independent kingdoms or dynasties since its founding in 316 BC; agricultural potential and strategic geography were key to its political power. Yet throughout history it has been equally well known for culture: not by accident did the Tang dynasty poet Du Fu brush his strokes here.

The city is split by the Brocade River (Jīn Jiāng), a reminder of the city's silk brocade industry, which thrived during the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220). From here the Southern Silk Road guided caravans to the known world. The city's name eventually shifted from Jīnchéng (Brocade City) to 'Hibiscus City', still used today by locals.

By the time of the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907) the city of Chéngdū had become a cornerstone of Chinese society. Three hundred years later, during the Song dynasty, Chéngdū also began to issue the world's first paper money.

It is also a survivor. Devastated first by the Mongols in retaliation for its fierce resistance, from 1644 to 1647 it was presided over by the rebel Zhang Xianzhong, who set up an independent state in Sichuan and ruled by terror and mass executions. Three centuries later the city became one of the last strongholds of the Kuomintang.

### Orientation

Ring roads circle the outer city: Yihuan Lu (First Ring Rd), Erhuan Lu (Second Ring Rd) and Sanhuan Lu (Third Ring Rd). These are divided into numbered segments (*duàn*). The main boulevard that sweeps through the centre of everything is Renmin Lu, in its north (北; *běi*), central (中; *zhōng*) and south (南; *nán*) manifestations.

The nucleus of the city is the square that interrupts Renmin Lu, where you'll find the Sichuan Exhibition Centre, a sports stadium and a colossal Mao statue. Just south is Tianfu Sq, a pedestrianised neon extravaganza and the main shopping district. Note that a new subway system and ongoing plans to relocate government offices and industries are affecting the lay of the downtown land.

### MAPS

Tourist maps of Chéngdū, including a handful of English-language ones, abound at train and bus stations, bookshops and newspaper kiosks. City maps in Chinese can be useful for tracing bus routes, though not even the best ones can hope to fully capture the insanity that is Chéngdū's street naming.

### Information

#### BOOKSHOPS

**Foreign Language Bookstore** (Wàiwén Shūdiàn; Zongfu Lu) Has a good selection of maps and Lonely Planet books.

**South West Book Centre** (Xínán Shūchéng; Shangdong Dajie) The best stop for English-language fiction and non-fiction.

### INTERNET ACCESS

Well-located options include an internet café on Chunxi Lu, another above the Tourism Passenger Transport Centre, and one on Renmin Beilu, south of the train station. The average charge is Y3 to Y4 per hour. All guesthouses – but not all hotels – have internet access, although few of these are set up to burn CDs or go beyond email.

### STREET NAME HEADACHE

Chéngdū is a true Asian city when it comes to its nonchalant disregard of systematic street numbering and naming. When following street numbers in one direction, it's not unusual to meet another set coming the other way, leaving some places with five sets of numbers on their doors. Street names, also, seem to change every 100m or so – with very little apparent logic involved.

Try to bear this approach to street names and numbers in mind when you're looking for somewhere in particular, and rely more on nearby landmarks and relative locations on maps than on street numbers and names.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

**Chéngdū** ([www.chengdu.gov.cn](http://www.chengdu.gov.cn)) This provincial government website has an OK English version with information on the city and surrounding areas.

**Global Doctor Chengdu Clinic** (Huánqiú Yīshēng Chéngdū Zhěnsuǒ; ☎ office 8522 6058, 24hr emergency 139-8225 6966; ground fl, Kelan Bldg, Bangkok Garden Apt, Section 4, 21 Renmin Nanlu; ☎ 9-11am & 1.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri) This doctor's clinic has English-speaking staff.

**No 3 Hospital** (Disān Yīyuàn; Dongmen Jie; ☎ 24hr) Helpful staff here with a handful of English speakers who will assist the traveller.

### MONEY

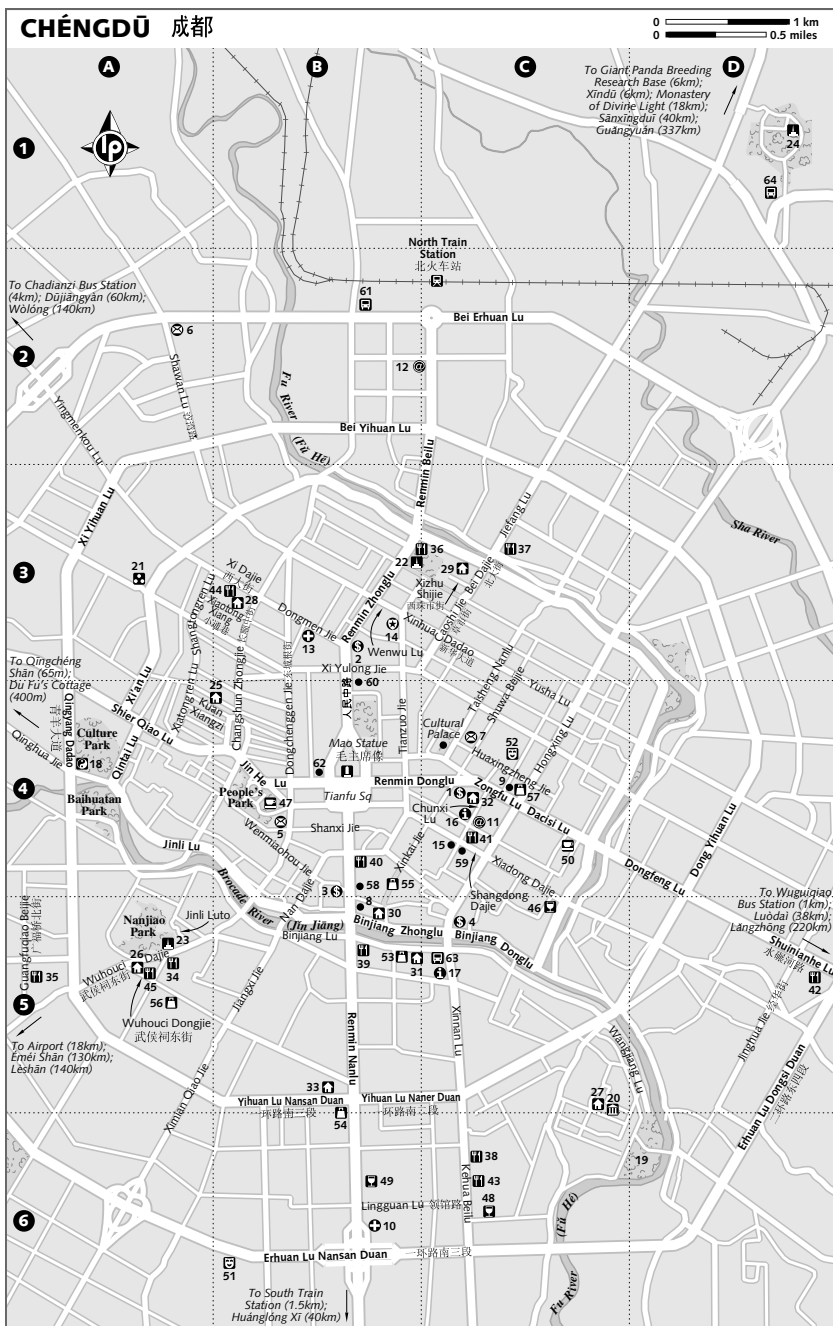
**Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; ☎ 8666 0332; Renmin Nanlu; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun) This place changes money and travellers cheques and will offer cash advances on credit cards from Monday through to Friday. Other well-located branches include those on Renmin Zhonglu and just north of the Tourism Passenger Transport Centre. All banks have ATMs and similar hours.

### POST & TELEPHONE

**China Post** (Zhōngguó Yóuzhēng; 71 Shawan Lu; ☎ 8am-6pm) The main international post office is west of the train station. A smaller branch can be found on Dongchenggen Jie near People's Park.

### PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

**PSB** (Gōngānjú; ☎ 8640 7067; 136 Wenwu Lu; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) The foreign affairs entrance is on Tianzuo Jie; this is the place where you can get visa extensions. The PSB says it's a five-day wait. Period. Consider picking yours up in Lèshān, Kāngdīng, or, best, Sōngpān.



**INFORMATION**

- Bank of China ATM 中国银行 ..... (see 63)
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- CITS 中国国际旅行社 ..... 8 B5
- Foreign Language Bookstore 外文书店 ..... 9 C4
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**TOURIST INFORMATION**

The best source for up-to-the-minute restaurant, bar and entertainment listings is the free magazine *Go West*, found in guesthouses and restaurants, but it goes quickly and isn't always easy to find. It's published every two months.

**Tourist booths** (Lǚyóu Zìxún Fúwù Zhōngxīn; ☎ 9am-9.30pm summer) These are popping up all over the city in Chéngdū's rush for the 'best tourism city' crown. The best ones are on Chunxi Lu and next door to the Tourism Passenger Transport Centre. The staff often speak English and can be remarkably helpful – once you've pried them away from watching *Desperate Housewives* on the computers.

**Tourist hotline** (☎ 8292 8555) Free hotline with English-speaking operators.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

Every other building in the city seems to be a travel agency; note also that dissatisfaction with private agencies is a none-too-rare thing, so ask around first. Basically everywhere you can lay your head has a travel agency of some sort.

The more useful travel agencies are at Dragon Town Youth Hostel, Loft and Sim's Cozy Guesthouse; see Sleeping, p364.

Tours offered differ at every place, but many include Hailuoguo Glacier Park, Wolong Nature Reserve, Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve, Èméi Shān and Sōngpān. Also on offer are day trips to the Giant Panda Breeding Research Base and local Sichuan opera performances.

Prices depend upon the number of travellers but are generally good value.

Agencies can often arrange Yangtze River (Cháng Jiāng) cruise tickets, train and flight tickets and permits to Tibet.

**China International Travel Service** (CITS; Zhōngguó Guójiā Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 8642 8212, 8666 4422; Renmin Nanlu) Arranges pricey tours, including packages to Tibet, and offers train and plane ticket booking for a substantial fee.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

There have been several reports of foreigners becoming targets for rip-offs and theft in Chéngdū, though violent encounters are rare.

Some travellers have reported having things stolen out of their bicycle basket while they were pedalling.

SICHUAN

SICHUAN

## Sights

### GIANT PANDA BREEDING RESEARCH BASE

大熊猫繁殖研究中心

Nearly 50 giant and red pandas live at this centre, one of the most popular sights in the city. Breeding (obviously) is the focus at the **Giant Panda Breeding Research Base** (Dàxióngmāo Fánzhí Yánjiū Zhōngxīn; ☎ 8351 6748; admission Y30; 🕒 8am–6pm) and March to May is the ‘falling in love period’ (wink wink). In autumn and winter you can

also peer through the glass into the panda ‘nursery’, which is just adorable – except when the *faux* scientist in the nursery notices tourists’ imminent arrival and starts poking the sleeping babies to get them active.

There’s also a **museum** at the base with detailed exhibits on panda evolution and habits, as well as a pair of pickled panda genitals in a jar. Exhibits have good English captions. A 15-minute movie plays nearby, explaining panda

mating habits; it includes some disturbing images of a mother panda swatting around her piglet-pink newborn.

Feeding time is around 9.30am and is when the pandas are most active. Once feeding is over, they don’t do much besides sleep.

Bus 10 runs out to Qīnglóng, from where you’ll have to change for bus 1 to the terminus. From here, hop on a motorised rickshaw to the breeding centre. A lot less hassle are the tours run by most guesthouses for Y50, including the entrance fee. You can also get one of the special tourist buses directly here from the Traffic Hotel. The base is about 10km from the city centre.

### WENSHU TEMPLE 文殊院

This Tang dynasty monastery is Chengdū’s largest and best-preserved Buddhist temple. **Wenshu Temple** (Wénshū Yuàn; Renmin Zhonglu; 人民中路; admission Y5; 🕒 8am–6pm) has air redolent with incense, a low murmur of chanting, exquisite relief carvings, and, best of all, a sense of serenity and solitude despite the crowds of worshippers who flock to the place. If you only have time for one temple on your visit, this is by far the most interesting.

A vegetarian restaurant and two atmospheric teahouses (see p368) are on the grounds.

A new **pedestrian street** has been set up just south of here with restaurants and souvenir stalls.

### TOMB OF WANG JIAN 王建墓

The small, dark and pleasantly spooky **Tomb of Wang Jian** (Wángjiàn Mù; Yongling Lu; 永陵路; admission Y20; 🕒 8am–6pm Mar–Oct, to 5pm Nov–Feb) was erected in honour of Wang Jian (AD 847–918), a general who came to power after the AD 907 collapse of the Tang dynasty and later became emperor of the Shu kingdom. He’s remembered for ruling in a hands-off manner and for the success of agriculture during his reign.

So far, this is the only mausoleum excavated in China that features above-ground tomb chambers. It’s also known for having 24 statues of musicians – a collection now considered to be the best surviving record of a Tang dynasty musical troupe. Excellent English captions explain their musical instruments in detail.

Look around carefully (especially up at the ceiling) for damage caused by tomb raiders believed by archaeologists to have forced their way into the chambers over the centuries.

### ZHAOJUE TEMPLE 昭觉寺

This **temple** (Zhāojiué Sì; admission Y2; 🕒 park 6am–6pm, ticket office to 5pm) dates back to the 7th century and has since served as a model for many Japanese and Southeast Asian Buddhist temples.

During the early Qing dynasty, Zhāojiué Sì underwent extensive reconstruction under the supervision of Po Shan, a famous Buddhist monk who established the lovely waterways and groves you see here today. The effect is impressive and the grounds are quieter and more spread out than at Chengdū’s other temples.

Little of the temple’s original architecture survived the Cultural Revolution, and serious restoration work was only undertaken in the last decade.

There are several pavilions, though all except the imposing prayer hall were being renovated at the time of research.

There’s a vegetarian restaurant on the grounds (see p367) and a teahouse next door.

Zhaojue Temple is about 6km northeast of Chengdū city centre. Loads of buses run to the nearby Zhaojue bus station (*Zhāojiué chēzhàn*) from around town. Cycling there is possible, though you risk asphyxiation from traffic fumes.

### TEMPLE PARKS

The **Green Ram Temple** (Qīngyáng Gōng; Qingyang Dadao; 青羊大道; admission Y5; 🕒 7am–6.30pm) is the oldest and most extensive Taoist temple in the Chengdū area. For local visitors, stroking the bronze goat here is a must – it can supposedly vanquish life’s troubles and pains. Its odd, ungoat-like companion has no special powers, but is unique in that it combines features of all the Chinese zodiac animals. Another highlight here is an eight-sided pagoda built without bolts or pegs. The 16 pillars inside are covered in elaborate carvings and in total 81 dragons are depicted.

The temple has excellent nightly performances of Sichuan opera and theatre. You can give the **Culture Park** (文化公园; Wénhuà Gōngyuán; admission free; 🕒 7am–10pm) next door a miss. With its mass of teahouses, souvenir stalls and weathered rides for kids, it’s noisy, loud and doesn’t actually have much green space.

Down the road, you’ll find one of the city’s most popular scenic spots, set up in honour of the poet Du Fu (AD 712–70), a man who

### LIFE ON THE EDGE FOR THE GIANT PANDA *David Andrew*

The Giant Panda is one of the most instantly recognisable large mammals in the world, and in China you will see its moniker on everything from cigarette packs to souvenir tie pins. But although there are vague references to its existence in Chinese literature going back 3000 years, it was not until 1869 that a remarkable French curate-naturalist, Père Armand David, brought a pelt back to the West and formally described the Giant Panda to the scientific world. Endemic to China, it is now restricted to just five mountain ranges straddling the provinces of Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gānsū, and is thought to number just 1000 or so individuals in the wild.

One Chinese name for the Giant Panda is *dà xióngmāo* or ‘big bear-cat’, and it is so unlike other bears that scientists have long debated whether it in fact belongs to the raccoon family, or even whether it should be in a separate family of its own. Recent molecular evidence shows it to be a bear, and like other bears it has a carnivorous ancestry. However, the similarities pretty well end there and almost every aspect of the Giant Panda’s ecology and behaviour is adapted to a diet of bamboo. Bamboo is a poor food for a large, warm-blooded animal – it is low in protein and high in indigestible plant fibres, and barely provides enough nutrition to support the panda’s metabolism. But it grows as a superabundant food resource in the damp, chilly mountains of Southwest China, and through a suite of adaptations the Giant Panda has overcome the challenge of surviving on what is effectively woody grass.

Most famous of these adaptations is the ‘panda’s thumb’ – not a real thumb, but a modified wrist bone that enables the Giant Panda to strip bamboo leaves from their branches, and to manipulate shoots and stems. Its rounded body shape (by bear standards, at least) and extremities conserve heat in winter, thus enabling the panda to feed year-round without hibernating. Its striking black-and-white colouration and prominent eye patches serve as a warning both to other pandas and to potential predators, since both social and threatening interactions would mean wasting precious energy.

However, the Giant Panda must still ingest an extraordinary amount of bamboo to extract its daily nutrition requirements. And just to make life interesting, every 25 or so years bamboos flower and die en masse, and the pandas must move to other feeding areas to survive. With the increased fragmentation of their natural forest habitat their choices for new feeding sites are limited, and in the mid-1970s more than 130 pandas starved to death when bamboos flowered and died in Mǐn Shān, Sichuan.

With world attention focused on the panda’s survival, the Chinese government has set up 11 panda reserves in the Southwest and thrown itself behind a captive breeding program. Chinese laws now strictly forbid hunting or tree-felling in Giant Panda habitat. Peasants are offered rewards equivalent to double their annual salary if they save a starving panda, and life sentences or public executions are imposed on convicted poachers. Even though Giant Pandas are notoriously difficult to breed in captivity, Chengdū’s Giant Panda Breeding Research Base (above) has recently had successes with the birth of a number of pandas. But sceptics would rather leave the pandas to their own devices and see more efforts made to preserve natural panda habitat; captive breeding has in only a very few cases been used successfully to save wild populations of large animals. And you can’t ignore the profit motive in China’s burgeoning economy: Giant Pandas draw a crowd wherever they are displayed and nearly 200 are kept in China’s zoos.

wrote some of the Tang dynasty's most enduring poems. **Du Fu's Cottage** (杜甫草堂; Dùfū Cǎotáng; ☎ 8731 9258; 38 Qinghua Lu; 清华路38号; admission Y60; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mar-Oct, 8am-6.30pm Nov-Feb) is a park centred around his former residence and is arguably the most beautiful green space in Chengdū.

Du Fu was born in Hénán but the upheaval caused by the An Lushan Rebellion (756-763), an uprising by a general against Tang rulers, kept the poet on the move. He ended up settling in Chengdū for four years. During that time, he penned more than 200 poems on the people who lived and worked nearby.

The park is an interesting set up of bamboo paths, streams and pavilions, including a replica of Du Fu's cottage (though there is some dispute over how accurate the placement is). The most recent addition is a modern structure at the north end of the park where you can check out an excavation site of Tang-era objects.

During the high season, shuttle buses sometimes run from the park's north gate to Wuhou temple, free of charge. Audio guides (Y20, plus Y300 deposit) are also available in several languages including English, but they are very popular and run out quickly.

Next to Nanjiao Park (南郊公园; Nánjiāo Gōngyuán; admission Y2; open 6am to 10pm), **Wuhou Temple** (武侯祠; Wúhóu Cí; admission Y60; ☎ 6.30am-8pm) is a complex of pavilions and statues commemorating figures from the Three Kingdoms period (AD 220-80). The images and names you'll see most frequently here are Emperor Liu Bei and that of Zhuge Liang, a legendary military strategist known for his wisdom and culture and immortalised in one of the classics of Chinese literature, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

The temple is surrounded by picturesque gardens and mossy cypresses draped over walkways. It regularly hosts Sichuan opera performances. **Jinli Luto** to the east is a recently gentrified street (in the 'new-old' style of so many Chinese cities) chock-full of shops, galleries, restaurants, pubs, teahouses and more.

In the southeast of town, near Sichuan University, is **Wàngjiānglóu Gōngyuán** (望江楼公园; River Viewing Pavilion Park; admission Y20; ☎ 8am-6pm), a park known for its beautiful bamboo-lined paths and dedicated to the Tang dynasty poet Xue Tao, one of the few women of this period whose work is still celebrated today. The four-

storey, wooden Qing pavilion in the heart of the park overlooks Brocade River and was built in her honour. The well nearby is where Xue Tao is said to have drawn water to dye her writing paper. The park also features over 150 varieties of bamboo from China, Japan and Southeast Asia, ranging from bonsai-sized potted plants to towering giants.

#### PEOPLE'S PARK 人民公园

This **park** (Rénmín Gōngyuán; admission free; ☎ 6am-8pm) always seems full of life. Locals flock here to practise their singing and dancing and do their exercises. The teahouse draws many visitors (and locals after their taichi practice) for good reason (see p368).

Plopped in the middle of the park's bonsai and perennials is the **Monument to the Martyrs of the Railway Protection Movement** (1911). This obelisk memorialises an uprising of the people against corrupt officers pocketing cash intended for railway construction. People's Park was a private officer's garden, so it was a fitting place to put the structure.

The bunker-like structure across the lake from the teahouse was an underground **fun-house** with a notoriously tacky reputation. It's been closed for some time now and it's not clear when (or if) it will reopen.

#### SICHUAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM 四川大学博物馆

The **Sichuan University Museum** (Sichuan Dàxué Bówùguǎn; East Gate, Sichuan University; 四川大学东大门内) is one of the better museums in the southwest. The collection is particularly strong in the fields of ethnology, folklore and traditional art, and is housed in a swank modern building near the university's east gate. However, it's been closed for some time and no-one seems to know when it will be reopening. Stay tuned.

#### Sleeping BUDGET

Chengdū has a great choice of backpacker-friendly places.

**Sim's Cozy Guesthouse** (Guānhuá Qīngnián Lǚshè; ☎ 8691 4422; www.gogosc.com; 42 Xizhu Shijie; 西珠市街42号; 12-bed dm Y15-20, 4- & 6-bed dm Y25-35, s from Y50, d Y70-200; ☎ ☎ ☎) Run by a backpacker couple (he's Singaporean, she's Japanese), this exceptional hostel is one of the most welcoming you'll find. A stone's throw from the serene Wenshu Temple, the hostel is in a

traditional-style building over 100 years old. The rambling halls seem to go on forever and rooms exist in every kind of amenity combination you can imagine (with or without air-con, bathrooms, wi-fi etc). Lovely touches are everywhere, such as lockable boxes in the dorms or TV sets with DVD players in some of the double rooms. There's a lovely pond-side bar and the staff are phenomenal. Backpackers will love this place.

**Loft** (Shào Gōngchǎng Qīngnián Lǚguǎn; ☎ 8626 5770; www.loftshostel.com; 4 Tongren Lu, Xiaotong Xiang; 同仁路4号, 小巷巷; 4-/6-bed dm Y20/15, s & d with/without bathroom Y120/60; ☎ ☎) This place screams New York chic at every turn and has the coolest setup of any hostel in China's Southwest. Rooms have exposed brick walls, minimalist furnishings and sexy black-tiled bathrooms. There's a massive, high-ceilinged common room with free internet, movies and a pool table. The staff are so relaxed and friendly it's hard to tell at first glance who's an employee and who's a traveller. The chic setup would appeal to both backpackers and midrange travellers. Enter through Café Copenhagen (which, by the way, is great) to reach the front desk.

**Holly's Hostel** (Jiǔlóngdǐng Qīngnián Kèzhàn; ☎ 8554 8131; hollyshostelcn@yahoo.com; 246 Wuhou Dajie; 武侯祠大街246号; 4-bed dm with shared bathroom Y20, 6-bed dm with bathroom & air-con Y30, d Y120; ☎ ☎) An awesome location near the bustling Tibetan quarter and sweet, helpful staff are the real pluses here. The plain, serviceable rooms don't have the same verve as some of the other hostels, but the complimentary shampoo and amenities in the doubles are a nice touch. A top-floor café serves Western and Chinese food and has a lovely, leafy terrace. Free pickup from the train station; airport pickup is Y70.

**Dragon Town Youth Hostel** (Lóngtáng Kèzhàn; ☎ 8664 8408; www.dragontown.com.cn; 27 Kuan Xiangzi; 宽巷子27号; dm Y30-40, s Y100-150, d 100-160; ☎ ☎) This building dates from the Qing dynasty and is one of the most atmospheric hostels around. Down a quiet alley, it's got a traditional courtyard and two 'honeymoon suite' rooms featuring antique Chinese furniture. The rest of the rooms are simple, but they're clean and comfortable. The bar here seems perpetually full and is a great place to meet fellow travellers.

**Traffic Hotel** (Jiāotōng Fāndiàn; ☎ 8545 1017; www.trafficotel.com; 6 Linjiang Zhonglu; 临江中路6号; dm Y30, d/tr Y240/290; ☎ ☎) A backpacker standard for

ages, this hotel is old-fashioned but has spotless rooms and every service you could ever imagine, including several travel agencies and an on-site restaurant. The location near the Tourism Passenger Transport Centre can't be beaten and it's got helpful English-speaking staff. It's also near the stop for the new tourism buses.

#### MIDRANGE

Besides what's listed here, most budget guesthouses have midrange value doubles for bargain prices.

**Yulin Binguān** (☎ 8557 8839; 9 Yihuan Lu, Nanshan Duan; 一环路南三段9号; d Y148-280; ☎ ☎) There's something for all price ranges here, including one wing with the niftiest midrange digs in town. Though small, the rooms are delightfully set up: the modern bathrooms sparkle with glass sinks and showers and there are flat-screen TVs in every room. The third wing is more expensive with bigger (or do the wall mirrors just make them seem that way?) rooms, which, though pleasant, don't quite seem worth the price. A cheap wing with stinky halls has clean but snoringly bland rooms.

**Hóngwǎ Binguān** (☎ 8541 2979; 29 Wangjiang Lu, inside Sichuan University East Gate; 望江路29号, 四川大学东大门内; s/d/tr Y160/260/300; ☎ ☎) The starkly plain facilities here are by no means the best in the city, but the location in a peaceful corner of Sichuan University makes it worth considering. The basketball and badminton courts are nearby and you can usually get in on a game, making it easy to meet people and get an up-close look at local university life. Discounted rooms often run Y96 for a single, Y156 for a double.

**Xinchun Binguān** (☎ 8672 6622; fax 8667 2382; 23 Chunxi Lu, Bei Duan; 春熙路北段23号; s Y280-340, d 340; ☎ ☎) Tucked down one of the city's bustling pedestrian shopping streets, you couldn't ask for a more central location than this. The reception staff can get hysterically giddy with foreigners, but if you can put up with that the rooms are awesome - small, sleekly modern and gleaming clean. Outside of high season times, rates are often discounted by 50%.

#### TOP END

Developers are throwing up first-rate luxury hotels with wild abandon both downtown and in the city's suburbs - if this is what you're after, the selection is phenomenal.

**Sofitel Wanda Chengdu** (Chéngdū Suǒfēitè Wàndá Dǎijiàndiàn; ☎ 6666 9999, 6680 8899; fax 6666 3333; 15 Binjiang Zhonglu; 滨江中路15号; s & d from Y1500, discounted ¥900; ☒ ☒) From service to facilities, this is the best hotel in town at the moment. Basic rooms are filled with mirrors, exotic vases and naughty 360-degree glass showers looking into the bedrooms. Televisions offer 24-hour channels in almost every major Asian and European language. Best of all, everyone from the hotel electricians to housekeeping to desk staff are friendly and helpful. A stay here would be a memorable experience worth every yuán.

## Eating

### CHINESE

Chinese people revere Sichuan's hot and spicy cuisine (see the boxed text, opposite). The most salient pepper flavour is *huàjiāo* (花椒; a wild pepper); some love it, while others cringe at its over-the-top numbing effect (rural dentists purportedly use it as an anaesthetic) and say its aftertaste is a bit like a detergent.

You should also learn *xiǎo chī* (小吃; little eats); cheap, quick snacks are the way of life here. Popular for lunch with the on-the-fly lunchtime crowd is *shāokǎo* (烧烤), Sichuanese barbecue. Skewers of meat, veggies and smoked tofu are brushed with oil and chilli and grilled.

Sadly, city officials have begun clearing many streets of itinerant roadside food stalls, so instead of forming night markets many of these stalls have had to either close or move indoors. Yet prowling around you'll still find roadside stalls on back streets, many simply portable grills on bikes.

With more time you can savour *huǒguō* (火锅), though it's becoming a bit of a yupified sit-down affair. It's similar to fondue: you dip skewered meat and veggies into big woks filled with hot, spiced oil and then into little dishes of peanut oil and garlic. Be forewarned though – hotpot can be *very* hot. Even many Sichuanese can't take it. To prevent the sweats, try asking for *báiwèi* (白味), the hotpot for wimps. Peanut milk, sold in tins, can help arrest the dragonsque results.

**Xiǎohuī Dòuhuā** (☎ 8625 2753; section 12, 86 Xi Dajie; 西大街86号, 附12; dishes ¥2-10) Specialising in tofu and noodle snacks in more combinations than you'd ever think possible, eating at this cosy neighbourhood eatery is a sensory thrill. Try the crispy beef beancurd (牛肉豆

花; *niúròu dòuhuā*) and steamed beef with rice powder (粉蒸牛肉; *fěnzhēng niúròu*), and don't miss the thick, succulent and spicy sweet noodles (甜水面; *tiánshuǐ miàn*). Note to allergy sufferers: more than half the dishes here are served with some kind of peanut ingredient. The cooks will make them without peanuts, however, if you ask.

**Chén Mápó Dòufu** (Pockmarked Mother Chen's Bean Curd; Jiefang Lu; 解放路; dishes from ¥5) *Mápó dòufu* is served here with a vengeance – soft, fresh bean curd with a fiery sauce of garlic, minced beef, salted soybean, chilli oil and fiery Sichuan pepper. So popular is this place that a handful of franchise options are now found throughout town.

**Yǒngjī Tāngyuán Miànguǎn** (☎ 8553 4074; 13 Wuhouci Dongjie; 武侯祠东街13号; noodles ¥5, dumplings ¥7.50) Steamy and bustling, this little place is right near the Tibetan neighbourhood and is a terrific place to come for monstrous-sized bowls of delicious dumplings.

**Lǎozǐ Hào** (☎ 6809 0096; Shuiniánhe Lu; 水碾河路; noodles ¥5-10) Two brothers run this noodle place and they've turned it into a neighbourhood institution. The modernisation steamroller has forced them to move several times in recent years, but they always find somewhere else in the area to set up – their customers trailing loyally behind them. Try their fiery tomato egg noodles (番茄煎蛋面; *fānqié jiān dànmiàn*) to see what all the fuss is about.

**Lóngchāoshòu Cāntīng** (cnr Chunxi Lu & Shandong Dajie; 春熙路与山东大街交叉路口; meals ¥5-15) This big, bustling cafeteria-style eatery can be overwhelming, but it's a long-time favourite for sampling Chengdū snacks. The cheapest option gives you a range of sweet and savoury items, with each price bracket giving you the same deal on a grander and more filling scale. Unfortunately, it hasn't much to offer vegetarians.

**Àrè Zàngcān** (☎ 8557 0877; 234 Wuhouci Dajie; 武侯祠大街234号; dishes from ¥10) Right across the street from Wuhou Temple, this Tibetan restaurant looks fussy on the outside, but the 3rd-floor dining room is actually bright and relaxed with small, simple tables. There's an English menu from which you can choose something simple, such as veggie *momos* (Tibetan dumplings; ¥10), or something more elaborate, such as yak stew (¥68). Service is attentive and there's an adjoining outdoor terrace crowded with leafy green plants that's perfect for warm weather alfresco dining.

## HOT & SPICY

The Chinese have a saying: 'Shí zài Zhōngguó, wèi zài Sīchuān' (食在中国, 味在四川); China is the place for food, but Sichuan is the place for flavour. Flavour starts with mouth-singeing peppers whose spiciness is believed to help reduce a person's internal dampness caused by the frequent high humidity and rainy weather. Anything from ginger to local spices to a variety of chillis are then added in unending combinations to give each dish its unique character. With such fiery food, the Sichuanese have a reputation for being a little hot-headed and the local women are even referred to as *là mèizi* (spice girls).

The province boasts a repertoire of over 5000 different dishes. The large number may partly be due to the relocation of people and troops from other provinces over the centuries – each group of people brought their own cuisine with them, influencing local dishes along the way.

We'll just start with five of the most popular dishes:

- *huíguō ròu* (回锅肉; boiled and stir-fried pork with salty and hot sauce)
- *gōngbǎo jīdīng* (宫保鸡丁; spicy chicken with peanuts)
- *shuǐzhū yú* (水煮鱼; boiled fish in a fiery sauce)
- *gānbǎn sījìdòu* (干煸四季豆; dry-fried green beans)
- *mápó dòufu* (麻婆豆腐; pock-marked Mother Chen's bean curd)

The last two dishes can be made suitable for vegetarians; just ask for the meat to be left out (不放肉; *bù fàng ròu*).

If you'd rather learn to whip the dishes up yourself, some hostels offer cooking lessons to their guests. Holly's Hostel (p365) needs one day's notice, and for ¥100 you'll be taught to cook up your own five-dish Sichuan feast. Lessons at Sim's Cozy Guesthouse (p364) cost around ¥75.

**Bāguó Bùyí Fēngwèijǐulóu** (☎ 8509 5888; section 19, 8 Guangfuqiao Beijing; 广福桥北街8号, 附19; main dishes ¥38-52; ☎ 10am-9.30pm) Now at a new location, the modern decoration has given this restaurant a slightly clubby vibe. Named after the traditional cotton clothing that was worn by peasants in the eastern part of the province, the Sichuan food here is hugely popular. There's no English spoken, but the huge plank-like menu is full of glossy multi-coloured pictures, so choosing won't be too hard.

## VEGETARIAN

A special treat for vegetarians is to head out to Wenshu Temple (p363), where there is an excellent vegetarian restaurant with an English menu (dishes ¥6 to ¥10).

Zhaojue Temple (p363) also serves up vegetarian dishes for lunch (dishes from ¥8, from 11am to 3.30pm). If you're really keen, you might ride out to the Monastery of Divine Light (p373) in Xīndū, 18km north of Chengdū, in time for lunch (dishes from ¥7, 11am to noon).

Most of the Western restaurants also feature vegetarian options on their menus.

## WESTERN

The number of Western restaurants springing up in Chengdū continues to grow. There's over a dozen along Kehua Beilu alone.

**Highly Café** (Gāofēi Kāfēi; ☎ 8544 2820; 18 Linjiang Zhonglu; 临江中路18号; dishes from ¥12; ☎ 9am-late; ☒) Along with the Traffic Hotel, this place has been a backpacker mainstay since the '90s. The happy staff get overwhelmed with hipster Chinese at times, but it's a relaxing place with great food; try the delicious calorie-laden fudge brownies. Free internet access.

**Peter's Tex-Mex** (Pídé Déizhōu Páfāng; ☎ 8522 7965; 117 Kehua Beilu; 科华北路117号; dishes from ¥15; ☎ 7.30am-11pm) More than just the best Tex-Mex food in the city, the food served here is among the best you'll have anywhere. Once you've given the *chimichangas* (deep-fried burritos) a pass (it's the only dish they haven't quite pulled off), you can't go wrong no matter what you order. Try the strawberry margaritas (¥40) – slightly tart, they taste like fresh berries. Service is flawless and this place attracts everyone from businessmen to Chinese families and students from nearby Sichuan University.

**Grandma's Kitchen & Deli** (Zǔmǔ De Chūfáng; ☎ 8524 2835; 73/75 Kehua Beilu; 科华北路73/75号; mains from ¥20) Grandma's has burgers, steaks and salads, but it's the desserts that stand out the most. Shakes and smoothies are also popular and on Sundays this place is packed with families and young children. The deli here also has plenty of fans.

## Drinking TEAHOUSES

There's positively nowhere in China that better represents the culture of tea than Sichuan does. The 'art' of drinking tea dates back 3000 years, and traditionally the teahouse functioned as the centre of social life: a place where people had haircuts, watched opera performances, played cards, bantered over poetry, had their earwax removed (no kidding) and gossiped about their neighbours. It's a bit like going to the pub today, minus the earwax and opera.

**Temple of Mercy** (Dàcí Sì; Dàcí Sì Lu; 大慈寺路; tea ¥1; ☎ 10am-6pm) This temple itself doesn't offer much to see, however, its teahouse, with tables piled high with mah jong pieces and teacups, is a perfect place for a lazy afternoon in the sun.

**Renmin Teahouse** (Rénmín Cháguǎn; People's Park; 人民公园; tea ¥5-20; ☎ 10am-6pm) This is one of Chengdu's finest. Come and enjoy a most pleasant afternoon over a bottomless cup of stone-flower tea.

Another charming family-type teahouse is in Wenshu Temple (p363), with an amazingly crowded and steamy ambience. This is in addition to the huge tea garden outside – one of the largest and most lively in Chengdu. If you want to join in, sit on the west side of the path, closest to the main temple, where tea costs ¥2. The tea must be greener on the other side of the path where it costs ¥10.

## PUBS & BARS

Chengdu has a wild and booming but ever-changing nightlife and part of the fun is finding out exactly where it's taking place. Like in Chongqing, what's this week's 'must' destination can be next week's ghost haunt. Because clubs and bars change owners, vibes and names so quickly, nightlife in Chengdu is often more about getting to a particular area and seeing what's going on, rather than heading to a particular club or bar. A copy of *Go West* magazine (see p359) is a good place to start.

**Shamrock Irish Bar & Restaurant** (Sānyècǎo Āi'ěr'lán Xīcān Jiùbǎ; ☎ 8523 6158; 4 Duan, 15 Renmin Nanlu; 人民南路15号4段; ☎ 10am-2am) From atmosphere, to service, to food, to drink, this place is the perfect pub. Expats regularly gather here to watch sports events on the TVs, oohing and aahing over everything from cricket and football to hockey. A pint of Guinness on tap costs ¥80.

**Roo Bar** (Dàdàishū Jiùbǎ; ☎ 8540 1318; 6 Kehua Jie; 科华街6号; ☎ 11.30am-2am) Equally boisterous, this place often gets a big student crowd from the nearby university. In addition to your beer here, you can indulge in a burger with beetroot and egg, among other delicacies.

**Hemp House** (☎ 138-0800 1424; 3rd fl, Oriental Times Mall, Dongmen Daqiao, Dong Dajie; 东大街, 东门大桥, 东方时代商城3楼; ☎ 9pm-late) One of the most popular places at the time of research, Hemp House has pool tables and plays everything from house to reggae. The best time to come is Saturday nights when it becomes a dancing free-for-all.

## Entertainment

Sichuan opera is one of the art forms Chengdu is best known for throughout China. It has a tradition dating back more than 250 years and features slapstick, eyeglass-shattering songs, gymnastics and even fire breathing. Several opera houses are scattered throughout the older sections of town, a couple of which are in temples listed previously (the ones in the temples are pricey and filled with tourists). Many offer daily performances, some are weekends only. No matter where you go, it's a grand, fun-filled experience.

For those new to the genre, weekend shows usually dish up a kind of medley of Sichuan opera's 'greatest hits', giving you a good overview. Any of the guesthouses will be able to organise tours for a similar price; some even have local connections to possibly get you backstage.

**Jinjiang Theatre** (Jinjiang Jùyuan; Huaxingzheng Jie; 华兴正街) This combination teahouse, opera theatre and cinema is one of the more centrally located. High-standard Sichuan opera performances are given every Saturday and/or Sunday afternoon (¥120 per person), though the teahouse itself often has performances for just ¥15!

At the time of research, the best place to head for super-slick discos was the south side of Erhuan Lu, Nansan Duan (二环路南三段).

For the best bars playing hip-hop, reggae and blues, it's best to check out the streets in and around Sichuan University.

## Shopping

The main downtown shopping area extends from the eastern end of Renmin Donglu south to Shangdong Dajie, with trendy clothing shops and department stores. Glitzy department store complexes are pretty much ubiquitous now.

South of the river, on a street across from the entrance to Wuhou Temple, is a small Tibetan neighbourhood. While it's not evident in the architecture, it is in the prayer flags, colourful scarves, beads and brass goods for sale. You won't find the variety of things (nor the bargains) that you'll find in the northwest of Sichuan, but it still makes for an interesting wander.

**Qingshiqiao Market** (Qingshiqiao Shichang; Xinkai Jie; 新开街) This large market is one of the most interesting and busiest places to wander in town. Shops and stalls sell brightly coloured seafood, flowers, cacti, birds, pets and a thousand dried foods.

**Tóng Rén Táng** (Tong Ren Tang Pharmacy; 1 Zongfu Lu; 总府路1号) Even if your knowledge of Chinese medicine is zilch, this traditional Chinese pharmacy, over 260 years old, is a superb place to just browse and gape at the enormity of knowledge accrued over four millennia.

Outdoor clothing and equipment are a big buy in the city (lots of folks headed into the western hills and Tibet, natch). Mountain Dak Outdoor Sports Club (Gaoshan Hūwài Lǚyóu Tànxian Yòngpǐn) and **Airwolf** (Fēiláng Hūwài; ☎ 8544 2612; 18 Linjiang Lu; 临江路18号; ☎ 10am-8pm Nov-Feb, to 9pm Mar-Oct) are near Highfly Café. Another half a dozen are to the south along Renmin Nanlu at the corner of Yihuan Lu Nansan Duan. Quality varies: experts don't call a lot of it 'North Fake' for nothing.

## Getting There & Away

**AIR**  
Flights internally go everywhere, virtually all the time. Whatever you do, shop around: outside the highest periods posted rates should mean little. Internal destinations include Běijīng (¥1440, 2½ hours), Chóngqīng (¥380, 45 minutes), Dàlián (¥1810, 3½ hours), Shànghǎi (¥1660, two hours 20 minutes), Guǎngzhōu (¥1300, one hour 50 minutes), Lǐjiāng (¥880,

one hour), Kūnmíng (¥700, one hour) and Xī'ān (¥630, one hour 20 minutes).

Within Sichuan there are four flights a day to Jiuhuagang Airport (¥700, 40 minutes), the new air link for Jiuzhaigou and Songpan in northern Sichuan.

International destinations include Hong Kong (¥2200, 2½ hours), Tokyo (¥3000, 6½ hours), Singapore (¥1900, four hours 20 minutes), Seoul (¥2800, three hours 45 minutes) and Bangkok (¥1700, two hours 55 minutes). Flights should also operate between Amsterdam, Vienna and Macau by the time you read this.

Airline offices in Chengdu:  
**Air China** (Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 8666 1100; 41, Section 2, Renmin Nanlu; ☎ 8am-7:30pm)

**China Southern Airlines** (Zhōngguó Nánfāng Hángkōng; ☎ 8666 3618, 8666 3468; 19 Shangdong Dajie; ☎ 8.30am-6pm)

**Dragon Air** (Gānglóng Hángkōng Gōngsī; ☎ 8676 8828; Section 1, 15 Renmin Zhonglu) In the Sheraton Chengdu Lido Hotel (Tiānfú Lǐdú Xīlǎidēng Fāndiàn).

**Sichuan Airlines** (Sīchuān Hángkōng Gōngsī; ☎ 8666 6998, 8666 6768; 1 Fu, 6 Renmin Xilu; ☎ 8am-9pm)

## BUS

Transport connections in Chengdu are more comprehensive than in other parts of the Southwest. High-speed expressways from Chengdu to Chongqing, Leshan, Zigong and Yibin have cut down travel time significantly, and more are always under construction.

The **Tourism Passenger Transport Centre** (Xinnanmen; ☎ 8543 7347, 8544 3617; 57 Binjiang Lu) recently had its name changed from Xinnanmen and though often just called the 'tourist bus station' these days some people still refer to it by its old name. It's in the southern part of town and is the main bus station, with tickets to most places around Sichuan.

See the boxed text (p370) for bus times. Note that some destinations have departures from more than one station; not all can possibly be listed here so double-check with your guesthouse or hotel.

## TRAIN

Train tickets are a hell of a lot easier to land these days, but you still can't count on next-day middle-berth hard sleeper miracles for the most popular routes. Almost all the hotels can book train tickets for a service fee of around ¥20.

Daily departures include Kūnmíng (¥248, 18 hours), Èméi (¥22, two hours), Chóngqīng



(normal/express Y101/125, 11 hours/five hours), Běijīng (Y405, 26 hours) and Xī'ān (Y185, 18 hours). One high-speed train line has recently started between Chéngdū and Miányáng; another to Lèshān was close to being finished at the time of research. Note that the express to Chóngqīng that started in 2006 is nearly as fast as the bus.

Trains leave from Chéngdū for Lhasa every other day at 6.18pm (Y740, 48 hours), but, as always, you must get your permit first. Travel agencies in hostels can help you get it. Most departures of interest to travellers will leave from the North Train Station (Huǒchē Běizhàn).

### TO TIBET

You still cannot fly solo to Tibet and so must sign on for a 'tour' in order to get the required Tibetan travel permit. All guesthouses

in town offer the service. You may have 20 people in your guesthouse's 'tour group', but you'll never see them again after you deplane.

At the time of research these packages were priced from Y1600 to Y1900 including flights, and were the most cost-effective way of getting into Tibet. CITS runs its own four- to six-day tours (Y2000 to Y4000).

Sichuān's land borders into Tibet are still closed to foreigners. Some travellers attempt to sneak across but the majority are turned back and fined heavily. Don't believe anyone who says they can drive you to Lhasa; they can't.

Stories of travellers being dumped off in the middle of nowhere once they've crossed the border into Tibet (minus their bags and money) are not uncommon. In 2006 the US State Department was reporting incidents of

travellers being physically assaulted by authorities after they were caught.

### Getting Around

#### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Shangliu Airport (双流国际机场; Shuāngliú Guójiā Jīchǎng) is 18km west of the city. Bus 303 (Y10) is actually an airport bus that leaves from outside the Air China office on Renmin Nanlu. Another bus 303 (Y1) – no lie – is a local bus running to/from the north railway station, taking pretty much forever. A taxi will cost around Y70, though if you are leaving early in the morning, before the traffic gets going, it can be as little as Y45.

#### BICYCLE

Cycling is a great way to get around Chéngdū, although the pollution (and traffic) can be terrible. Guesthouses rent bikes for about Y10 per day. The bikes are in fairly good condition but the usual rules apply: check your bike before you cycle off and make an effort to park it in a designated parking area. Also, see Dangers & Annoyances, p361.

#### BUS

The most useful bus is 16, which runs from Chéngdū's north train station to the south train station (*nán chēzhàn*) along Renmin Nanlu. Regular buses cost Y1, while the double-deckers cost Y2. Bus 81 runs from the Mao statue in the centre of the city to Green Ram Temple, and bus 12 circles the city along Yihuan Lu, starting and ending at the north train station. Bus 4 runs from the centre of town to Chadianzi bus station and Wuguqiao bus station.

#### SUBWAY

In 2006 ground was broken (immediately snarling traffic) on the city's new subway, slated for a 2010 completion. When finished, it will be one of the most extensive in China; expect traffic headaches till the day it's done.

#### TAXI

Taxis have a flag fall of Y5 (Y6 at night), plus Y1.40 per kilometre. Motorised rickshaws also scuttle around the city and are cheaper, but slower, than cabs. Hailing a cab on Friday and Saturday nights in Chéngdū these days can be even harder than hailing a rush-hour cab in New York City. Brace yourself – it can sometimes take more than an hour.

## AROUND CHÉNGDŪ

### Luòdài 洛带

☎ 028 / pop 25,000

The winding lanes, soaring guildhalls and atmospheric teahouses of this Hakka village make for a fantastic day trip from Chéngdū. This place has been prettied up for tourists, but by and large it's been done right and is very foreigner-friendly. Many food stands have English menus and listed prices, and there's a fantastic **tourism centre** (Five Phoenix Bldg Visitor's Centre; Wúfēng Lóu Yóukè Fúwù Zhōngxīn; 五凤楼游客服务中心; ☎ 8489 3693; ☎ 8am-6pm, later in high season) with English-speaking staff. They can help you with accommodation and also give out free bilingual Chinese-English maps marked up with all the sights. The centre's right by the southernmost parking lot.

The main street (老街; Lǎo Jiē) has the lion's share of sights including a slew of guildhalls, built by migrating Hakka groups and named for their respective provinces. The **Guangdong Guildhall** (which now houses a teahouse) and the **Jiangxi Guildhall** are both worth a visit. The moderately interesting **Hakka museum** (admission Y5; ☎ 9am-5pm), filled with photos, maps and some passable English captions, is in the Hubei and Hunan Guildhall.

Don't miss wandering the lanes and cobble streets.

Located in the suburbs, 38km east of Chéngdū, you can easily visit this town in half a day, but you may wish to make it a full-day trip.

#### SLEEPING

There isn't much reason to stay overnight, but there's plenty of accommodation available if you need it. What's available is generally serviceable but not big on atmosphere.

The central **Gōngxiāoshè Lǚguǎn** (供销社旅馆; ☎ 8962 6888, 8489 3137; 4 Lao Jie Xia Jie; 老街下街4号; d Y120) has plain rooms with Chinese toilets. There's also a youth hostel across from the Guangdong Guildhall, though despite the white triangle logo, it's not an official member of Hostelling International. It was closed when we passed by, but may be worth checking out when you're in town.

#### EATING & DRINKING

If you are interested in Hakka food, there's a line of stalls beside the Guangdong Guildhall serving up snacks. Items are labelled in

### CHÉNGDŪ BUS TIMETABLES

Buses from the Tourism Passenger Transport Centre (Xinnanmen):

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Éméi	Y37	2hr	every 20min	6.40am-7pm
Dūjiāngyàn	Y18	1hr	half-hourly	8.30-11am
Huánglóngxī	Y11	1hr	half-hourly	8am-noon
Jiúzhàigōu	Y123	10hr	1 daily	8am
Kāngdīng	Y117	7hr	hourly	7am-2pm
Lèshān	Y43	2hr	every 20min	7.10am-7.35pm & 9.30pm

For northern destinations you will need to trek over to the Chadianzi bus station in the north-west of the city.

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Dūjiāngyàn	Y18	1½hr	every 40min	6.30am-8pm
Jiúzhàigōu	Y110	12-13hr	3 daily	7.20am, 8am & 4pm
Sōngpǎn	Y74	8hr	3 daily	6.30am, 7am & 7.30am
Wòlóng	Y20.50-22.50	4hr	1 daily	11.40am
Xiǎojīn	Y46	7hr	4 daily	6.30am, 7am, 7.30am & 8am

For eastern and northeastern destinations your best bet is to try the north bus station, near the north train station. However, to get to Dàzú, you'll most likely need to head to Wuguqiao bus station outside the Second Ring Rd.

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Làngzhōng	Y89.50	5hr	every 50min/30min	6.50am-12.30pm/ 4pm-6.30pm
Yībīn	Y97	4hr	every 40 min	8am-7pm
Zīgòng	Y64	3hr	every 25min	7am-7pm

## THE HAKKA

The Hakka people are known as great wanderers, which is reflected even in their name. 'Hak' is the Cantonese for 'guest' and 'ka' (pronounced 'ga' in Cantonese) means family. In Mandarin, their name is pronounced Kèjiā (客家). Though 1700 years ago they were predominantly found in the Shānxī and Hénán provinces, they were pushed into southern China by various wars and important Hakka communities sprung up in Guǎngdōng, Jiāngxī and Fújiàn provinces.

Though there's no ethnic difference between them and the Han Chinese, the Hakka are distinct through their customs and speech. There are dozens of Hakka dialects that can have as many as seven tones or as little as none. (Standard Chinese has four tones.) Despite their small numbers, the prominence of successful Hakka, both at home and abroad, is a source of great pride. Notables include actor Chow Yun-Fat (1955–), former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) and the self-proclaimed son of God and Taiping rebellion star Hóng Xiùquán (1814–1864).

Hakka food is usually pickled. Anthropologists explain its prevalence as a necessity, because when the Hakka settled in new communities most farmland was already being cultivated by the original inhabitants.

The majority of Sichuān's Hakka population came to the province between the late 17th and early 20th centuries, and number about three million. There are 80 million worldwide.

English as well as Chinese along with the prices, which are all reasonable, averaging around Y5 each.

For beer or cocktails, try the **Chic Courtyard of Dongshan** (东山别院; Dōngshān Biéyuàn; ☎ 8489 3186; 78 Lao Jie Xia Jie; 老街上街78号), though it may only be open during the high season.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are frequent buses to Luòdài from Chéngdū's Wuguíqiao bus station and less frequent service from Chéngdū's tourist bus station. The last bus leaves Luòdài for Chéngdū at 6pm. The trip will take at least an hour.

## Huánglóng Xī 黄龙溪

☎ 028

With an arresting riverside location, this 1700-year-old village has a network of winding cobbled lanes leading to temples, old wharves and ancient gates. The setting is so unique, the county says upwards of 150 movies have been shot here.

A former military outpost of the ancient Shu kingdom, with its position at the Jinjiang and Luxi Rivers, it later evolved into an important commercial centre, particularly for transporting tea during the Song dynasty.

Many of the buildings here were constructed during the Ming and Qing periods. You can pretty well head off in any direction and find something of interest to explore, from courtyards to ancient banyan trees to interesting old foot bridges.

Boats leave from the **old wharf** (古码头; gǔmátou), where you can choose between big traditional-style Chinese boats or little motor boats for hire (Y60 to Y80 per hour). However, they often don't run during the low season. During the high-traffic summer months, you may also find small water taxis that can drop you off at one of the monasteries further along the river. Just make sure you figure out how you're going to get back before sending your water taxi on its way.

Near the old wharf is **Zhènjiāng Sì** (镇江寺), a temple where sailors once came to make offerings when they pulled into port.

There are no maps of the village available yet, however, there is a good wooden sign with an English-Chinese map as you walk into town. If you take a picture of it with your digital camera, you could use this while you're sightseeing, to make sure you don't miss the town's major sights.

## SLEEPING & EATING

You'll see some tourist hotels on your way into the heart of the village, but they are generally pretty grim.

Try the rooms above **Lan's Tea** (兰庭; Lán Tíng; ☎ 1330-8199 9757; dm Y25-30, d Y80) instead. Opened by a couple who needed to find a space for their antique furniture, they decided to open a teashop and guesthouse to show it all off. Front facing rooms have lovely little balconies. Showers are communal and the toilets are a hole in the ground in a cubicle just off the courtyard.

Being so near the river, fish and shrimp are popular local dishes. Try the waterside restaurants by the old wharf. Not only do they have the best reputation in town, they also have stunning river views, especially in the evening. Also make sure you try the village speciality: black sesame cake (黑芝麻糕; hēizhīma gāo). It's sold on almost every street corner.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

About 40km away from Chéngdū, this is an easy day trip. Buses leave regularly from Chéngdū's tourist bus station (Y11, one hour). The last bus leaves Huánglóng Xī for Chéngdū at 5pm.

## Monastery of Divine Light 宝光寺

The **Monastery of Divine Light** (Bǎoguāng Sì; admission Y5; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) was founded in the 9th century, though some parts of this Buddhist complex date from as early as the 1st century. It houses multiple treasures, including a white jade Buddha from Myanmar (Burma), Ming and Qing paintings, calligraphy, a stone tablet engraved with 1000 Buddhist figures and ceremonial musical instruments. The **Arhat Hall**, built in the 19th century, contains 500 2m-high clay figurines of Buddhist saints and disciples (and one of Bodhidharma).

The area in front of the temple has recently been landscaped, creating a large modern square.

The temple is about 18km north of Chéngdū in Xīndū County. Buses run to the monastery from the north bus station and from a stop about 600m east of Chéngdū's north train station from around 6am to 6pm. The trip takes just under an hour. The temple's vegetarian restaurant has a good reputation but is only open 11am to noon.

## Sānxīngduī 三星堆

The striking and vast **Sanxingdui Museum** (Sānxīngduī Bówùguǎn; ☎ 0838-550 0349, 0838-565 1550; admission Y80; ☎ ticket office 8.30am-5pm, museum to 6.30pm) is home to a site some Chinese archaeologists regard as more important than the terracotta warriors of Xī'ān. It houses objects of such exquisite beauty they will be seared in your memory months after you leave.

Throughout the 1900s, farmers were continually unearthing pottery shards and other dirt-encrusted objects at this location, but war and the other well-known distractions of the 20th century kept people from taking much

interest in the discoveries. Archaeologists finally launched a full-scale excavation in 1986 and unearthed the proverbial archaeological mother lode – the site of the kingdom of Shu and the cradle of Chinese civilisation in the upper reaches of the Yangzi River.

The objects unearthed range from bells and weapons to bronze trees over 6 feet tall (the latter have to be seen to be believed). The dozens and dozens of masks are the stars of the exhibits, however. They are so sophisticated and complex that they wouldn't look out of place in a modern art gallery or on the cover of an alternative rock or heavy metal album. When you think that many of the objects are up to 4900 years old, it's hard not to get chills.

The English captions here are excellent and this is a sight that will appeal to anyone, whether your interest is history, archaeology, anthropology or art, modern or ancient. The museum grounds are enormous and the exhibits are displayed in two large, modern buildings.

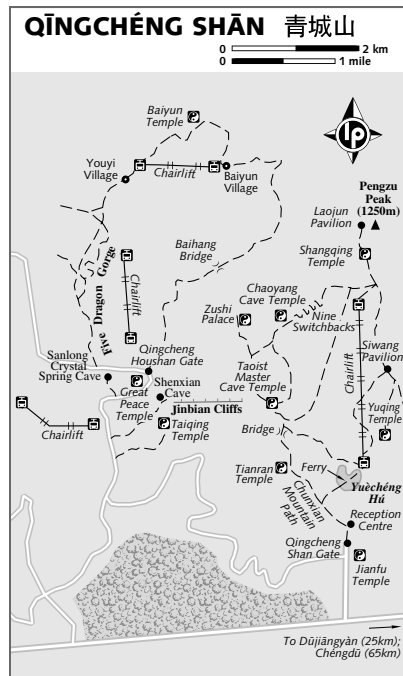
The museum is located 40km north of Chéngdū, west of Guǎnghàn. Get a bus from Zhaojue (or the Tourism Passenger Transport Centre) bus station to Guǎnghàn (Y10, two hours); from there you'll have to hop on bus 1 or 6 (Y2) for the remaining 10km to the site. Get here early: even those who swear they suffer easily from museum fatigue end up staying hours beyond what they'd planned.

## Qīngchéng Shān 青城山

The plum- and palm-tree-lined trails of **Qīngchéng Shān** (Azure City Mountain; admission Y60) have made this holy Taoist mountain one of the most popular trips from Chéngdū. Picturesque vistas and dozens of atmospheric temples dot the four-hour return route, along with subtropical foliage.

With a summit of only 1600m, the weather here is better than at Èméi Shān, so the views are far less likely to be obscured by mist and cloud. It's also a far easier climb.

If the front of the mountain is clogged with tourists clamouring for the Yuèchéng Hú (Yuecheng Lake) ferry (Y5) and then the cable car (round-trip Y58), consider heading for **Qīngchéng Hòushān** (Azure City Back Mountain; 青城后山) instead, some 15km northwest of the base of Qīngchéng Shān proper. With over 20km of hiking trails, Qīngchéng Hòushān provides the visitor a more natural environment,



with **Five Dragon Gorge** (Wúlóng Gōu) offering dramatic vistas.

Many travellers who come here spend several days. There is a cable car to help with part of the route, but climbing the mountain will still require an overnight stay; you won't want to rush the trip anyway. You can get information on the various walks and routes (though likely in Chinese only) from the ticket office though some employees will be more helpful than others.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Besides pricey resort-style (and a few budget) hotels on the road leading up to Qingcheng Shan's main gate, there are atmospheric temples on the mountain.

**Shangqing Temple** (上清宫; Shàngqīng Gōng; dm Y50) is a charming wooden building that offers hotel-like facilities. Rooms are basic and clean and have common balconies that look out over the surrounding forests. Its restaurant has a good reputation for quality food.

More restaurants, as well as some snack stands and noodle stops, are scattered along Qingcheng Shan's trails.

At Qingcheng Hòushān, there's accommodation in Great Peace Temple (太安閣; Tà'ān Gé) at the mountain's base, or at Youyi Village (友誼村; Yǒuyì Cūn), about halfway up. Dorm beds at both cost around Y20.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Qingcheng Shan is some 65km west of Chéngdū. To get there, you have to first travel to Dūjiāngyàn, a town 60km away. At the time of research, construction for the future Chéngdū subway closed the road to Dūjiāngyàn for most of the day. Though there was a one-hour window late in the morning when traffic could head to Dūjiāngyàn, and a one-hour window in midafternoon when traffic could leave Dūjiāngyàn for Chéngdū, these periods were so close together it was impossible to go to Qingcheng Shan and get back to Chéngdū on the same day. If you are on a tight schedule, ask your accommodation for an update on the construction before heading off.

Buses run to Dūjiāngyàn (Y16, 1½ hours, 7am to 8pm) from Chéngdū's Chadianzi bus station, departing when full, though you should check with your accommodation first on the status of Chéngdū's subway construction and how it's affecting bus service to Dūjiāngyàn. Once you make it to Dūjiāngyàn, it is easy to reach the mountain as numerous minibuses ply the route the rest of the way, stopping first at Qingcheng Shan (Y4) and then Qingcheng Hòushān (Y10). The last bus returning to Dūjiāngyàn leaves Qingcheng Hòushān around 7pm. During the high season there are likely to be buses running directly between Chéngdū's bus stations and Qingcheng Shan.

### Dujiangyan Irrigation Project 都江堰水利工程

The **Dujiangyan Irrigation Project** (Dūjiāngyàn Shuǐlǐ Gōngchéng; admission Y60; ☎ 8am-5pm) is where famed prefect and engineer Li Bing diverted the fast-flowing Min River (Mín Hé) via weirs into irrigation canals in the 3rd century BC. (Chéngdū's riverside parks are actually an extension of the project.) The Min River was subject to flooding at this point, yet when it subsided, droughts could ensue.

Li Bing's idea was to put together an annual maintenance plan to remove silt build-up. Thus the mighty Min was tamed and nary a flood has hit the Chéngdū plain since – a

positively Herculean feat, difficult enough to achieve today, let alone then. If it wasn't for Li Bing and his mountain-moving spirit, there would be no Sichuan as we know it today. Period.

The project is ongoing (and, naturally, modernising); it originally irrigated over a million hectares of land and since 1949 this has expanded to three million hectares. A good overall view of the layout can be gained from **Erwáng Miào** (Two Kings Temple), which commemorates Li Bing and his son, Er Lang.

This sight gets mixed reviews from travellers: some find the whole thing a waste of time, while others find the historical scope of the project makes it worth the trip. For non-Chinese-speaking people, an English-speaking guide can make all the difference (otherwise you're not looking at much more than coffee-coloured sludge). Occasionally, such guides hang out near the ticket office, or you may consider hooking up with one from Chéngdū, if you can find one that knows their stuff.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run regularly to Dūjiāngyàn's bus station (in the south of town) from the Chadianzi bus station in Chéngdū (Y18, 1½ hours, 7am to 8pm). Bus 1 runs to the irrigation project from outside the bus station.

The last bus back to Chéngdū leaves around 8pm. There is also a direct bus from Dūjiāngyàn to Wólóng (Y40.50, 2½ hours) at 8am and 2pm.

At the time of research, construction on the future Chéngdū subway was leaving only a one-hour window late in the morning when traffic could head to Dūjiāngyàn, and a one-hour window in mid afternoon when traffic could return to Chéngdū. Though this may have changed by the time you read this, if you are on a tight schedule, it would be a good idea to check with your accommodation before heading off so you don't get stuck unexpectedly.

### Wolong Nature Reserve 卧龙自然保护区

The **Wolong Nature Reserve** (Wólóng Zìrán Bǎohùqū; admission Y25) is made up of 200,000 hectares of pristine wilderness, set aside by the Chinese government to ensure suitable and protected romping grounds for the Giant Panda.

This UN-designated International Biosphere Reserve is a lovely place for hiking,

though trekking here is fairly tough and the trails are faint. Just keep in mind that there's next to no chance you'll see a Giant Panda in the wild here, no matter how long you spend.

For that, head to the park's **Giant Panda Research Centre** (admission Y40; ☎ 8am-6pm), where some 80 pandas have been artificially bred in captivity and live in enclosures. There's a good chance of seeing several baby cubs, no matter what time you visit. You can also visit the nearby **Red-Panda Centre** (Y5), several kilometres further up the mountain, and a **panda museum** (admission Y30; ☎ 8.30am-5pm), with exhibits devoted to the big black-and-white bear-cat as well as some of the reserve's other endangered creatures.

Other animals protected here are the golden monkey, the takin (a big ram-like mammal), deer and snow leopards. The Park Administration Office in Wólóng village (also called Shawan), at the centre of the reserve, can give information on hiking trails, and researchers at the Conservation Centre (some of whom speak English) are good sources of info on conditions. Be sure to bring your own supplies, including warm clothing.

In spring, the park is closed so that trekkers don't disturb the pandas as they hunt for each other during their mating season. The rainy season is a bad time to be here, as leeches take over the park. Summer is the most popular time to visit. If you can't get to the park, you can check out the utterly cool 'Panda Cam' set up by the reserve on the internet (www.pandaclub.net).

At the Conservation Centre, 6km from Wólóng village, the **Panda Inn** (☎ 0837-624 3028; fax 0837-624 3014; d Y200) has clean, comfortable doubles with hot showers and heaters. There is also a restaurant in the hotel and barbecue stalls across the road.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There is usually a bus leaving daily from Chéngdū's Chadianzi bus station to Wólóng village (Y24, four hours, 11.40am), but at the time of research it wasn't running regularly. If you miss that bus, head over to Dūjiāngyàn from where buses to Wólóng run twice daily (Y40.50, 2½ hours, 8am and 2pm). If you want to get dropped at the Conservation Centre, rather than Wólóng village, be sure to tell the bus driver.

Normally, onward buses continue from Wólóng village over the 4487m Bulangshan Pass to Rilóng, Xiǎojīn and Dānbā, from where you can catch buses to Kāngding. However, bus service along this route was cancelled at the time of research due to ongoing road construction.

## Lǎngzhōng 阆中

☎ 0817 / pop 112,000

Lǎngzhōng has Sichuān's largest grouping of extant traditional architecture and is poised to become a major site as the city develops its old town for tourism.

Located 220km northeast of Chéngdū, Lǎngzhōng was the capital of Sichuān for 17 years during the Qing dynasty, and was home to a host of notables throughout history, including astronomer Luo Xiahong, who invented the Chinese calendar.

Don't be put off by the noisy and congested town that greets you when you get off at one of the two bus stations. Just hop in a cab to the old town, where endless photo ops of black-tile roofs, swooping eaves, narrow alleys, flagstone streets and temples atop misty hills across a river await you.

What's so nice about a visit here is that, despite the development, the old town is still inhabited by locals. Vendors weave through the old town's streets hawking fresh bread and vegetables, while school children dash through the alleys, laughing and roughhousing.

## Orientation & Information

The town sits on a peninsula surrounded by Jiǎng Hé, and the old town is laid out according to a traditional Tang dynasty plan. Zhangfei Lu is the main artery running roughly north-south through town. At the intersection with Xincun Lu as it heads west, there's a statue memorialising Zhang Fei; the old town is southwest from here.

Banks here don't yet handle travellers cheques or advances on credit cards.

An internet café (per hr ¥2) is not far from the corner of Dadong Jie and Neidong Jie in the old town.

## Sights

There are dozens of sights in Lǎngzhōng's old town and several more seem to open each year as old houses are renovated and opened to the public, showcasing the town's rich history in advanced learning. Unfortunately, none of

them seem to have English captions so if you don't read Chinese it can be hard to grasp the significance of a lot of what you are seeing. However, as most places are pleasantly set up, it's still fun to flit from one to the other just to soak up the atmosphere. Many people will be happy just wandering the alleys and gazing at the eclectic architecture – a wondrous blend of north China quadrangle and south China garden styles.

Most of the newer sights charge anywhere from ¥10 to ¥30 entrance fees, however, there are no longer separate entrance fees for the four main sights listed following. Any of these (all open from 8am to 6pm) will sell you a ticket that will get you into all four places for ¥50. For more information about sights in the old town, call ☎ 623 8777.

**Gōngyuàn** (学道街; Xuedao Jie) is the best-preserved imperial examination hall in China. The **Zhang Fei Temple** (张飞庙; Zhāngfēi Miào; Xi Jie; 西街) is the tomb of and shrine to local boy done good Zhang Fei, a respected general during the kingdom of Shu who administered the kingdom from here. Further south is the **Huánguāng Lóu** (华光楼; Huanguang Tower; 大东街; Dadong Jie), with terrific views of the old town's roofs and courtyards, and the nearby **Folk Customs Performance Hall** (民俗博物馆; Mínsú Bówùguǎn; Wumiao Jie; 武庙街), which was being renovated at the time of research.

Across the river to the south and east you can have a grand time exploring. At the foot of Mt Daxiang sits the sedate-looking **Grand Buddha** (大佛寺; Dàfó Sì), one of the largest Buddha statues in Sichuān. Nearby, among Buddhist statuary, grottoes and caves littering the hillsides, is **No 1 Scholars Cave** (状元洞; Zhuàngyuán Dòng), where two legendary court officials once crammed for their examinations.

## Sleeping

Atmospheric accommodation for all budgets is springing up in the old town's historical old houses. All of the following are in Lǎngzhōng's historical quarter.

**Xinyuè Kèzhàn** (欣悦客栈; ☎ 801 6974; 100 Nanjie; 南街100号; s & d with shared bathroom ¥40-60) This is a charming mom-and-pop kind of place with small and simple rooms set up around a pretty interior courtyard. Shared bathrooms are basic and clean, but it's the warm and helpful owners that really make this place worth recommending.

**Qinjia Courtyard Hotel** (秦家大院; Qínjiā Dàyuàn; ☎ 666 4534; 67 Nanjie; 南街67号; r¥100-150) A former government office, this place is both stunning and great value. Rooms are all furnished with some combination of antique-style beds, cabinets and chairs and big modern bathrooms – some even come with charming little sitting rooms. There's no air-con, but rooms have electric blankets. A small restaurant in the middle of the courtyard serves Sichuān food (dishes ¥15 to ¥20), and though the atmosphere is intimate, it's geared towards groups rather than individual travellers. No English is spoken here but the owners, though shy, are very welcoming.

**Wharf Hotel** (水码头客栈; Shuǐ Mātou Kèzhàn; ☎ 623 3333; fax 622 5927; 61 Xin Jie; 新街61号; s/d from ¥218/288; ☺) If the Qinjia Courtyard Hotel is full, try this place. The rooms don't have as much character, but it's still cosy and atmospheric and is worth it if you can get a discount. Some of the bathrooms are a bit eccentric, however, with Western toilets set smack in the middle of the floor.

## Eating & Drinking

As the old town develops for tourism, heaps of restaurants and eateries are springing up here all the time – and the service and welcome in most of them are generally terrific.

One thing you'll notice is the air redolent with essence of vinegar – indeed, everything is pickled here! Famed local fare otherwise includes *zhāngfēi niúròu* (张飞牛肉; local preserved beef) and endless noodle soup variations.

**Zhāngfēi Zhuàngyuán** (张飞庄园; ☎ 622 9659; 4 Wumiao Lu; 武庙路4号; dishes from ¥10) Near the old town gates, this small restaurant is a busy but friendly place. You sit on wooden benches in front of a few long wooden tables. Most people come here for noodles, but the main dishes are equally good. Try the *hóng shāo niúròu* (红烧牛肉; ¥12), a delectable mix of beef, potatoes and spicy sauce.

**Dàoxiāngcūn Jiǔjiā** (稻香村酒家; ☎ 626 6333; Xincun Lu; 新村路; dishes from ¥10) The old town has loads of great snacking joints, but this sit-down restaurant with rustic décor, a bit outside the alleys, hearkens back to the old days.

There wasn't a lot going on in the way of nightlife at the time of research, but there is lots of construction in the waterfront area, just south of the Huánguāng Lóu. Some of

these little houses getting the once-over look like they are being converted into riverside bars; it would definitely be worth checking out when you are in town to see if they've taken off or not.

## Getting There & Away BUS

The town has two bus stations. The glitzy main one is north of the Zhang Fei statue, but you may be dropped off at the smaller, chaotic one to the south. The main station is more traveller friendly and has the less decrepit buses. It's also the best place to get buses to Chéngdū (¥89.50, five hours, half hourly, 6.30am to 6.30pm). Buses also leave from here for Guǎngyuán (¥41, five to six hours, hourly, 7.30am to 1.30pm, last bus 2pm), from where you have train and bus options towards Xi'an or west into the rough terrain of northern Sichuān.

Buses leave Guǎngyuán's station for Lǎngzhōng on a 'when full' basis from 6am until early evening (¥37 to ¥45, four hours). Waits can be long (two hours or more is not unheard of), so it's best to travel between 6am to 9am and noon to 3.30pm when passenger traffic is heaviest. Buy your ticket from window four at the kiosk outside.

## GUǎNGYUÁN 广元

☎ 0839 / pop 213,200

The endless low sprawl of this modernising grey city and minor manufacturing centre makes Guǎngyuán a forgettable place. But as it's smack in the middle of the Chéngdū-Xi'an rail line it's a good jumping off point for some of northeastern Sichuān's sights. Guǎngyuán is the birthplace of Wu Zetian, China's only female emperor, as well as being on the ancient Shūdào, or the 'Way to Sichuān' – which impelled Li Bai (AD 701-762) to brush his famous lines 'The way to Shu is harder than the way to heaven' (to translate it roughly) – sliced right through what is the modern city. These days, Guǎngyuán is famous for having China's largest nuclear weapons-grade plutonium production facility.

## Orientation

The city is separated into three chunks, split by Nán Hé (南河) and Jiǎng Jiāng (嘉陵江). The train station and one of the two bus stations sits on the east side of a peninsula formed by the rivers' confluence. Another

bus station is southwest, across a bridge over Nán Hé (any bus from the train station will go there). The main road is Shumen Lu, running through the heart of the city.

## Sights

**Huangze Temple** (皇泽寺; Huángzé Sì; ☎ 360 7017; admission temple Y50, temple & Thousand Buddha Cliff Y65; 🕒 8am–6.30pm May–Sep, to 6pm Oct–Apr) honours Guāngyuán-born Wu Zetian (AD 625–705), China's only female emperor. Wu, who ruled during the Tang dynasty from AD 690 until her death, is feted among the temples, pavilions and 1000-odd statues lining Thousand Buddha Cliff on the west bank of the Jiāling Jiāng.

The exquisite stone carvings, immaculately kept grounds and decent English captions make this a memorable sight, but even so, given that everything can be comfortably seen in under an hour, the ticket price is absolutely insane.

A taxi from the train station to the temple costs Y7.

## Sleeping & Eating

Few cheap options (figure Y25 or so for a bed in a common room) exist. Those that do are all in the vicinity of the train station, but it's worth noting that even Chinese visitors on a budget tend to give them a wide berth.

**Bāshū Bīnguǎn** (巴蜀宾馆; ☎ 288 7555; 46 Nanjie; 南街46号; discounted s & d without air-con Y45, with air-con Y65–75) It's about the only cheap hotel in the area and in comparison with what else this town has on offer, this hotel seems nothing short of spectacular. Cosy rooms are spotless, decorated in red and yellow and have simple gleaming bathrooms pumping out reliable hot water. Rack rates run Y140 to Y200, but staff told us the Y45 to Y75 range was pretty much used year-round.

**Phoenix Hotel** (凤凰大酒店; Fēnghuáng Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎ 551 6888; 45 Shumen Beilu Yiduan; 蜀门北路一段45号; s/d/tr incl breakfast Y200/240/320; 🍴) This is a fantastic midrange option, a Y5 cab ride away from the train and bus stations. The decoration is nothing special (standard issue dark wood with white bedding), but everything from the furniture to the carpet to the bathrooms looks like it was done up yesterday. A simple buffet breakfast of rice porridge, egg and vegetables is served from 7am to 9am. Discounts run 25% to 50% off the rack rates.

**Lǎo Chéngdū Cǎiguǎn** (老成都菜馆; Jīng Xiāngzǐ; 井巷子; dishes Y12–16; 🕒 10am–10pm) This place is a comfortable pit stop for Sichuān food. It's right around the corner from the Phoenix Hotel.

## Getting There & Away

All trains running between Chéngdū and Xī'ān stop here and are your best option for getting to the latter. Trains to Xī'ān are Y80 and to Chéngdū Y47. Both of Guāngyuán's bus stations have services to Chéngdū running from 7.40am to 7.20pm (Y98, three to four hours, every 40 minutes or so). From the bus station opposite the train station there is service to Jiǔzhāigōu (Y91, 10 to 12 hours, frequency depends on season), and buses to Xī'ān (Y111, at least six hours) run every 30 to 90 minutes from 7.30am to 5pm. Buses to Làngzhōng leave on a when-full basis between 6am and early evening (Y37 to Y45, four hours). Buses run most frequently from 6am to 9am and noon to 3.30pm.

## ZHĀOHUÀ 昭化

If the monotony of grey Guāngyuán is getting to you, a half-day trip to this pleasant country village makes for a nice change of scene, with its old wooden houses and villagers pattering through the lanes on their way to and from the surrounding fields. The main – and pretty much only – street **Tàishǒu Jiē** (太守街) stretches between famed village gates, fragments of which (they claim) date from the Three Kingdoms era.

Historic buildings are marked with Chinese-only signs, including the old town pharmacy and old town liquor-brewing facility.

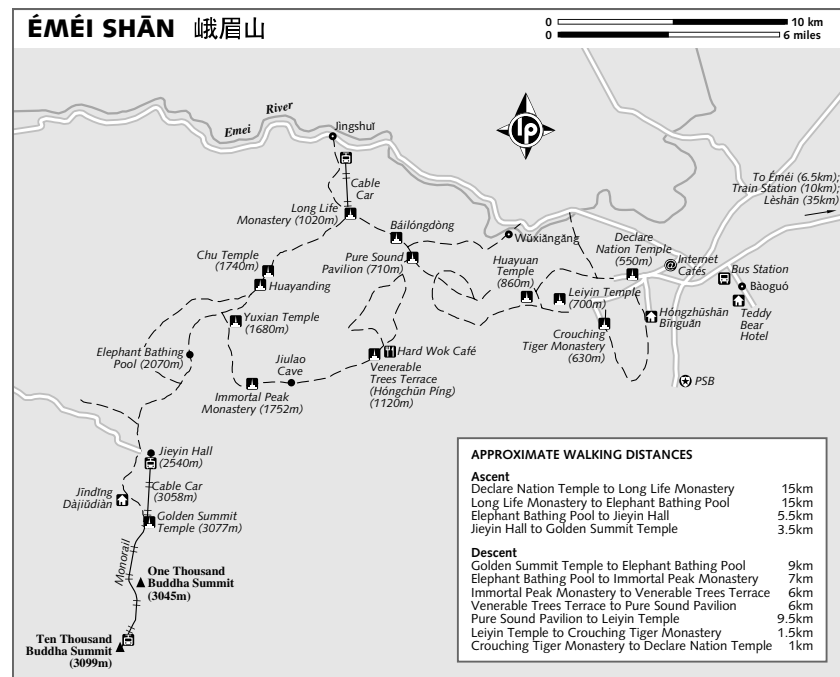
To get here, buses (Y9, 40 minutes to one hour) run from Guāngyuán's southern bus station (not the one at the train station); they leave as they fill up, so you may have a wait. Don't start your trip too late, as return buses taper off in the midafternoon.

## ĒMÉI SHĀN 峨眉山

☎ 0833 / elevation 3099m

For many travellers, watching the sun come up at this holy mountain is among their most memorable moments in China and the scenery here has long been considered 'a must' for anyone travelling through Sichuān.

Along with Pǔtúoshān in Zhèjiāng, Wútái Shān in Shānxī and Jiǔhuá Shān in Ānhuī, Ēméi Shān is one of China's four famous Buddhist



mountains. Here you'll find lush mountain scenery, plantations of tea trees, scads of temples, and macaques (a type of monkey) famous for harassing hikers for food and relieving them of any object that hasn't been tied down.

On the rare afternoon there is also a phenomenon known as Buddha's Aureole, where rainbow rings, produced by refraction of water particles, attach themselves to a person's shadow in a cloud bank below the summit. Devout Buddhists, thinking this was a call from yonder, used to jump off the Cliff of Self Sacrifice in ecstasy.

Ēméi Shān has little of its original temple work left (from 100-odd temples dating from the advent of Buddhism in China). Glittering Jinding Temple (Jīndǐng Sì), with its brass tiling engraved with Tibetan script, was completely gutted by fire. Other temples suffered the same fate, and all were nicked to various degrees by war with the Japanese and Red Guard looting.

However, it's not just the temples that lure people here. The scenery is astounding: fir, pine and cedar trees clothe the slopes, butterflies and azaleas line the paths, while lofty

crags and cloud-kissing precipices beckon in the distance.

A wave of pilgrims and tourists flock here during the peak season, when the number of stalls and hawkers multiply accordingly. However, most of these types of visitors tend to hover around the monasteries, meaning you can still find solitude on the mountain trails.

Along with Lèshān and Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve, Ēméi Shān is on Unesco's list of World Heritage sites.

## Tickets

Tickets for Ēméi Shān (Y120) include having your mug shot scanned onto the ticket, which is then laminated – a ready-made souvenir. Entry to Declare Nation Temple and Crouching Tiger Monastery at the foot of the mountain do not require this ticket; they have their own admission charges (see p381).

## Internet Access

Two large internet cafés are a five-minute walk east of Declare Nation Temple (see p381); the Teddy Bear Hotel (p382) also has internet access.

## Climate

The best time to visit Ēméi Shān is between May and October. Visiting in winter will present some trekking problems – iron soles with spikes can be hired to deal with encrusted ice and snow on the trails. Snowfall generally starts around November on the upper slopes. Try to avoid visiting during national holidays when the number of visitors to the mountain reaches epic proportions.

Temperate zones start at 1000m. Cloud cover and mist are prevalent all year round at Ēméi Shān and generally interfere with views of the sunrise (or even the hand in front of your face). If you're very lucky, you'll be able to see Gōnggā Shān (Gongga Mountain) to the west; if you're not so lucky, you'll have to settle for the less appealing Telecom tower and meteorological station. Some average temperatures in degrees Celsius:

Location	Jan	Apr	Jul	Oct
Ēméi town	7	21	26	17
Summit	6	3	12	-1

## What to Bring

Definitely not your entire pack – the less you have the happier you will be. Still, Ēméi Shān is a tall *and steep* mountain at 3099m, so the weather is uncertain – prepare yourself for sudden changes but don't weigh yourself down. The Teddy Bear Hotel (p382) stores bags for free (other places may levy a small charge).

Monasteries have no heating or insulation, but blankets are provided and some even have (godsend) electric blankets. You can also hire heavy overcoats at the top. Heavy rain can be a problem, as even a light mist can make the slate steps slippery and extremely treacherous. A good pair of rough-soled shoes or boots is a must. Flimsy plastic rainwear is sold on the mountain.

A fixed-length umbrella would be most useful – for the rain, as a walking stick and perhaps as a warning to any brigand monkeys. The Teddy Bear Hotel lends walking sticks out for free. A flashlight is important if you're spending the night or planning to hike at dawn. Food stalls are ubiquitous; nevertheless, extra munchies wouldn't hurt. Finally, don't forget toilet paper.

Travellers have become sick from contaminated water supplies on the mountain, so it's

wise to drink only the bottled water available at stands along the way.

## Routes

The most popular route up/down the mountain is to ascend via Long Life Monastery, Chu Temple (Chū Sì), Elephant Bathing Pool and on to the summit. On the way down, take the path off towards Magic Peak Monastery after you reach Elephant Bathing Pool. This path will also lead you past Venerable Trees Terrace (Hóngchūn Píng) and Pure Sound Pavilion. The majority of hikers agree that the descent is superior in sights and views.

Buses go up the mountain from the bus station in Bàoгуó village, near the Teddy Bear Hotel. Bus routes and prices are posted at the Bàoгуó bus station and at the stops en route. A ride to the top costs Y30, to Wǔxiānggāng Y10, and a return trip with a number of stops is Y60. Buses run half-hourly from approximately 6am to 5pm, but you don't want to cut it too close on the way down – if you miss the last bus, it's a 15km walk down from Long Life Monastery.

One popular option is to take a bus to Wǔxiānggāng and begin hiking from there. Alternatively, stay on till Jingshuǐ, from where you can get a cable car (up/down/return Y40/30/60, 6am to 6pm) up to Long Life Monastery. From the top of the cable car you can join the route to the summit. Buses run as far up the mountain as Jiēyīn Hall (接引殿; Jiēyīn Diàn; two hours), from where it's a steep two-hour hike or five-minute cable car ride (one way/return Y40/70) to the top.

For an epic one-day trek, most hotels can book you on a bus leaving at 3.30am(!), popular with Chinese tourists to 'cheat' and see the sunrise sweatlessly. But expect an immense traffic jam at the entrance gate followed by an enormous queue of tourists. Few actually make it in time.

These buses begin to head down from Jiēyīn Hall around midmorning, stopping at various temples along the way and finally bringing you back to Bàoгуó at around 5pm. The round trip costs about Y60 and will probably leave your head spinning.

## Duration

Time? Well, you'll be quoted wildly different times by everyone you meet. While you don't require any particular hiking skills, it is a tough climb. It is possible to make it to

## MONKEY ETIQUETTE

The monkeys have got it all figured out. If you come across a monkey 'tollgate', the standard procedure is to thrust open palms towards the outlaw to show you have no food. The Chinese find the monkeys an integral part of the Ēméi trip and many like to tease them.

The monkey forms an important part of Chinese mythology. There is a saying in Chinese, 'With one monkey in the way, not even 10,000 men can pass', which may be deeper than you think!

Some of these chimps are big, and staying cool when they look like they might make a leap at you is easier said than done. There is much debate as to whether it's better to give them something to eat or to fight them off.

One thing is certain: if you do throw them something, don't be too stingy. They get annoyed very quickly if they think they are being undersold. More than one traveller has told the tragic tale of having their Lonely Planet book ripped to shreds in front of their eyes by an extortive simian.

the summit from Long Life Monastery and back down to Declare Nation Temple in two days, but you must be willing to spend at least 10 hours hiking each day and hope for good weather. The altitude may also play havoc with your breathing and ascending too quickly will only increase this. All up, it's wise to leave yourself three days for the trek.

The approximate distances on the map will give you an idea of what is involved; time yourself on the first kilometre or two and then average out your own probable climbing duration.

## Sights

### DECLARE NATION TEMPLE 报国寺

Constructed in the 16th century, **Declare Nation Temple** (Bàoгуó Sì; admission Y8) features rare plants and a 3.5m-high porcelain Buddha that was made in 1415, which is housed near the Sutra Library.

### CROUCHING TIGER MONASTERY 伏虎寺

The renovated **Crouching Tiger Monastery** (Fúhǔ Sì; admission Y10) is hidden deep within the forest. Inside is a 7m-high copper pagoda inscribed with Buddhist images and texts.

### PURE SOUND PAVILION 清音阁

Named after the sound effects produced by rapid waters coursing around rock formations, this temple (Qīngyīn Gé) is built on an outcrop in the middle of a fast-flowing stream.

Small pavilions here are great for appreciating the natural music. It's possible to swim here, although the water is only likely to be warm enough during the summer months.

### LONG LIFE MONASTERY 万年寺

Reconstructed in the 9th century, **Long Life Monastery** (Wànnián Sì; admission Y10) is the oldest surviving Ēméi temple. It's dedicated to the man on the white elephant, the Bodhisattva Puxian, who is the protector of the mountain. This 8.5m-high **statue** is dated from AD 980, cast in copper and bronze and weighs an estimated 62,000kg. If you can manage to rub the elephant's hind leg, good luck will be cast upon you. The statue is housed in Brick Hall, a domed building with small stupas on it and the only building left unharmed in a 1945 fire.

### IMMORTAL PEAK MONASTERY 仙峰寺

Somewhat off the beaten track, this monastery (Xiānfēng Sì) is backed by rugged cliffs, surrounded by fantastic scenery and oozing with character. The nearby **Jiulao Cave** (九老洞; Jiǔlǎo Dòng) is inhabited by oversized bats.

### ELEPHANT BATHING POOL 洗象池

According to legend, Elephant Bathing Pool (Xìxiàng Chí) is the spot where Puxian flew his elephant in for a big scrub, but today there's not much of a pool to speak of. Being almost at the crossroads of both major trails, the temple here is something of a hang-out and often crowded with pilgrims.

### GOLDEN SUMMIT TEMPLE 金顶寺

This magnificent but clearly recently renovated temple (Jīndǐng Sì) at the Golden Summit (Jīn Dǐng; 3077m) is as far as most hikers make it. Covered with glazed tiles and surrounded by white marble balustrades, the temple now occupies 1695 sq metres. The original temple had a bronze-coated roof,

which is how it got the name Jin Ding (which can also mean 'Gold Top').

It's constantly overrun with tourists, pilgrims and monks, and you'll be continuously bumped and jostled. Sadly, the sun rarely forces its way through the mists up here.

From the Golden Summit it was once common to hike to **Ten Thousand Buddha Summit** (Wǎnfó Dǐng), but most pilgrims now just take the monorail (a one-hour return ticket costs Y50).

### Sleeping & Eating ON THE MOUNTAIN

The old monasteries offer food, shelter and sights all rolled into one. While some travellers complain about the spartan and somewhat damp conditions, others love what may be as many as a thousand years of character.

A few of the monasteries at key junctions have posted prices, but at others you may well have to bargain with the monks. You can expect to pay between Y20 and Y40 for a bed in a dorm room (the cheapest beds are reserved for pilgrims), with plumbing and electricity provided in those at the higher end of the scale. The following should give you an idea of where to head for the cheapest beds, but expect to pay more in the high season.

**Venerable Trees Terrace** (洪椿坪; Hóngchūn Píng; dm Y20-30, d Y160) is a good spot, with newer rooms, countless monkeys and fresh landscaping. Other travellers like **Elephant Bathing Pool** (dm from Y20).

Others, including **Declare Nation Temple** (dm from Y20), **Pure Sound Pavilion** (dm Y15-20, d Y150), **Long Life Monastery** (dm Y10-40), **Crouching Tiger Monastery** (dm from Y50), **Golden Summit Temple** (dm Y15-40), Magic Peak Monastery (though some have found the monks here unfriendly hosts) and Leiyin Temple (雷音寺; Léiyīn Sì), have monastery guesthouses. There's also a host of smaller lodgings at Chu Temple (初殿; Chū Diàn), Jieyin Hall, Yuxian Temple (遇仙寺; Yùxiān Sì), Bǎilóngdòng (白龙洞; White Dragon Cave) and Huayuan Temple (Huáyuan Sì), among others. The smaller places will accept you if the main monasteries are full, often during peak season. Failing those, if night is falling you can kip virtually anywhere, such as in a teahouse or a restaurant. Be prepared to backtrack or advance.

There are also guesthouses and hotels on Ēméi Shān, though you can't count on them being open in the off season. They may also

give preference to locals over foreigners. On average you can expect to pay between Y150 and Y300 for a room. Most of these guesthouses are clumped behind Golden Summit Temple, to the west. **Jinding Dajiuadian** (☎ 509 8088, 509 8077; d Y600) is a three-star hotel located at the base of the cable car offering the ultimate luxury: 24-hour hot showers.

Vegetarian meals are included with the price of a bed at many of the monasteries.

Just up from Venerable Trees Terrace, Hard Wok Café is run by a friendly ex-army cook and his wife; find the best coffee on the mountain and fairly decent pancakes (wow!).

Food stalls near the monastery grounds sell biscuits, instant noodles, peanuts and drinks – not to mention a wide variety of fungus. Be wary of teahouses or restaurants serving *shénshuǐ* (神水; divine water), or any tea or food said to possess mystical healing qualities. Miracles are not guaranteed but the price of at least Y10 for the cup of water or tea is.

### BÀOGUÓ VILLAGE

Hotels are everywhere on the road leading to the mountain; most are nondescript and overpriced. Have a wander and check out a few options, as prices and room conditions fluctuate.

**Teddy Bear Hotel** (玩具熊酒店; ☎ 559 0135, 138-9068 1961; www.teddybear.com.cn; dm Y30-35, s & d Y80-150, tr Y180) A long-time backpacker favourite, this is the best place to stay if you are visiting for the first time – and not just because the rooms are spotless. Many of the staff speak English and can tell you anything you want to know about taking on Ēméi Shān. Other perks include free laundry, a left-luggage service and a massage when you make it back down the mountain. The café inside is a great place to unwind and swap tall mountain tales.

**Hóngzhūshān Bīnguǎn** (红珠山宾馆; ☎ 552 5888; d Y580) This hotel has a tranquil setting of lush forests and a view on the edge of a pond, making it worth the splurge for some people.

The street leading up to Declare Nation Temple is lined with restaurants, including *huōguō* and *shāokǎo* stalls, which begin to appear as evening approaches.

### Getting There & Away

Ēméi town is the main transport hub for travel to and from the mountain. It lies 6.5km east of Ēméi Shān, and 130km southwest of Chéngdū. Buses from Chéngdū's tourist bus station run

every 20 minutes to Ēméi town (Y33, two hours, 6.40am to 7pm).

### BUS

There is no direct public bus between Ēméi town and Bàoguó village. If you don't want to catch a taxi (Y20), then take bus 1 from opposite the long-distance bus station (Y0.50). Get off at the first stop, cross the road (past the statue) and then catch bus 5 (Y1) to Bàoguó village.

Heading back to Ēméi town, buses leave every 10 minutes from outside Bàoguó's long-distance bus station (Y1, 20 minutes, 7.30am to 7pm). You can also catch a direct bus to Chéngdū (Y36, two hours, hourly from 6.30am to 6pm), Lèshān (Y11, one hour, hourly from 6am to 5pm) and Chóngqing (Y40, seven hours, 8.30am) from here.

### TRAIN

Ēméi train station is on the Chéngdū–Kūnmíng line and lies 3.5km from the centre of Ēméi town. Bus 4 (Y0.50) runs between the train station and the long-distance bus station. Ēméi town has trains to Chéngdū, Kūnmíng and Wūshíhé. A new high-speed train to Chéngdū should be running by the time you read this. The Teddy Bear Hotel can help you out with train times (they change frequently) and booking tickets.

### LÈSHĀN 乐山

☎ 0833 / pop 155,930

This small riverside city is home to 'Dàfó', the tallest Buddha in the world and one of Southwest China's most enduringly popular sights.

With new expressways completed, Lèshān is now easily done as a day trip from Chéngdū, though if you want to overnight it there are enough diversions around the city to make it worth your while.

### Information

**Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; ☎ 212 5121; Renmin Nanlu) Changes money and travellers cheques and offers cash advances on credit cards. There is also an ATM here.

**China Post** (Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; Yutang Jie) Next door is China Telecom where international phone calls can be made.

**Internet cafés** (wǎngbā; per hr Y2-3) These are scattered throughout downtown (shown on the map).

**Mr Yang** (☎ 211 2046, 130-3645 6184; richardyangmin@yahoo.com.cn; Yang's Restaurant, 2F,

128 Baita Jie) Has long been the guru of travel information in Lèshān and can organise almost anything (a visit to a local doctor, a local family or nearby villages, calligraphy lessons). One or two travellers have given lukewarm reviews, but the vast majority of feedback has been positive. (That said, the company he is affiliated with in Chóngqing for Yangzi River cruise tickets has not been so favourably reviewed.) So have a chat with this friendly and interesting character; if you're suspicious, do some homework and see.

**People's Hospital** (Rénmín Yiyuǎn; ☎ 211 9310, after hours emergencies 211 9328; 76 Baita Jie) Has a couple of English-speaking doctors.

**Public Security Bureau** (PSB; Gōngānjú; ☎ 219 3718; 236 Chunhua Lu; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Two-day visa extensions are typical.

### Sights

#### GRAND BUDDHA 大佛

Carved into a cliff face overlooking the confluence of Dadu River (Dàdù Hé) and Mín River (Mín Hé), Grand Buddha (Dàfó) is 71m high, has ears 7m long, insteps 8.5m broad, big toes 8.5m long and fingernails taller than your average human.

A Buddhist monk called Haitong got the ball rolling on the statue's construction in AD 713. He hoped that a giant Buddha would calm the swift currents and protect boatmen from lethal currents in the nearby river hollows.

It worked. During the 90-year construction period, enormous amounts of rock and silt were discarded into the river by sculptors, which ended up filling the river hollows and inadvertently taming the currents. However, for regular folks it's all about the Buddha, and locals still credit his calming influence for taming the waters.

An elaborate water-drainage system is in place inside the sculpture (not visible to travellers, unfortunately) to prevent weathering. It's done a good job on the inside, though on the outside, Dàfó is starting to show his age and soil erosion is an ongoing problem. There was once a building sheltering the statue, but it was destroyed during a Ming dynasty war. Some people think it should be rebuilt; others want to sheath the Buddha in a high-tech plastic bubble.

To really get a sense of the statue's magnitude make sure you visit the platform on top, opposite his head, and then descend the stairway to the feet for the Lilliputian perspective.

**THOUSAND BUDDHA CLIFFS** 夹江千佛岩  
About 30km north of Lèshān and 2.5km west of the train station at Jiājiāng are the **Thousand Buddha Cliffs** (Jiājiāng Qiānfóyán; admission Y35; ☎ 8am-5pm). For once, the name is not an exaggeration: over 2400 Buddhas dot the cliffs, dating from as early as the Eastern Han dynasty. The statues show a few signs of wear and tear but, considering their age, are in fairly good condition.

Set in a rather pretty location along a riverbank and on the edge of the countryside, this site takes something of an effort to reach. Catch one of the many buses from Lèshān's central bus station down the bumpy road to Jiājiāng (Y5, one hour). From Jiājiāng bus station, take a pedicab (Y10) or taxi (Y15)

to the site. The last bus returning to Lèshān leaves Jiājiāng at 6pm.

### OTHER SIGHTS

The **boardwalk** along Binhe Lu follows the Dadu River from its confluence with the Min River up past Jiāzhōu Bīnguān. Popular for strolling in the evenings, if you follow it as far as Jiāzhōu Bīnguān, you'll see fan dancers, ballroom dancers and even tango lessons underway in a large square near the intersection with Baita Jie.

Travellers have recommended day trips to villages outside Lèshān, such as **Luóchéng** (罗城), 50km southeast (famed for its old 'boat-house' architecture). Check with Mr Yang.

### Tours

Tour boats pass by for panoramic views of the Grand Buddha (hovering in front for about 10 minutes), which reveal two guardians in the cliff side, not visible from land. You currently have a choice of three types of boat from the docks along Binjiang Lu. Large

**tour boats** (Y50; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm 1 Apr-7 Oct, 8am-5.30pm 8 Oct-31 Mar) and smaller **speedboats** (Y50; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm) leave regularly throughout the day from the dock near the central bus station.

The third option is to take the bargain ferry (Y3) that leaves from a small dock not far from the Táoyuán Bīnguān next to the Sleeping Buddha Tea Pavilion. This cheap option doesn't stop in front of the Buddha but you will still get a good view – you'll just have to be extra quick with your camera. The only drawback is its infrequent departures (every 90 minutes from 7am to 5.30pm April to September, every 90 minutes from 8am to 5pm October to March).

A fun option is the local ferry (Y1) to Lizheng Island, in the middle of the two rivers' confluence. While this doesn't take you to the Buddha itself, it gives you unrivalled views. The ferry leaves regularly throughout the day from Lizheng Gate (look for a stone archway), not far from the Jiāzhōu Bīnguān.

The final destination for the boats leaving from the main docks is **Wuyou Temple** (Wuyóu Sì; admission Y10; ☎ 8am-6pm). Like the Grand Buddha, this monastery dates from the Tang dynasty with Ming and Qing renovations. It commands panoramic views and is a museum piece containing calligraphy, painting and artefacts, many with English captions.

Wuyou Temple has a hall of 1000 terracotta *arhat* (Buddhist disciples who have achieved enlightenment) displaying an incredible variety of postures and facial expressions – no two are alike. The *arhat* are housed in the **Luohan Hall**, which dates back to 1909. Inside is also a fantastic statue of **Avalokitesvara**, the Sanskrit name of the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin in Chinese).

If you get off the boat at Wuyou Temple, a visit through the temple will take you across Wuyóu Shān and down to a small bridge that crosses over to Língyún Shān (Towering Cloud Hill). Here you can visit **Oriental Buddha Park** (Dōngfāng Fódú Gōngyuán; admission Y40), a newly assembled collection of 3000 Buddha statues and figurines from all around Asia. The park's centrepiece is a 170m-long reclining Buddha, said to be the world's longest. However, this park seems a hasty effort to cash in on Buddhism.

Next door is the **Mahaoya Tombs Museum** (Màhàoyāmù Bówùguǎn; admission Y5), which has a modest collection of tombs and burial arte-

facts dating from the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220).

Continuing past the museum and up Língyún Shān brings you to the entrance gate of **Dafo Temple** (Dàfó Sì; admission Y70). This is where you can get right up close to the Grand Buddha, with narrow staircases running head to toe. Avoid visiting on public holidays or weekends, when traffic on the stairs comes to a complete standstill.

To return to Lèshān, you can either catch another boat from the ferry dock near the entrance to the Buddha or take bus 13, which leaves from the same place and will drop you back at Lèshān's dock.

This can take less than 1½ hours from the Lèshān dock, but that's pushing things a lot.

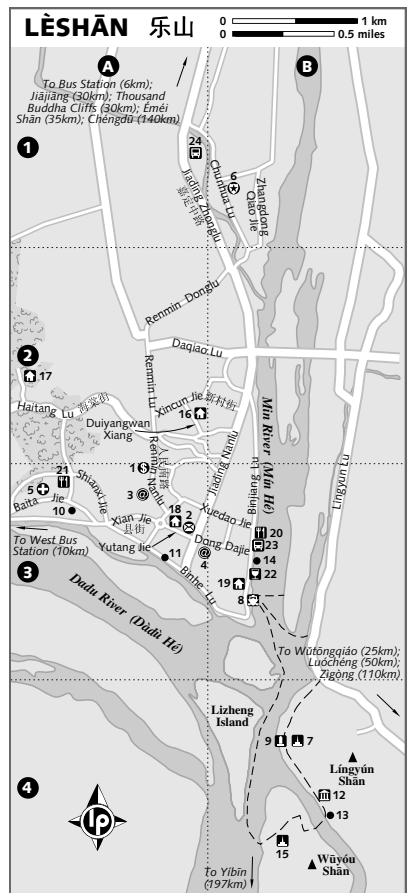
### Sleeping

**Táoyuán Bīnguān** (☎ 210 1718; Binjiang Lu; 滨江路; s with shared bathroom Y60, d Y120) Facing the docks, this hotel's location is unbeatable if you want an early morning start to your Grand Buddha visit. Room conditions have deteriorated in recent years, but it's still a backpacker favourite. Tiny shoebox-sized singles are occasionally discounted to Y50, but the shared bathrooms are odorous nightmares. The doubles are OK, but once you've seen the pristine condition of the similarly priced rooms at the Post & Telecommunication Hotel, the prices here will seem outrageous.

**Duiyángwān Bīnguān** (☎ 501 0345; middle section, Duiyangwan Xiang; 兑阳湾巷中段; d Y100-160) Despite having halls resembling corridors in a rickety Chinese hospital, the basic rooms here are OK, though a bit on the damp side. This wouldn't be your first choice, but it's a useful back-up place should other addresses in town be full.

**Post & Telecommunication Hotel** (Yóudiàn Bīnguān; ☎ 211 1788; fax 211 0457; 32 Yutang Jie; 玉堂街32号; r Y138; ☎) The tyranny of basic beige decoration reigns at most Chinese budget hotels, but it was thrown off here during recent renovations and the result is stunning. Rooms have *faux* hardwood floors and neat-as-a-pin modern bathrooms. The white furniture, bedecked with pink or peach upholstery and cushions, won't be everyone's cup of tea, but it certainly makes the rooms bright and cheerful.

**Jinhaitang Dajiuadian** (☎ 212 8888, 212 2666; fax 212 2666; 99 Haitang Jie; 海棠街99号; d incl breakfast Y460; ☎) Of the top-end offerings in town, this



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large, multiwinged hotel is the most successful at delivering clean, comfortable rooms. It's also free of the pervasive dampness present in so many of this town's other hotels. Decoration is humdrum white linen and tired cream-coloured walls, but a discount would definitely make a stay here worth it.

### Eating & Drinking

The roads near the docks are the best places to prowl for interesting restaurants and bustling hole-in-the-wall eateries. The western side of Binjiang Lu is particularly good. Another good place to wander is Binhe Lu, where you'll find a handful of teahouses and a number of restaurants.

**Yang's Restaurant** (Yángjiā Cāntīng; 2F, 128 Baita Jie; 白塔街128号; dishes ¥15-25; ☎ 6-9pm) Run by Mr Yang the travel guru (see Information, p383), this restaurant is in the living room of his home. His wife is the chef and serves good local food.

**Xibà Dǒufu Dàjiùdiàn** (☎ 211 3333; Binjiang Lu; 滨江路; mains ¥18-48) For something a little fancy, try this place by the river bank. It's got a large cavernous dining room and specialises in tofu dishes (Y28 to Y48).

For drinks, check out the bar (*jiǔbā*) just south of where the tour boats leave from. Right on the river, it's got loud music and a lovely outdoor patio. Visit during the warm months – there won't be much going on here otherwise.

### Getting There & Away

Expressways link Lèshān to Chéngdū and Chóngqing; another is being built to Yíbin.

### BUS

Lèshān has two bus stations and both are inconveniently located outside of the downtown core.

You can get onward transport to most places from the long-distance bus station. See the boxed text, below, for bus info. Note that at the time of research, there was no service to Xíchāng in southern Sichuān from Lèshān. You'll have to head to Chéngdū for onward transport.

If you are coming from Chéngdū, you may be dropped off at the bus station 6km to the north of town. It has daily services to Ēméi (Y8, one hour, 7am to 6pm), as well as frequent departures for destinations such as Chéngdū, though these departures are less frequent than those from the long-distance bus station.

There's a third bus station near the downtown docks, but at the time of research it was only being used for tour buses.

### TRAIN

No matter that ticket sellers swear blind there is a station here, there simply is no train service to Lèshān. It still means Ēméi Shān, or more likely Jiājiāng, both about an hour away by bus. (A new high-speed train is running from Chéngdū to Ēméi Shān, but the bus is still faster.)

### Getting Around

Buses 1 and 8 run the length of Jiading Lu and connect the pier area with the northern long-distance bus station. Buses run from 6am to 6pm, at roughly 20-minute intervals. Bus 13 runs from Lèshān dock to Wuyou Temple.

Pedicab rides cost from Y2 to Y5. Taxis start at a flat rate of Y3 for the first 3km.

Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be any bicycle hire in Lèshān – or many bicycles at all for that matter. But you probably wouldn't want to take one up and down the stairs at the Grand Buddha anyway.

#### LÈSHĀN BUS TIMETABLES

Buses from Lèshān's long-distance bus station:

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Chéngdū	Y39-42	2hr	every 20min	6.30am-7pm
Chóngqing	Y88	6hr	hourly	8am-5pm
Ēméi	Y11	40min	every 15min	7am-6pm
Kāngdìng	Y100	8hr	1 daily	9.30am
Yíbin	Y59	6hr	5 daily	8.30am-3.10pm
Zigong	Y35	5hr	half-hourly	8.40am-5.10pm

## WESTERN SICHUĀN & THE ROAD TO TIBET

To the north and west of Chéngdū is where green tea becomes butter tea, Confucianism yields to Buddhism and gumdrop hills leap into jagged snow-capped peaks. Much of the area kisses the sky at between 4000m and 5000m high.

To Tibetans and Tibetan-related people (Qiang) this area is part of the province of Kham, which covers the eastern third of the Tibetan plateau. For travellers, it is Tibet sans the 'official' provincial border and all its hassles.

The Sichuān-Tibet Hwy, begun in 1950 and finished in 1954, is one of the world's highest, roughest, most dangerous and most beautiful roads. It splits into northern and southern routes 70km west of Kāngdìng. As yet, there isn't much in the way of tourist facilities. For more information on Kham visit [www.khamaid.org](http://www.khamaid.org).

### Dangers & Annoyances

Towns in these areas experience up to 200 freezing days per year. Summers are blistering by day and the high altitude invites particularly bad sunburn. Lightning storms are frequent from May to October, when cloud cover can shroud the scenic peaks.

If you're planning to attempt to cross into Tibet from Bātáng or Dégé, you may want to reconsider. The Public Security Bureau keeps a close eye on foreigners, and as truck drivers are severely punished for carrying foreigners across the border, they're unlikely to give you a lift. Some travellers have managed to bribe their way in, but at costs that make flying from Chéngdū seem cheap. However, if you're arriving from Tibet into Sichuān, nobody seems to give a damn.

In 2006 the US State Department was reporting incidents of travellers being physically assaulted by authorities after they were caught attempting to cross into Tibet.

Be forewarned: at the time of writing it was not possible to change money or travellers cheques or to get advances on credit cards in Sichuān's northwest. The bank in Kāngdìng *sometimes* changes cash and travellers cheques but don't count on it. Better to bring your Renminbi with you.

## KĀNGDÌNG (DARDO, DARSEDO) 康定

☎ 0836 / pop 82,000 / elev 2616m

The biggest city in the region, Kāngdìng's core is a mass of busy shopping streets surrounded by eerie, underpopulated clusters of low grey buildings.

Most travellers doing the Tibetan Hwy will need to stay in Kāngdìng at least one night, though there are lots of places to explore in the outlying areas if you want to hang around longer. Kāngdìng is also famous throughout China for a popular love song called the 'Kāngdìng Love Song' that the town's surrounding scenery inspired.

The comma-shaped town is wedged into a deep valley and built up around the confluence of the swift Zheduo and Yala Rivers (known as the Dar and Tse in Tibetan). Gōnggā Shān (Gongga Mountain; 7556m) towers nearby.

Kāngdìng has been a trade centre between Chinese and Tibetan cultures for centuries with trading including the exchange of wool, Tibetan herbs and, especially, bricks of tea from Yā'an wrapped in yak hide. It also served as an important staging post on the road to Lhasa, as indeed it still does today.

Kāngdìng was historically the capital city of the local Tibetan kingdom of Chakla (or Chala). It was also later, from 1939 to 1951, the capital of the short-lived province of Xikang, when it was controlled by the opium-dealing warlord Liu Wenhui.

These days, despite being the capital of the Gānzī Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Kāngdìng doesn't have much of a Tibetan flavour and is majority Han Chinese.

### Information

**Agricultural Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Nóngyè Yínháng; Xī Dàjiē; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) If its one English-speaking employee is working, this bank will change US dollars, UK pounds and *maybe* travellers cheques. But because it's such a crapshoot, you're better off changing *all* the money you will need before you get to Kāngdìng. No ATMs or credit card advances are available in this city either.

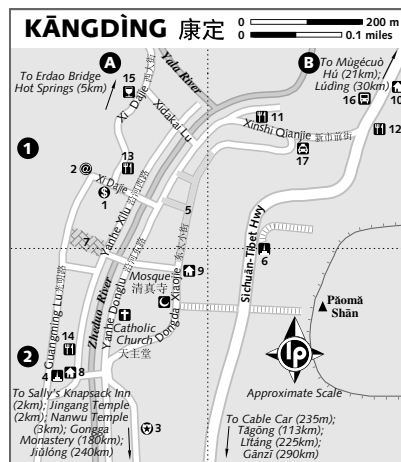
**Internet café** (wǎngbā; per hr Y2-3; ☎ 8am-midnight) In an alley off Xī Dàjiē, this internet café has fast connections. You can also get online at Sally's Knapsack Inn (see p389).

**Public Security Bureau** (PSB; Gōngānjú; ☎ 281 1415; Dongda Xiaojie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm) Three- to five-day service for visa extensions, but if you sweet-talk *politely*, perhaps the same day.

## Sights

There are several monasteries in and around Kāngdìng. Just behind Black Tent Guesthouse, the quiet **Anjue Temple** (Ānjué Sì; Ngachu Gumpa in Tibetan) dates back to 1652 and was built under the direction of the fifth Dalai Lama.

**Nanwu Temple** (南无寺; Nánwú Sì) belongs to the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) sect of Tibetan



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### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

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People's Square 人民广场	7	A1

### SLEEPING

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### EATING

Covered Stalls 小吃店	11	B1
Droma Yudia-Khampa Tibetan Eatery	12	B1
Hóngkāng Fāndiàn 鸿康饭店	13	A1
Nine Bowls Vegetable of Country 九碗农家乡	14	A2

### DRINKING

Kangba Dancehall 康巴大舞台	15	A1
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### TRANSPORT

Bus Station 汽车站	16	B1
Taxis to Lúding & Mùgécuò 往泸定和木格措的出租汽车	17	B1

Buddhism and is the most active monastery in the area with around 80 monks in residence. Set in the south of town on the northern bank of the river, it affords good views of Kāngdìng and the valley. Walk south along the main road, following its bend to the left for 2km. Cross the bridge at the southern end of town and continue on 300m. Next to a walled Han Chinese cemetery is a dirt path that follows a stream uphill to the lamasery.

You can also head up **Pāomǎ Shān** (跑马山) for excellent views of Kāngdìng, the surrounding mountains and valleys and – if you're lucky – Gònggā Shān. The ascent takes you past oodles of prayer flags, several Buddhist temples and up to a white *chörten* (stupa). You can go up by foot, or on the weathered old cable car (Y30). Take particular care when wandering around Pāomǎ Shān and try to avoid hiking on your own. A British tourist was murdered here in the spring of 2000 and one or two muggings have been reported.

To reach the hill, bear left at the fork in the road just south of the bus station and walk about 10 minutes until you reach a **monastery** on the left; a stairway leads up the hill from here. A second, more direct route, heads up the hill further south, beginning above the staircase on Dongda Xiaojie.

In the south of town the 400-year-old **Jingang Temple** (金刚寺; Jīngāng Sì) is undergoing renovations. A taxi from the bus station will cost you Y5.

About 5km north of Kāngdìng are the **Erdao Bridge Hot Springs** (二道温泉; Èrdào Wēnquǎn), where you can have a half-hour bath in slightly egg-smelling, warm, sulphurous water. Take your own towel. You can reach the hot springs by taxi for about Y8.

In town, the **market** (*shìchǎng*) on Dongda Xiaojie is worth a look. On summer evenings, **People's Square** (Rénmín Guǎngchǎng) is filled with dancers boogieing to an eccentric mix of techno and ballroom music.

## Festivals & Events

The **Walking Around the Mountain Festival** (Zhuànshān Jié) is the biggest annual celebration in Kāngdìng and one of the best times to visit the city. It takes place on Pāomǎ Shān on the 8th day of the fourth lunar month to commemorate the birthday of the Historical Buddha, Sakyamuni. During the festival,

white-and-blue Tibetan tents cover the hill-sides and visitors come from all over western Sichuān for wrestling, horse racing and the 10-day street fair.

## Sleeping

Kāngdìng has a good range of accommodation, including a couple of backpacker-friendly choices.

**Black Tent Guesthouse** (Gònggāshān Lúshè; 28 Yanhe Xilu; 沿河西路28号; dm/d Y20/50) By far the most popular place, the atmospheric dorm rooms with wood floors here are cosy. There's one shower and one toilet.

**Sally's Knapsack Inn** (背包客栈; Bēibāo Kèzhàn; ☎ 283 8377, 130-6007 5296; dm Y20; ☺) Next to Jīngāng Temple, this laid-back hostel and café has colourful carved wooden beds and the most helpful staff in town when it comes to travel info. A taxi from the bus station will cost you Y5.

**Qingyuan Dajiudian** (☎ 669 9888; Yingbing Dadao; 迎宾大道; d Y380; ☺) Some rooms here are missing lights, electric kettles and room switches. However, once you stumble on an intact room, they're terrific – tremendously comfortable with the works (reliable hot water, heating). Conveniently located right by the bus station, a discounted room may run as low as Y120 to Y150.

**Love Song Hotel** (Qīnggē Dàjiùdiàn; ☎ 281 3333; fax 281 3111; 156 Dongda Xiaojie; 东大街156号; d incl breakfast Y580) Service here can be pretty lethargic and dismissive, but the rooms and facilities are the best in town. Discounts are the only real disappointment – even in the low season they aren't substantial. Despite the good condition of the rooms, some travellers may find them overpriced.

## Eating

Hotpot is everywhere, as in most Sichuān tourist towns.

**Nine Bowls Vegetable of Country** (Jiǔwǎn Nóngjiā Xiāng; ☎ 287 5199; Yanhe Xilu; 沿河西路; dishes from Y5; ☺ 11am-9pm) You can't miss this cubbyhole place – the sign next door says 'Chóngqìng Strange Taste Fish'! The exceedingly friendly staff is overseen by an equally hospitable manager who speaks decent English. It also has an English menu.

**Droma Yudia-Khampa Tibetan Eatery** (☎ 282 3463; Xinshi Qianjie; 新市前街; dishes from Y10; ☺ 9am-9pm) This newer place has a large, warm dining room and comfy seating, and a huge menu

of local, Nepali and Western food and even breakfast (though they seem to rise late around here).

**Hóngkāng Fāndiàn** (☎ 283 5101; 14 Xi Dajie; 西大街14号; dishes Y12-18; ☺ 9am-10pm) Outstanding Sichuān food is served in this modest but spotless restaurant – you really can order just about anything off the menu here and not be disappointed. The small dining room is filled with dark wood chairs and tables decked with cheery blue-and-white checked tablecloths. The waiters aren't very friendly, but they're still among the most attentive and professional in town. You'll never have to lift a finger for so much as a tea refill or dropped napkin.

Near the bus station and market are *bāozì* (steamed stuffed buns; 包子) places, great for snacks to take on bus journeys. In the evening, numerous covered stalls set up camp at the northern end of town with arguably the widest selection of skewered meat, veggies and fish in Sichuān.

## Drinking

Tibetan dance halls are the place to go for a night out in Kāngdìng and they make for a very entertaining evening. Traditional Tibetan and Chinese songs, including the famous Kāngdìng Love Song, are performed to ear-splitting techno beats and a very appreciative audience. Try the **Kangba Dancehall** (Kāngbā Dǎwútái; ☎ 669 3255; Xidakai Lu; 西大开路; drinks from Y20), where you can get up and dance once the performances are finished.

## Getting There & Away

An airport is being built on the way to Tāgōng; it's slated for completion in 2009.

## BUS

Improved roads have made Kāngdìng far more accessible. The bus station is in the northeast of town.

If heading south, check whether roadwork near Xīchāng has been completed or not. At the time of research, delays caused by construction on this route were increasing travel times well over the usual seven hours.

See the boxed text, p390, for bus details.

## TAXI

Taxis congregate on Xinshi Qianjie, not far from the Chāngchéng Bīnguǎn. Trips to Lúding cost around Y20.

## KĀNGDÌNG BUS TIMETABLES

Buses from Kāngdìng:

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Bātáng	Y138	2 days	daily	6.30am
Chéngdū	Y105-117	8hr	half-hourly	6am-5pm
Dānbā	Y43	4hr	daily	7am
Dégē	Y166	24hr	daily	7.30am
Gānzī	Y107	12hr	daily	6.15am
Lèshān	Y72-89	8hr	daily	7am
Lítáng	Y80	7hr	daily	6.45am
Tāgōng	Y33	4hr	daily	6am
Xiāngchéng	Y140	14hr	daily	6am
Xīchāng	Y90	7hr	daily	6am

## AROUND KĀNGDÌNG

## Mugecuo Lake 木格措湖

There are several mountain lakes and hot springs in the vicinity of Kāngdìng. Lying 21km to the north of town up the Yala Valley, Mugecuo Lake (Mùgécuò Hú) is one of the highest lakes in northwestern Sichuān at 3700m. Locals boast that it's one of the most beautiful.

Trails around it lead to other smaller lakes such as **Hóng Hǎi** (Red Sea). Also worth checking out is **Qīshè Hǎi** (Seven Colour Lake), which lies a few kilometres before Mùgécuò. It's best not to wander around these parts alone or to stray too far off the path. The area of 'Wild Men's Lake', as Mùgécuò means in Tibetan, is home to wolves and other wild beasts.

There's no public transport to the lake. You'll need to negotiate transport with a taxi or minivan. Prices vary wildly depending on the number of passengers and how long you want to stay. Taxis start at Y200 to Y300. It takes 1½ hours to get to the lake.

Mùgécuò is best done as a day trip from Kāngdìng.

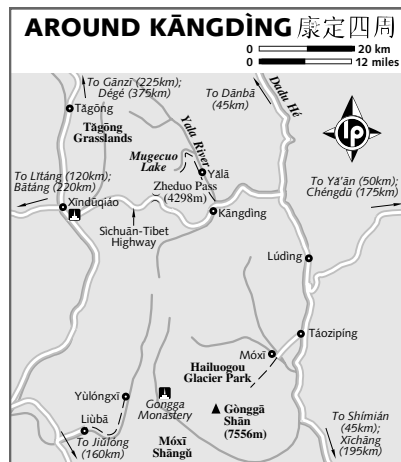
## Gongga Monastery 贡嘎寺

This monastery (Gōnggā – or Konka or Kongkar – Gumpa) is situated at the western foot of Gōnggā Shān, a mountain increasingly popular with hardcore, experienced mountain climbers.

The monastery was ravaged during the Cultural Revolution but is currently enjoying something of a revival. It is of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism and forms part of a pilgrimage route around the holy Minya

Konka, the local Tibetan name for Gōnggā Shān. The monastery is very remote and can only be reached on foot or with a 4WD.

This trip is difficult but not impossible to do on your own. You first need to get yourself to the trailhead at Liùbā (六巴), a small village. There is no bus service to Liùbā but you may be able to get one heading for Jiùlóng (九龙). This will take you to the crossroads leading to Liùbā from where you'll have to walk or hitch the remaining 10km. From Liùbā you can hitch or trek the 25 or so kilometres to Yùlóngxī (玉龙溪), where you may be able to arrange accommodation. From here you will have to trek over into the Moxi Valley (磨西山谷; Móxī Shāngǔ), where the monastery is situated.



You may be able to stay in the monastery, from where you could do any number of day hikes up and down the Moxi Valley, before retracing your steps back to Kāngdìng. A more difficult option involves following the Moxi Valley downstream (eastwards) for around 60km until you reach the main Lúding–Shīmíán road, where you can flag down a bus.

This is a wild, difficult and untouristed route. Only experienced hikers should attempt it with sufficient food, a tent and warm clothes.

## LÚDÌNG 泸定

☎ 0836 / elev 1310m

Lúding is a small, bustling town about halfway between Kāngdìng and Móxī. You wouldn't make a point of coming here, but as it's a minor connection point for buses between western Sichuān and Chéngdū, Lèshān and Móxī, you may end up here all the same.

The only sight is the **Luding Bridge** (泸定桥; Lúding Qiáo; admission Y10), a 100m-long chain suspension bridge over the Dadu River (Dàdù Hé), famous throughout China as the site of one of the most famous episodes of the Long March. It's said that 20 communist troops, armed with grenades, supposedly crossed the bridge hand over hand after finding the Kuomintang troops had pulled the planks off the bottom of the structure. There's increasing doubt, however, whether this event actually took place.

The bridge is five minutes' walk from the bus station. Just follow the river into town and you'll find it. There's also a small museum here commemorating the Long Marchers.

## Sleeping &amp; Eating

The hotel situation in Lúding is good unless you're on a budget; for cheaper digs head for Móxī or Kāngdìng.

**Chèzhàn Lǚguǎn** (车站旅馆; Bus Station Hostel; ☎ 139-9048 9606; dm Y20, d/tr Y30/60) This hostel is one of the few cheap but decent options.

**Lúding Qiáo Bīnguǎn** (泸定桥宾馆; ☎ 312 8888; d Y480) Across the river from the bus station in the new area of town, this hotel is a good midrange option where you can often get 50% discounts on rooms. It's the building with the large green dome on the roof.

Clustered around the bus station are a number of nondescript restaurants as well as a teahouse, where you can while away your time until the next bus pulls into town.

## Getting There &amp; Away

From Lúding there are daily buses to Chéngdū (Y92 to Y98, six hours, 6.30am, 10am and 1pm) and Shīmíán (Y20, three hours, 6am and noon). Minibuses run regularly to Kāngdìng (Y20) and Móxī (Y20).

A second route between Èméi Shān and Lúding, without doubling back to Chéngdū, runs via Wūshíhé to the south. There is usually one morning bus at 6am from Lúding to Wūshíhé (Y20), but if it doesn't appear, jump on the bus to Shīmíán from where there is frequent onward transport. Once you reach Wūshíhé you'll need to hop on a train to Èméi town. The train departs Wūshíhé in the afternoon, so you shouldn't have to stay overnight here. If you're headed south to Pānzhihūa or Kūnmíng, you can only buy hard-seat tickets in Wūshíhé and few onward trains stop here.

## MÓXÍ 磨西

☎ 0836 / pop 6,000

Móxī, the gateway to Hailuoguo Glacier Park (see p392), is nestled in some delicious mountain scenery around 50km southwest of Lúding. The village itself isn't much but is pleasant to wander around for an hour or two. Locals are mainly Han Chinese or Tibetan.

## Sights

Móxī's older, traditional wooden buildings are at the bottom of the village. Also at this end is a multicoloured **Catholic church** (天主教堂; Tiānzhǔ jiàotáng; admission Y3) where Mao camped out during the Long March. It's open to the public and you will be given an obligatory tour by the old men who look after the place. From here, the village climbs its way up a hill. If you follow the dirt road up, about 200m past the main crossroads on the right is **Guānyīn Gǔ Gōngpa** (观音古寺), a 400-year-old Bön (Tibetan Buddhist sect) temple that is run by some delightful old women. In the courtyard is a mammoth, gnarled tree around which the temple has been built. Across the road from the temple is a small **pagoda** (塔), from where you can get a view of the surrounding scenery.

## Sleeping &amp; Eating

Móxī has plenty of accommodation.

**Bīngchuān Fàndiàn** (冰川饭店; dm Y25, d Y60) Opposite the entrance to the church, this place has what may be the best glacier views in town. It's also a good choice because staff here are used to dealing with foreigners.

**Hǎilúo Fàndiàn** (海螺饭店; ☎ 326 6297; d Y80; 🍽️) Up the road from the Bingchuān Fàndiàn, this place has generic budget rooms, but is known for the magnificent views from its rooftop terrace.

There are a number of restaurants, barbecue stalls and hotpot places along the main road and the road leading to the glacier park entrance. Check prices before ordering.

Móxi's shops and fruit stands are well stocked if you need to buy some supplies for a trip to Hǎilúogōu.

### Getting There & Away

Most visitors to Móxi arrive on a tour bus. Basically the transport system here entails prowling the village for the inevitable jumble of minibuses and motorbikes, then sorting out prices and drop-offs with the drivers and your fellow commuters.

Most locals scoot around on motorbikes or catch a ride to Lúding (Y20) in one of the minibuses that circulate between the two towns. These leave from the crossroads at the top end of town.

There is supposedly a 7am bus to Lúding (Y15, two hours), but don't count on it. Ditto Chéngdū (Y95, eight hours, 8.30am). The owner of the Bingchuān Fàndiàn will be able to help you out with transport. Change at Lúding for Chéngdū and Kāngding. If you're headed to Shímíán, get off the bus at Mǎozǐpíng, on the other side of the bright-orange Rainbow Bridge. From here you can flag down a southbound bus.

To reach Móxi, get off your bus in Lúding, from where you can grab a minibus to Móxi (Y20). Travelling from the south via Shímíán, get off at Mǎozǐpíng and flag down a minicab to Móxi from there. If you're coming from Yǎ'ān, get the driver to let you off at Gāngǔdì (干谷地), from where you can get a taxi (Y20, one hour).

### HAILUOGOU GLACIER PARK 海螺沟 冰川公园

Hailuogou Glacier slides – literally – off the eastern slopes of Gònggā Shān to form the lowest glacier in Asia. **No 1 Glacier** (一号冰川; Yīhào Bingchuān), the main glacier, is 14km long and covers an area of 16 sq km. It's relatively young as glaciers go: around 1600 years old. The top of Hailuogou can offer incredible vistas of Gònggā Shān and the surrounding peaks, all above 6000m, but how

much you actually see is entirely up to Mother Nature. Constantly framed with a backdrop of snowy peaks, the surrounding forests are also beautiful, their ecosystems changing as you ascend the mountain.

The entrance to **Hailuogou Glacier Park** (Hǎilúogōu Bingchuān Gōngyuán; admission Y140) lies in Móxi. The park was once a popular choice for trekking and camping; it used to be possible to ascend the entire mountain by foot or pony, but as the sight has become more commercial this is no longer the case. Nowadays, travellers must take a minibus from the park entrance along a paved road up to **Belvedere** (观景台; Guānjǐngtái), 3km above Camp No 3, via Camps No 1 and 2. From Belvedere the tour groups tend to continue their ascent to the base of No 1 Glacier via cable car (Y160, 8.30am to 4pm).

It is still possible to trek from Belvedere and it's a one- to two-hour walk up to No 1 Glacier. While not a tough climb, the walk is made more difficult as the path has been largely neglected and so at times is hard to follow. On a clear day, however, there are some beautiful views to be had and the trail passes through some lovely forest. En route to the base is the **Waterfall Viewing Platform** (冰川观景台; Bingchuān Guānjǐngtái) at 3000m. From here you can see the main glacier tongue, plus **No 2 Glacier** (二号冰川; Èrhào Bingchuān) and **Golden Peak** (金银峰; Jīnyīnfēng) at 6368m.

The entrance fee to the park includes a guide, compulsory for all tourists going out on the glacier and handy for keeping you away from deep crevices and melting points. Guides meet you at the base of No 1 Glacier and take you on a 30-minute tour of the glacier, after which you are free to go off and explore.

The park's development means this is no longer the nature getaway it once was. But if your main interest is seeing and even walking across a glacier, then the park is still worth a visit. Come prepared with warm clothes and sunglasses. You'll also need to bring food and water, as you might not find much to buy en route until you reach Camp No 3 and its pricey restaurants. On maps of the park, marked trails may be less than accurate and some may have disappeared.

The rainy season for this area spans July and August, although the locals say they get 200 days of rain a year. (Some travellers who've been here during these summer months are emphatic that it wasn't worth it.) The best

time to visit is between late September and November, when skies are generally clear. Autumn colours are particularly beautiful at this time, though it can be cold up at Camp No 3.

### Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation options in the park tend to fall into one category: old and overpriced.

**Camp No 1** (一号营地; Yīhào Yíngdì; dm Y150) At 1940m, this spot still offers budget dorm beds but conditions are damp and dirty.

**Camp No 2** (二号营地; Èrhào Yíngdì; dm Y150) Sitting at 2620m, No 2 has cramped, expensive dorm rooms, although the price does include a dip into the hot springs.

**Camp No 3** (三号营地; Sānhào Yíngdì) is the highest camp at 2940m and offers two resort-style hotels. The huge **Jinshān Fàndiàn** (金山饭店; Golden Mountain Hotel; ☎ 326 6433; r Y160-180) and the new **Jinshān Dǎjiùdiàn** (金山大酒店; Golden Mountain Grand Hotel; ☎ 326 6383; d Y580) sit side by side and offer the best – and most expensive – accommodation within the park.

The park authorities frown upon camping; in any case there isn't a great deal in the way of flat ground on the way up.

The camps sell some food and drinks, although, out of season, you can only count on this at Camp No 3. Mineral water, soft drinks, beer and instant noodles are usually available at high prices.

### Getting There & Away

Turn left at the main crossroads at the top of the hill in Móxi and carry on to the ticket office, about 400m up the road. Móxi itself can be reached by minibus from Lúding (see Getting There & Away, opposite, for details).

Minibuses (Y50 return, one hour) start running up the mountain from the park entrance gate at 7.30am and leave as soon as they have more than one passenger. The last bus leaves Belvedere around 7pm and stops at all three camps on the way down.

### SICHUĀN-TIBET HIGHWAY (NORTHERN ROUTE)

For many, this stretch of the Tibetan Hwy is by far the most thrilling and awe-inspiring. Some 300km longer than the southern route, it crosses Chola Mountain, the highest pass this side of Lhasa. The views are jaw-dropping, the landscape rugged and the cliff-hugging roads are guaranteed to keep your

adrenaline pumping for the duration of your journey.

The opportunities for independent exploration are endless. Besides the places listed in this section, almost every major town along this route has an interesting monastery set amongst stunning scenery. Few people make it up this way and you could easily spend a couple of weeks just hopping on and off buses, discovering it all for yourself.

Some of the highway's highlights include the increasingly popular Tagong Grasslands (below), or, for a small detour just off this route, you could head to the splendid little town of Dānbā with its fabulous Qiang watchtowers.

The highway ultimately leads to the border town of Dégé, with its internationally revered printing monastery. It also takes you to the north where it is possible to work your way up to Qīnghǎi province via Sèrxu.

Come prepared with warm clothing. Remember that bus services can be erratic – this is no place to be if you're in a hurry. It's also not possible to change money or travellers cheques, so load up with dosh before you come.

### Tagong Grasslands 塔公草原

A trip to the Tagong Grasslands (Tǎgōng Cǎoyuán) will give you a glimpse of remote Tibetan life and some off-the-beaten-track trekking options.

The base for visitors to this area is Tǎgōng town, a small place with a real Tibetan flavour. Some travellers arrange horse treks here, though many just hang out and wander the countryside longer than they'd planned.

The best time to visit is from the beginning of June through to the end of September. There's not much going on during the cold, snowy, off-season months when the area can seem pretty dead. During this period the long slog to get here doesn't seem worth it.

About the only thing to visit in town is the **Tagong Temple** (塔公寺; Tǎgōng Sì; admission Y10). It dates back to the Qing dynasty and blends Han Chinese and Tibetan design elements.

The town is well known for its annual **horse racing festival** (sàimǎhui), which features thousands of local Tibetan herdsmen along with Tibetan opera and dance performances. It takes place during the eighth lunar month, usually falling in July or August.

## THE TIBETANS

**Population:** 4.6 million in China and one million in China's Southwest

**Location:** Western Sichuān (Gānzī and Àbà Autonomous Prefectures and Mǔlì Autonomous County); northwestern Sichuān (Zhōngdiàn and Déqīn Counties); northwest Yúnnán (Déqīn Prefecture)

Western Sichuān and the extreme northwest of Yúnnán were once part of the Tibetan province of Kham and remain distinctly Tibetan to this day, despite large-scale Han Chinese immigration. Almost the entire region is comprised of Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, the largest of which centre upon the Àbà, Gānzī, Déqīn and Mǔlì regions. The grasslands of the extreme northwest of Sichuān once formed part of the Tibetan region of Amdo, (in)famous for its bandits and caravan-raiders.

Khamba men are seen swaggering along the streets of most settlements west of Kānding. Most wear a *chuba* (Tibetan cloak), normally lined with sheepskin and properly worn hanging off the right shoulder. Many wear broad-rimmed cowboy hats (fur-lined hats in winter) and big boots, sporting at least one gold tooth, an amulet around their neck and a knife by their side. Women traditionally wear elaborate coral and amber jewellery and arrange their hair into 108 braids.

Khambas are known as the most religious and warlike of all Tibetans and were depicted by most early travellers as either saints or murderers. In 1959 the region around Lítáng saw the fiercest guerrilla resistance to the encroaching Chinese troops and many rebels fled to India and Nepal to organise armed resistance from Mustang (with CIA assistance).

Almost all Tibetans are Buddhists, though northwestern Sichuān is also a strong centre of Bön, the indigenous pre-Buddhist faith of Tibet. Bön blends the shamanistic spirit worship of rivers, mountains and trees with a veneer of Tibetan Buddhism (which itself has been influenced by the Bön pantheon of gods). Followers of Bön are most easily recognised by the fact that they walk *koras* (pilgrim circuits) and rotate prayer wheels anticlockwise, as opposed to Buddhists who do these things clockwise.

The most famous Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the region is the printing college of Dégé. Many others were destroyed in the 1959 rebellion or during the Cultural Revolution. As you travel through Tibetan territory, you'll see plenty of *chörtens* (Tibetan stupas) and prayer flags adorning the countryside.

Some Tibetan foods you might taste in the region include *tsampa* (roast barley), *momos* (dumplings) and *thugpa* (noodles). Tibetan drinks include yak butter tea and *chang* (Tibetan barley beer).

Lhasa dialect is about as close as you'll come to a lingua franca among the various Kham communities. In western and northern Sichuān, however, few regular Tibetans, other than monks or the educated, can understand or speak it. Tibetan dialects differ so much from town to town that two Tibetan people living as little as 200km away from each other often have to switch to speaking Chinese in order to communicate.

### Basic Tibetan Phrases

Hello.	<i>tashi delek</i>
Thanks.	<i>tujay chay</i>
Goodbye.	<i>kaliy shu</i>
(if you are leaving)	
Goodbye.	<i>kaliy pay</i>
(if someone else is leaving)	
What is your name?	<i>kayrang gi mingla karay ray?</i>
My name is...	<i>ngay mingla...ray</i>
I am from (America)	<i>nga (Arig) nay yin</i>
...Australia	<i>...ositaliya</i>
...England	<i>...injiy lungpa</i>
Where is...?	<i>...kaba du?</i>
straight ahead	<i>shar gya</i>
right side	<i>yay chola</i>
left side	<i>yon chola</i>
far	<i>tha ringpo</i>
monastery	<i>gompa</i>
shrine	<i>ihakhang</i>
beautiful	<i>nying-jepo</i>
good	<i>yakpo</i>
boiled water	<i>chu khoma</i>
I don't understand.	<i>ha ko masong</i>

For a comprehensive guide to the Tibetan language, refer to Lonely Planet's *Tibetan Phrasebook*.

There are tons of guesthouses around, but don't expect them all to be open if you show up in the off-season. Wherever you go, prices are fairly uniform: dorms average ¥15, rooms with shared bathrooms are around ¥60 and rooms with private bathrooms cost around ¥100.

Top of the heap is the great **Snowland Guesthouse** (雪城旅社; Xuéchéng Lǚshè; ☎ 286 6098; dm ¥25), right next to Tagong Temple. It's got wooden everything and rigid but comfy beds; best are the thick blankets. The shower and facilities are clean.

**Sally's Kham Restaurant** (康巴餐厅; Kāngbā Cāntīng; ☎ 139-9045 4752; tagongsally@yahoo.com; ☑) is a goldmine for travellers. It serves Tibetan, Chinese and Western food and has internet access, CD burning, a bakery, and bicycle and sleeping bag rental. Sally speaks English, is about the best source of local travel information and can arrange one- or two-day horse treks for two people or more (¥100 to ¥120 per person per day).

One morning bus to Tāgōng village (on its way to Dàofú) runs daily from Kāngdīng (¥40, four hours, 6am) and drops you outside the temple. During the horse racing festival buses are likely to be more frequent. If you're heading to Gānzī, you can pick up the same bus the next day at about 10am as it passes through town. To Dānbā you'll likely have to take a minivan to Bāměi (¥10, one hour), then another to Dānbā (¥25, two to three hours).

Returning to Kāngdīng, afternoon buses can be flagged down as they pass through Tāgōng town. You can also catch a minibus on the main street that will take you to Yājīāng, from where there are buses to Chéngdū or Lítáng.

### Dānbā (Lome Dhamkho) 丹巴

☎ 0836 / pop 58,200 / elev 1800m

The area around Dānbā has got to be one of the jewels of western Sichuān. Set in a gorge, the town is built up along the banks of the Dadu River (Dàdù Hé). Though there's not much to see in the town itself, something about its small compact size and the big roar of the river makes it impossibly charming.

Though technically not on the Sichuān-Tibet Hwy, Dānbā is nonetheless a good place to take a brief detour – the low elevation means it's unusually warm, a virtual paradise if you have just made your way down from the freezing mountains further west.

Numerous Tibetan and Qiang villages perch in the hills and cliffs in the surrounding countryside along with dozens of ancient stone Qiang watchtowers. With so much to explore, it's ridiculously easy to lose track of time here. Also keep an eye out for families of roly-poly monkeys ambling across villages and (increasingly) the main roads.

There are heaps of places to visit besides what's listed following – though if you don't speak Chinese, it may be difficult to find out about them once you're here. If you're coming from Chéngdū, travellers have been particularly satisfied with the suggestions they've gotten at Sim's Cozy Guesthouse (see p364) for exploring the region.

### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The narrow town meanders from east to west along the river; the only main road is Sanchahe Lu, paralleling the river. The bus station is in the far west end. Upward (literally) from here you'll find the post office (郵局; yóujú) and **Public Security Bureau** (PSB; 公安局; Gōngānjú; ☎ 353 3710) in the maze of alleys. Continuing on you'll eventually run into a pedestrian street of shops and bakeries. There's an **internet café** (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr ¥2) on Guangming Lu (光明路), but it, like the others in town, seem to have the slowest internet connections in all of Sichuān.

### SLEEPING & EATING

There's accommodation for every budget in town.

**Xiàngzi Jiǔlóu** (巷子酒楼; ☎ 352 3655; 98 Tuanjie Jie; 团结街98号; dm from ¥20) Down a dark, body-width-narrow lane, this is a gritty Chinese budget hotel with a slightly rank communal Chinese toilet that's nonetheless pretty cute (the hotel, that is, not the toilet). Flights of narrow steep stairs lead up to the rooms – which are cramped and a little damp but very clean – and a greenhouse-like, glassed-in sitting area with a view of the river. They say they have 24-hour hot water, but water pressure can be so weak it's hard to know one way or the other.

**Old Castle Hotel** (古堡大酒店; Gǔbǎo Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎ 352 2999; 43 Guangming Lu; 光明路43号; s/d/tr ¥680/580/680; ☑) This place has heat, endless hot water, shower pressure that could put out a fire and the most comfortable rooms in town, which may be discounted as low as ¥150 if you're lucky.

### QIANG WATCHTOWERS & CULTURE

The striking Qiang watchtowers are this area's trademark and many in the Dānbā region are between 800 and 1000 years old. Over 3000 watchtowers were built between the Ming and mid-Qing dynasties alone and 562 from this period are still standing today. The watchtowers come in all sizes depending on their primary use.

Family-built watchtowers averaged between 20m and 30m in height and were mainly used for storing agricultural produce or protecting valuables. Village watchtowers, however, soared as high as 60m. Though occasionally used as places of worship, they mostly served political purposes – protecting Qiang settlements during war, staking out village borders or operating as checkpoints. Fires lit on the towers' rooftops would have warned surrounding villages of impending attack.

Tower entrances are typically up to 10m above the ground, reachable only by ladder that can then be pulled inside preventing access to others.

While the interior of the watchtowers is always rounded, the outside can have anything from four to 13 corners. It's said the only surviving 13-corner watchtower in the Dānbā area is in Pujiadong village.

The Qiang themselves are a small ethnic group that derive their name from a 2000-year-old kingdom ruled by a tribe that is said to have been the progenitor of both the Qiang and Tibetan people. These days, the Qiang and Tibetans live in close proximity in the valleys of northwestern Sichuān and there are many ethnological and linguistic links between them.

Qiang women wear dresses slit down the sides over blue trousers. Over the top of this, work aprons and black waistcoats are worn. Most women wear black or white turbans and as much silver and amber jewellery as they can afford.

Like their Tibetan cousins, Qiang houses are three-storey constructions. The bottom floor is for livestock, the middle floor for living quarters and the top floor is for storing grain and drying crops. The sharp corners of these fortress-like houses are lined with whitewash and the window frames are painted in bright colours. The sombre stone walls are often lined with bright yellow maize, red chillies and green lucerne drying over the upper balconies.

There are lots of places to eat in Dānbā, but the food is unremarkable with the exception of the dumplings served at **Suibian Xiǎochī** (随便小吃; Tuanjie Jie; 团结街; per bowl ¥5), which are terrific. You'll find it roughly at the midpoint between the China Post and PSB.

Wherever you eat, double-check prices, especially around the bus station. Some places charge foreigners over three times the price they charge locals.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run daily to Kāngdǐng (Y42, four hours, 6.30am and 3.30pm), Tǎgōng (Y34, 7.30am), Gānzī (Y92, 7am) and Mǎ'ěrkāng (Y41, 5½ to six hours, 7.30am).

The road between Dānbā and Chéngdū (via Wólóng) is under construction through to 2008 so the daily bus to Chéngdū (Y92, 6.30am) is sometimes cancelled. Even if it is running during this period, prepare yourself for epic delays running several hours.

Wherever you're travelling to, bus drivers won't go if passenger loads are low. Instead, you'll be passed off to private minivan drivers,

who may then troll maddeningly for more passengers. If you're heading for Kāngdǐng you can negotiate with clusters of these drivers at the east end of town; to head towards Tǎgōng, go to the west end.

### Around Dānbā

Dozens of Tibetan villages dot the countryside around Dānbā. Some are already very popular with Chinese travellers and quite developed for tourism. Yet all you really have to do is trek out into the surrounding countryside, clamber up some hills and do some solo exploring to get away from it all.

It's possible to stay with locals in most villages. The usual rate is ¥50 for one night's accommodation, dinner and breakfast.

If you can arrange it, visit in autumn, when the scenery, a riot of colours, is downright inspirational.

### ZHONGLŪ ZÀNGZHÀI DIÀOQUN GŪYIZHÌ

中路藏寨碉群古遗址

The grey boxlike building near this village's entrance seems sorely out of place amongst

the rolling hills and crumbling watchtowers. Once you get past that, however, this village is a pleasant surprise. It's a little more unspoilt and rough around the edges than the popular Jiǎjū Zàngzhài. Short winding trails are bordered by low stone walls, and further on sumptuous scenery promises wonderful walks. A ¥15 to ¥20 entrance fee is inconsistently collected from visitors.

About 11km from Dānbā, you may be able to negotiate a round-trip taxi ride here for about ¥20.

### Jiǎjū Zàngzhài 甲居藏寨

Proclaimed 'Best Village in China' in 2005 by the Chinese *National Geographic*, this is one of the most visited places in the Dānbā region and is truly worthy of the accolades. Once your vehicle has inched its way up the narrow sliver of cliff-clinging earth posing as a road, the village folds out before you, with clusters of houses tucked into rolling hills.

Home to 150 families, some may find Jiǎjū Zàngzhài a little too slick (tourist money has fixed this place up big time), but the setting is undeniably gorgeous and keen walkers will have a field day exploring the terrain around the village.

There's a small **hotel** (☎ 137-7839 7868, 898 3198) and restaurant in the village, though it's not necessarily open year-round so call first.

Seven kilometres from Dānbā, you can negotiate a round-trip here with taxi drivers for around ¥20.

### SHUIQIǎZI CŪN 水卡子村

This village is worth a visit for its exquisite scenery as well as its tiny **selugupa monastery** (Gyalya Yudhom Darjelling Ghen), home to 20 monks and one of the rare temples you'll see in western Sichuān from this sect of Buddhism. The temple underwent major renovations in 2005, but is between 1000 and 2000 years old, according to the resident monks. You won't need a lot of time to visit the monastery, but could spend some time doing some pleasant walks in the area.

If heading along the road towards Dānbā, you'll pass by a thatch of prayer flags, some boulders and the village stupa, the sight of a heartbreaking accident that recently killed nearly all of the village's young people. Recognising the tourist potential of Shuiqiǎzi Cūn, a hotel was set up here in 2004 and local young people were invited to do trad-

itional dancing performances. Heavy rains one night caused a catastrophic landslide killing the dancers and destroying the hotel. The village lost 53 people that night and the accident is still much talked about in the Dānbā region.

It takes 45 minutes to reach the village by taxi. Negotiated fees with taxi drivers are usually around ¥50 one way, ¥80 return.

### SUŌPŌ 梭坡

If you're interested in seeing Qiang watchtowers, this is *the* place to come. This village has some of the most remarkable watchtowers in the region; they're in incredible condition and the photo ops are unforgettable.

If you go to the village entrance (across the narrow suspension bridge fluttering with prayer flags), you are likely to be shadowed by the village 'guide'. Despite the laminated ID hanging round his neck, he doesn't do much 'guiding' other than follow you up the steep hills to the towers and relieve you of a ¥15 entrance fee on your way down. (Some travellers have said they were hit up for around ¥30, but friendly negotiation should usually get him down to ¥15.)

Alternatively, you can stop at kilometre marker 147 on the road to the village and head up a dirt road to Suōpō, passing more towers and lovely Tibetan villages on the way. It's about 90 minutes if you don't poke about and are in good shape. Do not shortcut: one residual of the tower fortifications is ridiculously well-designed defensive stone walls full of flesh-ripping brambles.

You can negotiate a round-trip taxi ride here from Dānbā for around ¥20.

### Gānzī 甘孜

☎ 0836 / pop 61,400 / elev 3394m

A vast sprawl of low wooden houses ringed by the soaring peaks of Chola Mountain, Gānzī is a buzzing little market town populated mostly by Tibetans.

As the capital of the Gānzī (Garzê) Autonomous Prefecture, a growing number of foreigners are sojourning here on their way from Kāngdǐng to Sèrxu or on their way west to Dégé. There are endless possibilities for exploration in the surrounding countryside, which is scattered with Tibetan villages and monasteries.

Roads in and out of Gānzī can be notoriously treacherous in winter. Icy roads mean

a route littered with overturned trucks and passenger vehicles is not unheard of. If traveling further north or west from here, consider putting off long-haul travel altogether during snowfall. You don't want to be one of those people caught in blizzard conditions between Gānzī and Sērxu, when your nine-hour trip in a rickety, unheated bus stretches to over 24 hours.

It's a good idea to bring a torch (flashlight) with you too – electricity can be iffy here.

## SIGHTS

The **gompa** in downtown Gānzī is a small but thrilling little place for monastery fans. Circled perpetually by praying locals, you'll hear the buzz of chanting and see people doing full body prostrations before you even reach the front door of the prayer hall.

The protector hall at the back is dark and spookily atmospheric. Four glass-enclosed deities are illuminated by dozens of yak-butter candles and the effect is spectacular. Go through the hole in the wall on the left-hand side of the room, and you'll be in a superb corridor filled with Tibetan Buddhist-themed wall paintings that resident monks say are 1000 years old.

To get here, go down the lane running between Dongda Jie and Qinghe Lu.

North of the town's Tibetan quarter you'll find **Garze Gompa** (甘孜寺; Gānzī Sì), a 540-year-old monastery that glimmers with blinding quantities of gold. Encased on the walls of the main hall are hundreds of small golden Sakyamunis – representing all four Buddhist sects. In a smaller hall just west of the main hall is an awe-inspiring statue of Jampa (Maitreya or Future Buddha), dressed in a giant silk robe. The views of town from here are fantastic. There's an inconsistently collected entrance fee of around Y15.

To find the lamasery, take a left out of the bus station and head north for about 10 minutes until you reach the Tibetan neighbourhood. From there, wind your way uphill around the clay and wooden houses. You can also take a taxi (around Y5).

## SLEEPING & EATING

At the time of research, we were turned away from every cheap hotel and guesthouse in town and told they didn't accept foreigners. However, some travellers report having had better luck than we did with the guesthouses

around the bus station (dorm Y20), so it's worth asking around when you visit.

**Ruifēng Zhùsùdū** (瑞丰住宿都; ☎ 752 5465; Binhe Donglu; 滨河东路; s & d Y50) This place has plain, basic rooms with startlingly immense bathrooms, but no hot water. Walk left out of the bus station, hang a right on Chuanzang Lu, continue until you cross the river and turn left onto Binhe Donglu (which reads just 'He Donglu' on the street sign).

**Himalaya Hotel** (喜马拉雅宾馆; Ximǎlāyà Bīnguǎn; 13 Dong Dajie; 东大街13号; ☎ 752 1878; r with/without air-con Y170/150; 🍴) The small but spotless, modern rooms at this friendly hotel are the nicest in Gānzī. (Discounted rooms from Y110 to Y120). To reach the hotel, turn left out of the bus station, then right on to Chuanzang Lu. Dong Dajie will be the second major street after you cross the bridge. When you reach Dong Dajie, turn left. The hotel will be on your left-hand side halfway up the street.

**Golden Yak Hotel** (金牦牛酒店; Jīnmáoniú Jiǔdiàn; ☎ 752 5188, 752 5288; 1 Dajin Tan; 打进滩1号; s & d Y150) Attached to Gānzī's bus station, the Golden Yak has similar rates and discounts to the Himalaya Hotel, but it's not nearly as nice. (It's got electric blankets but no air-con, limited or no hot water and some seriously stinky toilets.) But it's still worth considering for the convenience if you have an early bus the next morning.

Food in Gānzī is pretty mediocre but plentiful nonetheless. There are oodles of hole-in-the-wall restaurants, dumpling stands and noodle places concentrated outside the bus station. The Sichuan dishes at **Dàbā Zànghàn Yǐjiāxīn Fàndiàn** (大巴藏汉一家新饭店; 27 Dajin Tan; 打金滩27号; dishes Y8–10; 🍴 9am–10pm) are generally the tastiest. The lane opposite the station's entrance is also a great place to prowl for food – you'll find a fruit and vegetable market as well as several 'point-and-choose' carts for a cheap on-the-go meal.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to Gānzī leave Kāngding daily (Y106, 10 to 12 hours, 6.15am). A bus to Kāngding leaves Gānzī every morning at 6.30am. There are also daily buses to Dégé (Y61, seven hours, 8.30am), Manigango (Y21, two hours, 2.30pm), Dānbā (Y91, 10 hours, 6.30am) and Bǎiyù (Y70, 6.30am).

Private minivans to Dégé are available for hire – at Y450, they're not a bad deal if there's a group of you.

You can head north from Gānzī to Xíning in Qinghǎi province via Sērxu (Y92, nine hours, 6.30am).

## Around Gānzī

For a nice half-day walk, turn right out of the bus station and walk through the Tibetan housing until you reach a bridge festooned with prayer flags running over the Yǎlóng Jiāng. There are endless possibilities for walks on the other side of this bridge. The right path leads through barley fields for 20 minutes to **Dongtong (or Dontok) Gompa** and the impressive **Dingkhör chörten**. The left path leads to **Pongo Gompa** after about an hour or so.

About 7km along the road to Kāngding, sheltered in the lee of a hill, is the **Burana Ani Gompa**, a large nunnery by the roadside that might be worth checking out.

Headed 15km west on the road to Dégé, on the north side of the river, is the Gelukpa sect **Beri Gompa**. There are several other monasteries in this pretty area.

Another 15km or so, near the village of Rongbatsa, are the circular walls of **Dargye Gompa** (Dǎjīn Sì) set against white-capped mountains. From here it's a two-hour walk north along the Yǎlóng Jiāng to **Hadhi Nunnery**, home to around 60 nuns.

To reach Beri Gompa and Dargye Gompa, catch the morning bus to Dégé or one of the sporadic local buses heading west.

## Manigango 马尼干戈

☎ 0836

Manigango lies halfway between Gānzī and Dégé and is the jumping-off point for Dzogchen Gompa and Yihun Lhatso. Manigango itself is a dusty one-street town that looks unmistakably like the movie set for a Tibetan Western. It's a glorious multicoloured scene with Tibetans on horseback, monks in crimson robes on motorbikes and tractors piled precariously high with pilgrims rattling down the road. It's worth stopping off just for the atmosphere. A horse racing festival is usually held here in the summer. Be warned: Manigango seems to have the biggest population of mangy dogs in China's Southwest and they all come out to play at night.

The town is known in Chinese as Yǎlóng or Mǎnigāngē, but it's most commonly referred to by its Tibetan name, Manigango.

## SIGHTS

**Dzogchen Gompa** 竹庆佛学院

This important Nyingmapa monastery (Zhúqīng Fóxuéfúyuàn), 50km north of Manigango, has a stunning location at the foot of a glacial valley. The recently reconstructed monastery was founded in 1684 and is the home of the Dzogchen school, the most popular form of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Several important high Nyingmapa lamas, now exiled abroad, originated from nearby valleys.

The site includes the small town, 1.5km off the road, which has a few shops, *chörten* and a chapel with huge prayer wheels. Up the small gorge is the main monastery and 1km further is the *shedra* (monastic college).

Buses to Yùshù and Sērxu run daily past Dzogchen, but in practice it's easier to hitch. If you do plan to hitch make sure you set out in the morning, as there is little traffic on the roads come the afternoon. If you want to hire a car and driver then it will cost Y250 for the return journey. Getting here you have to cross over Muri La (4633m), so make sure you have some warm clothes, especially if you're hitching in the back of a truck.

**Yihun Lhatso** 新路海

Thirteen kilometres southwest of Manigango is **Yihun Lhatso** (Xīnlù Hǎi; admission Y20), a stunning holy alpine lake to rival any found in Jiuzhaigou. The lake is bordered by *chörten* and dozens of rock carvings, and the shoreline is sprinkled in places with pure white sand. It's possible to walk an hour or two up the left (east) side of the lakeshore for glacier views. The lake has many great places to camp, though you need to guard against the mosquitoes. To get here you'll have to hitch on Dégé-bound traffic to the turn-off, where there's a bridge and a 1km trail to the lake.

## ACTIVITIES

The countryside surrounding Manigango is crying out to be explored and one good way to do it is on horseback. The folks at the Mǎnigāngē Shìsùdiàn can help you organise a horse and guide for trekking in the neighbouring areas. Prices usually run at Y200 per day (for horse and guide), but you can probably negotiate. If you plan to go off camping for several days you will be expected to provide meals for your guide as well. Make sure you have all the equipment and food you need

before you get to Manigango. There's hardly anything available to buy in town let alone once you've left for the countryside.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Manigango was undergoing a construction boom last check, and upgrades were looming (but hopefully not in prices!).

**Mǎnīgāngē Shísùdiàn** (马尼干戈食宿店; dm Y10-20) This is where all the buses stop. It has comfortable basic rooms, but ask for the toilets and they'll point you half a mile up the road – make sure you bring a torch! The staff can help with travel information and bus timetables.

**Yùlóng Shénhǎi Bīnguǎn** (玉龙神海宾馆; dm Y15-30) Next door to the Mǎnīgāngē Shísùdiàn, this hotel is more modern and has its own toilet – bonus! Look for the large red-and-white sign.

The restaurant at the Mǎnīgāngē Shísùdiàn serves particularly tasty food and is very cheap. There is a good *niúròumiàn* (beef noodle; 牛肉面) restaurant next door to the petrol station.

The college at Dzogchen Gumpa offers beds for Y15 per night, though you need a sleeping bag and your own food. There are a couple of well-stocked shops in the village below.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

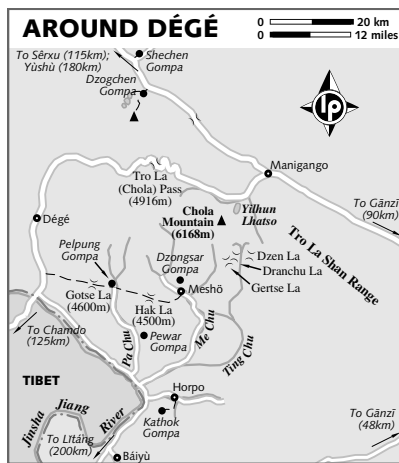
A daily bus passes through Manigango at 11am for Dégé (Y35, three to four hours). Coming from Dégé, a bus stops in Manigango at 11am and heads on to Gānzǐ (Y25, five to seven hours) and Lúhuò (Y50, five hours), where it overnights before heading on to Kāngdīng (Y130) the following morning. A 9am bus leaves daily for Sèrxu.

### Dégé 德格

☎ 0836 / pop 58,520 / elev 3270m

Resting in a valley with Chola Mountain to the east and the Tibetan border to the west, Dégé (Dégé), home of the legendary Gesar, an altruistic king of Ling, is steeped in tradition and still sees little of the outside world. Things are changing, naturally, but it still remains time-locked for the most part. Dégé was renowned for its apothecary monks who developed traditional medicine, but now people come for its famed printing lamasery.

Getting to Dégé is a gruelling haul and buses overturning on the icy, hairpin roads are not uncommon. Altitude sickness is also a very real possibility.



En route you'll see the towering snowy peaks of Chola Mountain stretching up 6168m, and the Xinhua Glacier, which comes down almost to the road at 4100m. Chola Mountain was first scaled in 1988 and you might begin to wonder if your bus driver is attempting to do the same, as the bus grumbles and inches its way uphill to the top of the peaks. At Tro La (Chola) of nearly 5000m, Tibetans on board will throw coloured prayer papers out the window and chant something that you can only hope will carry your bus to safety.

### SIGHTS

#### Bakong Scripture Printing Monastery

德格印经院

At the heart of Dégé and perhaps the heart of the Tibetan world in many respects is this **monastery** (Dégé Yīnjīngyuàn; admission Y25; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-6.30pm), a storehouse for Tibetan culture. Pilgrims circumambulate outside, performing some of the more than 1000 circuits required in the process of cultural development.

The printing house has existed on this site for over 270 years and houses more than 270,000 engraved blocks of Tibetan scriptures (and paintings) from the five Tibetan Buddhist sects, including Bön. Texts include ancient works on astronomy, geography, music, medicine and Buddhist classics. A history of Indian Buddhism, comprising 555 woodblock plates, is the only surviving copy in the world (written in Hindi, Sanskrit and Tibetan).

Built in the Qing dynasty by the 42nd prefect of Dégé, the monastery is revered as one of the three most important Tibetan monasteries (along with Sakya Monastery and Lhasa's Potala Palace) – not surprising since the material stored in Dégé makes up an estimated 70% of Tibet's literary heritage.

Within the monastery hundreds of workers hand-produce over 2500 prints each day. Upstairs, an older crowd of printers produces larger prints of Tibetan gods on paper or coloured cloth that later find their way to hills and temples as prayer flags. If you catch them with a free moment, they'll print you one of your choice for Y10.

Storage chambers are lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves, and a constant thwack emanates from paper-cutting and binding rooms. Protecting the monastery from fire and earthquakes is a guardian goddess, a green Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin).

The entrance fee to the monastery includes a tour guide who is excellent at communicating through pictures if your Chinese isn't up to scratch. The monastery is closed on holidays.

There are three other monasteries in town, including a large one just behind the printing house, which is over 1000 years old.

To reach the printing house, turn left out of the bus station and right over the bridge. Continue up this road to the southeast of town and it will bring you to the monastery's front door.

### SLEEPING

True or not, independent travellers may be told that the following place is your only option. That said, a few have had luck getting cheap beds in other hotels – it just depends on the day and the mood of the PSB. Those up here with Tibetan or Chinese guides, however, report few problems getting into the cheapies.

**Dégé Bīnguǎn** (德格宾馆; ☎ 822 2157; dm Y20, dY180) Here's where you'll likely be told to go. The dorm rooms are worse than the roads coming in and the doubles are priced laughably high; worse, you may be directed across the street to the expensive wing (Y280).

**Wùzī Zhāodàisuǒ** (物资招待所; dm Y25) One of the places you may have luck, this guesthouse is located directly opposite the bus station; you'll recognise it from the multicoloured bunting hanging outside.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to Dégé (Y60, eight to 10 hours) run from Gānzǐ every two to three days if you're lucky, but most of the time hope for a seat on the daily buses that pass through from other destinations, usually at 8.30am or so.

Private minivans to Gānzǐ and other places are available for hire (Y450).

Marginally more comfortable buses leave from Kāngdīng for Dégé daily at 7.15am (Y166, 24 hours), stopping overnight in Lúhuò. The return bus stops in Manigango (Y35, three to four hours), Gānzǐ (Y60, eight to 10 hours) and Lúhuò (Y86, 10 to 12 hours) on the way.

### Sèrxu (Shíqú) 石渠

There are two places commonly called Sèrxu (or Sershul): the traditional monastery town to the west (Sèrxu Dzong) and the modern county town of Sèrxu (Shíqú Xiàn), 30km to the east, which has most of the hotels and transport connections.

While you'll probably stop in Shíqú Xiàn en route between Manigango and Yùshù in Qīnghǎi, the huge monastery of Sèrxu Dzong and its intensely Tibetan village, full of wild-haired nomads, is by far the more interesting place and well worth a stopover. There's not a Han Chinese in sight here.

Sèrxu Gumpa houses 1200 monks and has two assembly halls, a Maitreya chapel and several other modern chapels, and a *shedra*, with a *kora* path encircling the lot. The road westwards from here towards Qīnghǎi is classic yak and nomad country, passing several long *mani* (prayer) walls and dozens of black yak-hair tents in summer.

In Sèrxu Dzong there's good accommodation at the **monastery guesthouse** (色须寺刚京饭店; sèxū sī gāngjīng fāndiàn; dm Y10-20, tw per bed Y40-50), though the restaurants in town offer better food.

In Shíqú Xiàn there are several decent places, including the **Zhàxíkǎ Fāndiàn** (扎溪卡饭店; dm Y40, tw Y120), on the central crossroads, and the monastery-run **Bumgon Choeyingling Monastery Guesthouse** (蒙宜寺九欲归富旅店; Méngyí Sī Jiùyù Guífù Lùdiàn; dm Y20), down the town's main side street.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Shíqú Xiàn has a 7am bus to Gānzǐ (Y94, eight hours), via Manigango (Y77), from the bus station in the east of town. To get to Sèrxu



Dzong, take the 8am bus to Yùshù (Y30) from the bus stand in the far west of town.

From Sèrxu Dzong, you'll have to catch a through bus, passing through town at 9am for Yùshù (Y20, four hours), or around 11am for Shíqú Xiàn (Y10, one hour). Coming from Yùshù, it's possible to get off the bus in Sèrxu Dzong, have a look around and then hitch or hire a minivan on to Shíqú Xiàn the same day.

There's no direct bus here from Chéngdū, so you'll have to go first to Gānzī and get the daily bus the rest of the way (Y92, nine hours, 6.30am). Be aware that the road between Gānzī and Sèrxu is extremely treacherous and Sèrxu is frequently snowed in between November and March, cancelling public transit in and out. You are taking your chances if you decide to make this trip in winter, when the nine-hour journey can take up to 36 hours. If the bus gets caught in a blizzard, the driver will stop until daylight, which means you'll be sleeping in an unheated bus all night in sub-zero temperatures. Misery will take on a whole new meaning.

## SICHUĀN–TIBET HIGHWAY (SOUTHERN ROUTE)

Vast lonely plains give way to razor-peaked mountains on this popular 2140km stretch of the Tibetan Hwy. A trip along this route will take you past imposing Tibetan block homes and nomad settlements, and from the frigid mountain heights of Litáng to the comparatively balmy mildness of Bātàng.

Improving road conditions are also making the Kāngdīng–Litáng–Xiāngchéng–Shangri-la (Zhōngdiàn) back-door route into Yúnnán immensely popular.

As with the rest of northwest Sichuān, warm clothing is a must. Some travellers experience difficulties with the high altitudes here, so be on the lookout for side effects (see Altitude Sickness, p499) and if you're feeling unwell, head to somewhere lower. There are no money-changing facilities in this region.

### Litáng 理塘

☎ 0836 / pop 51,300 / elev 4014m

Litáng has a Tibetan majority and is one of the most atmospheric stops on the southern Sichuān–Tibet Hwy.

On any given day, dozens and dozens of elderly Tibetans stroll the main streets swinging hand-held prayer wheels and chanting.

Nearby, wild-haired nomads wearing *Mission Impossible* sunglasses and drowning in *chorpas* (traditional long-sleeved Tibetan coats) look on, as they straddle their motorcycles and sell stacks of yak skins.

Though the town is famed as the birthplace of the seventh and 10th Dalai Lamas, there's not much to visit in Litáng itself besides the temple.

The town's core is a forgettable mass of low, ramshackle buildings, but it's ringed by interesting clusters of typical Tibetan houses, and further on the terrain spirals out into rolling hills, epic grasslands and ice-capped peaks.

The town is becoming an increasingly popular base for experienced trekkers looking for off-the-beaten-path routes. For casual hikers, there are also some spectacular walks in the hills. Advice on where to go (ie places that currently aren't being used as grazing pastures, or for sky burials; see p404) must be sought from locals. Be sure to allow yourself time to acclimatise to the altitude before you set out.

Travellers are increasingly being approached at the bus station or outside the Crane Guesthouse by freelance guides offering to organise walks or a visit to a nomad camp. Most travellers have had good experiences, some have been disappointed. Ask around when you arrive to get the latest from other travellers.

Litáng lies at a wheeze-inducing altitude of 4014m. If you find yourself suffering from altitude sickness and can't get out of town, there is a local treatment consisting of medicated pills and rehydration drinks. The women running Crane Guesthouse (opposite) may be able to help you out; however, this shouldn't be considered a remedy and you should still descend to a lower altitude as soon as possible.

November to February is absolutely freezing here. It's also not the ideal time to visit Litáng if you're on a tight schedule – snow storms frequently close the roads during this period, cancelling bus services in and out of town.

### INFORMATION

**China Post** (Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; Tuanjie Lu Beiduan;

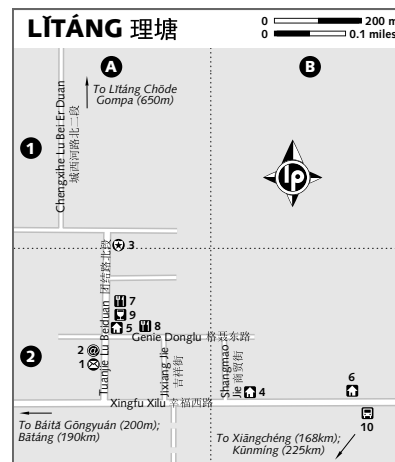
☎ 9-11.30am & 2-5.30pm)

**Internet café** (wǎngbā; Tuanjie Lu Beiduan; per hr Y3)

Right next to China Post.

**Public Security Bureau** (PSB; Gōngānjú; emergency

☎ 110; Tuanjie Lu Beiduan)



### INFORMATION

China Post 中国邮政	1	A2
Internet Café 网吧	2	A2
PSB 公安局	3	A1

### SLEEPING

Crane Guesthouse 仙鹤宾馆	4	B2
High City Hotel 高城宾馆	5	A2
Safe and Life International Hotel 平安涉外宾馆	6	B2

### EATING

Sichuan Fandian 四川饭店	7	A2
Wánglóng Guàntāngbāo 王龙灌汤包	8	A2

### DRINKING

Bar 酒吧	9	A2
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### TRANSPORT

Long-Distance Bus Station 长途汽车站	10	B2
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### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

**Litang Chode Gompa** (理塘长青春科尔寺; Litáng Chángqīngchūn Kē'ěr sī; ☎ irregular) is a Tibetan monastery built in honour of the third Dalai Lama. The town and mountain views from the lamery are spectacular. The statue of Sakyamuni inside is believed to have been carried from Lhasa by foot. To get here, follow Chengxihe Lu Bei Er Duan north. It's a lovely walk with heaps of traditional stone homes on both sides of the street affording wonderful glimpses of day-to-day Tibetan life. The temple is at the very end of the road.

**Baita Gongyuan** (白塔公园; Xingfu Xilu; 幸福西路; ☎ dawn-dusk) is a *chörten* on the edge of Litáng. No matter when you come, the area is packed with Tibetans sitting on the grass and praying, or circling the stupa at high speed

spinning prayer wheels. Dozens of smaller *chörten* fill the courtyard, which itself is edged with a corridor of prayer wheels. The entrance is on a side street off Xingfu Xilu.

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The annual **Litáng Horse Festival** is known as one of the biggest and most colourful of the Tibetan festivals. Every five years an even more spectacular event is staged.

Room prices triple during this period and hotels are booked solid well in advance. The festival usually starts on 1 August and lasts for 10 days, although it's worth checking at the hostels and travel agencies in Kāngdīng or Chéngdū before you head out here.

The festival usually kicks off with an odd mix of hip-hop, Indian and Tibetan dance performances. Arts and crafts displays, trade fairs, and horse stunts so daring it's hard to watch without holding your breath take place the following days.

### SLEEPING

Many hotels in Litáng have no showers or hot water and electricity everywhere can be unreliable. Nobody has central heating. Cheapo hostels (Y10 to Y15 per bed) are found around the bus station.

**Safe and Life International Hotel** (Píng'ān Shèwài Bīnguǎn; ☎ 532 3861; Xingfu Xilu; 幸福西路; 2-bed dm Y15, s Y30) Right across from the bus station, the location here is ideal if you have an early morning bus or arrive late at night. The owners speak no English but are incredibly kind and eager to help their guests, whether through ferreting out travel info or finding out about activities in the countryside. Rooms are cramped, beat up and can get cold and damp in winter so this may be a better choice for spring or summer stays. A communal shower in the courtyard has hot water from 8am to 11pm and their 1st-floor restaurant has an English-Chinese menu.

**Crane Guesthouse** (Xiānhè Bīnguǎn; ☎ 532 3850; Xingfu Xilu; 幸福西路; dm Y25, s/d Y156/166) Hands down the backpacker favourite, this place has a welcoming staff. Some speak a little English and they often invite guests to sit around the fire and sip yak butter tea. Two- and three-bed dorms are cosy and the single and double rooms have hot-water showers and heat lamps in the bathrooms. Guests can make long-distance calls from a phone in the main office.

**SKY BURIAL**

The white cloth is removed from the body while the *tomden* (a religious master of ceremonies) sharpens his large knife. He circles a small Buddhist monument, reciting mantras all the while, and slices into the body lying before him on the stone slab. The flesh is cut into large chunks and the bones and brain are smashed and mixed with barley flour.

The smell of flesh draws a large number of vultures who circle impatiently above. Eventually the *tomden* steps away and the huge birds descend into a feeding frenzy, tearing at the body and carrying it in pieces up to the heavens.

This is sky burial (*tiānzàng*), an ancient Buddhist-Tibetan burial tradition that performs both a spiritual and practical function. According to Buddhist beliefs, the body is merely a vehicle to carry you through this life; once a body dies, the spirit leaves it and the body is no longer of use. Giving one's body as food for the vultures is a final act of generosity to the living world and provides a link in the cycle of life. Vultures themselves are revered and believed to be a manifestation of the flesh-eating god Dakinis.

Practically, this form of burial provides an ecologically sound way to dispose of bodies in a terrain where wood is scarce and the ground is often frozen solid.

The Chinese banned sky burials in the 1960s and '70s. It wasn't until the '80s, as Tibetans regained limited religious rights, that the practice was once again legalised. However, most Han Chinese still regard sky burials as a primitive practice. The fact that one Buddhist sect has been known to keep the tops of the skulls to use as enlarged sacred teacups has often been touted as proof of Tibetan savagery.

In Lhasa, tourists require official permission to attend a sky burial; in the more remote areas of Sichuān, however, you may well be told where and when the burials are to take place. Nevertheless, local Tibetans have been unsurprisingly offended by travellers who have turned these funerals into tourist outings. Common decency applies – if you aren't invited, don't go, and whatever you do, do not attempt to capture the moment on camera.

**High City Hotel** (Gāochéng Bīnguǎn; ☎ 532 2706, 532 2338; Genie Donglu; 格聂东路; d/tr Y340/480; 🚗) This is the most upscale accommodation the city has to offer. Rooms here are certainly modern looking but the upkeep in some is surprisingly lax, especially when it comes to the cleanliness of the showers. The hotel cuts off the hot water in winter, but all rooms have heaters. The lobby is a popular place for business people to gather and drink tea. Low-season rates start at Y120.

**EATING & ENTERTAINMENT**

There are plenty of small, hole-in-the-wall restaurants in Litáng, and you can't really go wrong with any of them. Xinfu Xilu, around the Crane Guesthouse, has the best choice of places.

**Wánglóng Guàntāngbāo** (Genie Donglu; 格聂东路; 🍲 8am-late evening) This is the best place for breakfast. It serves delicious dumplings (饺子; jiǎozi; Y3) and bowls of rice porridge (粥; zhōu; Y1).

If you want something to do at night, try the bar (*jiúbā*) behind the High City Hotel. It's a big, saloon-style place that has Tibetan

dancing performances on many nights. Opening hours are irregular. Drop by around 9pm to see what (if anything) is going on. Closing time depends entirely on the size of the crowd.

Just north of the bar is a Sichuān restaurant (*Sichuān fāndiàn*). It's about the fanciest in town and its food gets good reviews from travellers. It's closed for much of the off-season though.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Litáng's bus station is a chaotic place. You'd be forgiven for believing the staff's sole goal is to make leaving town as difficult as possible. Getting tickets can take a lot of patience (and often a lot of time) so don't leave it until the last minute. The ticket window opens at 2pm.

Buses leave Litáng for Kāngdìng (Y81, eight hours, 6.30am), Xiāngchéng (Y62, four hours, 6am) and Dàoichéng (Y47, three to four hours, 6am).

There's also a daily bus from Litáng to Bātáng (Y60, 6.30am). Normally this trip should take six hours, however, ongoing road-

work between these two cities (which includes blasting tunnels through mountains) means frequent delays and interminable stops in the (usually freezing) middle of nowhere. At the time of research, the trip was averaging 12 to 15 hours. Check with your accommodation (not the infernal 'Construction? What construction?' bus-station staff) for an update on the situation when you arrive.

It looks easy to head north to Gānzī via Xīnlóng from here, but though road work continues, at the time of writing it was still a no-go for public transport.

**Bātáng 巴塘**

☎ 0836 / elev 2589m

Bātáng is kind of cool, if only because it's the closest town to Tibet (only 32km from the border) open to foreigners. It's a small place, crowded with stores and surrounded by suburbs of lovely ochre Tibetan houses. Bātáng is much lower (so much warmer) than surrounding areas. When it's still the end of winter in Litáng it's already spring in Bātáng.

Roadwork between Litáng and Bātáng (begun in 2004 and continuing indefinitely) is not only wrecking havoc with bus schedules between these two towns, but also with Bātáng's infrastructure; hot water and electricity are frequently cut for hours at a time. A flashlight is essential.

There's no signage in Bātáng. Streets all technically have names but locals don't know what they are. You're better off using landmarks to navigate around this place.

**SIGHTS**

The Gelugpa sect **Chode Gaden Pendeling Monastery** (巴塘寺; Bātáng Sì) in the southwest of town has 500 resident monks. It's dark, atmospheric and well worth a visit. There are three rooms behind the main hall: a protector chapel, a room with a giant statue of Jampa and a 10,000 Buddha room. Up some stairs via a separate entrance is a room for the Panchen Lama, lined with photos of exiled local lamas who now reside in India. Most images here are new but one upstairs statue of Sakyamuni is claimed to be 2000 years old. An old Chinese hospital is now used as monk accommodation. If the temple's locked, just duck into the kitchen (it always seems to be open) across from the front door and one of the monks will get the key for you.

To get here, follow Wenhua Jie downhill. Keep your nose alert for the smell of butter and follow the odour to the *gompa's* entrance. This temple is tucked off the street and easy to walk right past.

There are some fine walks around town. Head north to a lovely Tibetan hillside village and then west to a riverside *chörten*. Alternatively, head south from the town centre over a bridge and then east to a hilltop covered in prayer flags and offering views of the town.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Jinshui Bīnguǎn** (金穗宾馆; ☎ 562 2700; 3-bed dm Y30, d high season Y160-180, low-season Y100, d with shared bathroom high/low season Y100/80) Rooms here are in pretty good shape, for the most part very clean and well kept. Furnishing is minimal and beds have simple white covers. Get a back-facing room for views of the surrounding Tibetan village and away from the street karaoke. Turn left coming out of the bus station and continue into town. Take the first right after the huge, hard-to-miss golden eagle statue in the little park area; the hotel's a block down on the left.

**W Bīnguǎn** (W宾馆; ☎ 562 3132; 1 Jinxianzi Dadao; 金弦子大道1号; d Y68-86) Run by a cool, young Tibetan couple, this is a plain but very clean and bright hotel with decent bathrooms. Just a couple of minutes from the bus station, it's a good bet for early departures or late arrivals. The only downside is its proximity to some thunderously loud karaoke. Walk left coming out of the bus station. The hotel has an English sign and will be on your left.

**Xueyu Zhaxi Hotel** (雪域扎西宾馆; Xuèyù Zhāxī Bīnguǎn; ☎ 562 3222; Shangmao Jie; 商贸街; r from Y288; 🚗) People may try to steer you to this place (the supposed best in town), but, though the air-conditioning is a godsend on cold nights, you'll generally be better off at one of the two budget places we've listed. Though the battered rooms, decorated in an odd mix of beige fleur-de-lys wallpaper and green, yellow and burgundy striped carpets are OK, the bathrooms are often a problem: not all have hot water, shower pressure is almost nonexistent, many of the toilets don't work at all and the stink can be horrendous.

**Cuizhào Miàn** (脆绍面; 🍲 8am-8pm) This sparkling clean place is a standout in a town not renowned for good food. Its dumplings in broth (抄手; chāo shǒu; Y5) are outstanding, served with a dipping sauce so tasty you

could drink it back like juice. Sounds gross, but it's really that good. Turn left coming out of the bus station and follow the main road to the first major intersection. This small eatery will be on your left near the corner before you cross the street.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are daily buses to Kāngding (Y139, two days via Yǎjiāng, 6am, arrive around 11am) and Chéngdū (Y239, two days via Yǎjiāng, 6am, arrive about 6pm). Yǎjiāng is a cold, tiny town, made up of two cluttered streets. The **Yǎlóngwān Dàjiǔdiàn** (雅龙湾大酒店; d Y80) at the bus station has electric blankets and is your best lodging option. The restaurant right next door serves Sichuán dishes and tasty noodles.

The road to Lítáng is under heavy-duty construction until god knows when, so expect to be held up for long periods of time (you should bring a good book!). Though frustrating, delays are not as bad as when travelling in the other direction, from Lítáng to Bātáng (Y60, 6.30am), which can take up to 15 hours these days.

As Bātáng is closer to the construction areas and buses out of town leave so early, you're usually able to scoot past most of the roadwork before the construction crews wake up and seal everything off. The bus station is a 10-minute walk from the town centre.

Headed west, there are buses at 2pm (Y44, four hours) and afternoon minibuses (Y50) to Markham, 138km away inside Tibet. However, travellers will have problems buying tickets to Markham as the town is officially closed to foreigners.

#### LÍTÁNG TO SHANGRI-LA (ZHŌNGDIÀN)

This is a back-door route to Yúnnán that takes you through 400km of spectacular scenery from Lítáng to Shangri-la (also known as Zhōngdiàn) via Xiāngchéng, where you will have to spend the night.

#### Xiāngchéng (Chatreng) 乡城

☎ 0836

Xiāngchéng is a tidy little town, its countryside packed with numerous Tibetan villages. Though quickly modernising and expanding, there's not much to see in Xiāngchéng itself. Its **monastery** (桑披罗布岭寺; Sāngpī Luóbǐng Sì; admission Y15; ☎ 8am-8pm Jul & Aug, to 6.30pm Sep-Jun) on the hill overlooking town, however, is defi-

nately worth a visit, not only for the views but also for its religious significance.

Destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, the temple reopened in 2002. Putting it back together was a labour of love for locals, both those living in town and villagers from the countryside. A drive to collect donations began in 1996 and carvers and painters started coming in from the countryside to donate their time. Though the main building is completed, construction is ongoing. Villages continue to rotate their 'experts', with a new team replacing the previous one every few days.

The monastery is also important because of a small gold and silver stupa decorated with precious stones in the **Golden Prayer Hall** (Sarthom Kham). The stupa was placed there in honour of one of the Dalai Lama's teachers, who originally hailed from Xiāngchéng and has since passed away. A Chinese tourist put this monastery on the map in 2003 when he alerted the monks that he had seen the reincarnation of the lama in one of the precious stones. The monastery has become increasingly popular ever since, especially with Chinese Buddhists.

These days, this 2nd-floor hall is filled 24 hours a day with people doing full body prostrations in front of the stone. If you want to attempt to see the lama in the stone yourself, ask one of the monks for help. They have a long contraption with a magnifying glass dangling on the end that they'll hold up so visitors can get a good look.

This monastery is at the opposite end of town to the bus station. To find it, follow the dirt track up on the left as you reach the edge of town. A taxi here from the bus station is around Y10.

#### EATING & SLEEPING

There's something for every budget in Xiāngchéng, all on Xiangcheng Zhengjie, the town's main drag.

**Xiangbala Xiangcheng Dreamland Hotel** (香巴拉乡城梦乡客栈; Xiāngbālā Xiāngchéng Mèngxiāng Kèzhàn; ☎ 582 5449; 4-5 bed dm/s/d Y20/90/90) This hotel has big, bright spartanly furnished rooms with Chinese toilets and solar-heated 24-hour hot water.

**Bamushan Hotel** (巴姆山大酒店; Bāmǔshān Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎ 582 5999; Xiangbala Dadao; 香巴拉大道; s/d Y480/460, discounted Y280/160; ☎) Down the street, the Bamushan has standard Chinese business hotel rooms, modern bathrooms,

comfortable furnishings, Western toilets and boring, forgettable decoration. Breakfast is sometimes included in the room price.

Xiāngbala Dadao, the town's main street, is filled with small, hole-in-the-wall eateries serving filling but generally forgettable Chinese and Tibetan dishes.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There's one bus daily from Lítáng to Xiāngchéng (Y62, four hours, 6am). You can then catch a bus to Shangri-la in Yúnnán province the next day between 7am and 8am (Y90). Going the other way, buses from Xiāngchéng head back to Lítáng at around the same time. You can also head to Dàoichéng on a bus passing through at around 5pm, though it won't go any further than Xiāngchéng if there's a low passenger load. If this happens, you can usually arrange to share a minivan (Y300) with your fellow turf-ed-out passengers the rest of the way.

In Shangri-la, there's a daily bus to Xiāngchéng (Y90, 7am). Heading back to Shangri-la, the bus leaves at the same time. The trip's duration will depend on your route. A direct road through the mountains takes six to seven hours. However, it is closed by heavy snow in winter (and sometimes even spring and autumn). During these periods, buses take an alternative route, going via Déróng (得荣; 9½ hours).

Try to buy your onward ticket on arrival in Xiāngchéng, as the ticket office is not always staffed before the first buses leave in the morning.

#### Dàoichéng (Dabpa) 稻城

☎ 0836

Dàoichéng is a dull little town, but an important stop for travellers on their way to the Yading Nature Reserve. You'll likely have to spend one night here on your way to the reserve and another on your way back.

However, there are a couple of diversions in town if you have time to kill. **Echu Jie** (俄初街; Èchū Jiē) is lined with dozens of multicoloured, traditional houses and has been converted into a pedestrian shopping street. There are also several **internet cafés** (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y2-3.50) here.

**Xiongde Gumpa** (☎ 8.30am-6pm) is the biggest monastery in the region. There's no bus here but you can take a taxi (around Y40, 30 minutes).

There's also **hot springs** (per person Y10), 4km out of town. Taxis charge about Y20 to get to them.

#### SLEEPING

If you are visiting between October and March, many of the hotels will be closed or, if open, have their hot water and heat turned off.

**Tongfu Hostel** (同福客栈; Tóngfú Kèzhàn; ☎ 572 8667, 572 8300; www.inoat.com; 1 Yazhuo Jie; 亚卓街1号; dm Y20, d Y80-100) This backpacker-friendly spot has a young, welcoming owner who speaks a little English and is very helpful with tourist info. The hostel closes in winter, usually from late November to sometime in February.

**Jinsui Binguan** (金穗宾馆; ☎ 572 7179; d Y100-120; ☎) Across the street from the Tongfu, this place is open year-round, has simple rooms and keeps the hot water and electricity running 365 days a year. Hurray!

#### EATING

There are plenty of places to eat here; just don't leave it too late, as restaurants are often entirely shut down by 8pm.

**Khampa Restaurant** (康巴藏餐; Kāngbā Zāngcān; dishes Y6-25; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) This restaurant has a good selection of Tibetan fare. The **thurpa** (面块; miànkuài; Y6), a colossal serving of noodles, meat and vegetables, can fuel you for the whole day.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus station opens in the afternoon, usually by 2pm. There are daily buses for Xiāngchéng and Lítáng; both trips cost around Y47, leave at 6am and take three hours. A minivan or taxi to either of these places costs Y300.

#### Yading Nature Reserve 亚丁自然保护区

Stunning alpine scenery, snow-capped peaks and endless opportunities for horse treks draw more and more people to this **nature reserve** (Yǎding Zìrán Bǎohùqū; admission Y150; ☎ ticket office 8am-6.30pm) each year. The terrain is also dotted with lakes and monasteries and is the reason Dàoichéng is increasingly showing up on travellers' itineraries. The ticket office is open year-round, except when snow occasionally closes the road in winter. The best time to visit is autumn when the colours are changing (October is said to be particularly impressive).

The reserve is based around the three holy peaks of **Jampelyang** (Yāngmàiyǒng Shēnshān; 5958m) to the south, **Chana Dorje** (Xiárlí Duōjǐ Shēnshān; 5958m) and **Chenresig** (Xiānnǎiri Shēnshān; 6032m). The mountains are named after the Tibetan Buddhist trinity of Bodhisattvas known as the Rigsun Gonpo. None has ever been climbed. The reserve is a strong contender for the title 'Shangri-la' (see the boxed text, p290).

The region was once part of the old kingdom of Mǔlǐ and was visited by the fifth Dalai Lama in the 17th century. Joseph Rock, who counted the corpulent King of Mǔlǐ as a close personal friend, visited in the 1930s and first described the famed 'Bandit Monastery', whose 400 monks would regularly head out on plundering expeditions before returning to prayer and contemplation. The monastery, called **Konkaling Gompa** (贡岭寺; Gònglǐng Sì) is en route to the reserve, about 60km from Dàoichéng, just before Riwá.

The most popular way for Chinese tourists to see the reserve is by horse (foreigners who visit here seem to just walk). Horse treks are generally Y180 for the first day, and Y120 to Y150 for

each day after that, depending on your bargaining skills. There's very simple accommodation (no heat, no showers) at the **Tsongu Gompa** (冲古寺; Chōnggǔ Sì; rY40-60). A simple wooden (and as yet unnamed) **guesthouse** (☎ 136-98142416; dm Y30) was being built near Tsongu Gompa at the time of research and may be worth checking out. The owner is planning to offer horses for hire to his guests as well.

Three-hours' walk southeast of the monastery is **Luorong Pasture** (洛绒牧场; Luòróng Mùchǎng), where there is another tent hotel and restaurant. Three hours past here is a trail to **Niúnǎi Hǎi** (牛奶海; Milk Lake) at 4720m.

From this point most Chinese tourists return the way they came but it is possible to do a circuit of the mountain if you have camping equipment for one night. From Niúnǎi Hǎi the *kora* continues for one hour to a 4400m pass, and then branches right to some meadows, a popular place to camp. The next day, two hours' hiking northeast gets you to another higher pass, from where it's a four-hour descent beneath the north face of Chenresig Peak. The trail then passes **Tara Lake** (Drólma Tso) en route back to Tsongu Gompa.

The reserve is about 110km from Dàoichéng and takes about 2½ hours to reach. There is no public transportation here, although someone *occasionally* gets a bus to the park up and running during the high-season summer months, but this service cannot be counted on. Most people just arrange a ride through their accommodation. Alternatively, minivans ply Gongga Lu Yiduan, Dàoichéng's main street, all day; fellow travellers will be trolling for a ride here as well, so you could hook up with them and split the cost to the reserve.

## NORTHERN SICHUĀN

This area of the province is synonymous with stunning nature – a mix of savagely lush forests, the eerily stark beauty of vacant grasslands and icy deep lakes fed by thunderous rivers.

The most popular way for travellers to experience all this is by exploring the Jiuzhaigou or Huanglong nature reserves or, even better, by horse trekking around either Sōngpān or Lǎngmùsì. Whichever way you choose to experience it, you'll never forget a trip here.

Northern Sichuān is home to the Ābà, Tibetan and Qiāng Autonomous Prefectures. In the extreme northwest, the region around Zōigé and Lǎngmùsì is the territory of the Goloks, nomads who speak their own dialect of Tibetan, distinct from the local Amdo dialect. While these Tibetan destinations are less visited, you can incorporate them into an alternative route into Gānsù.

Most of northern Sichuān is between 2000m and 4000m in altitude, so make sure you take warm clothing. The grassland plateau in the northwest averages more than 4000m, and even in summer temperatures can dip drastically at night. The rainy season lasts from June to August.

Beyond the Sōngpān–Jiūzhàigōu route, roads in the region aren't always in the best condition. (And the buses aren't much better.) Roads are particularly hazardous in summer, when heavy rains prompt frequent landslides. You might want to think about planning this trip for the spring or autumn, when the weather is likely to be better.

One thing you are bound to see in the north are the countless logging trucks that shuttle up and down the Minjiang Valley (near Huanglong), stripping the area of its forest. Some sources estimate that up to 40% of the region's



forests have been logged in the last half-decade, causing erosion, landslides and increased levels of silt heading downstream, eventually flowing into the Yangzi River (Cháng Jiāng).

One more time: bear in mind that there is nowhere to change money in this region, so bring sufficient Renminbi.

### Mǎ'ĒRKĀNG (BARKAM) 马尔康

☎ 0837

Mǎ'ěrkāng is the capital of the Ābà (Tibetan) Autonomous Prefecture. It's a small but surprisingly modern little city built up along the banks of the Suomo River (Suómó Hé). Predominantly Han Chinese, the main draw of this town is its scenic neighbouring valleys dotted with Tibetan settlements. You could easily spend a couple of days bussing from town into the countryside, stopping where you like to explore some of the surrounding villages.

### Information

**China Post** (Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; Chongdai Jie) You can also make phone calls from here.

**Internet café** (wǎngbā; Daerma Jie; per hr Y2-3; ☎ 24hr) Has terrific high-speed computers. Enter through

### LOCAL VOICES *Aku Anzi, Yi Minority, age 30*

This Lijiāng resident and full-time trekking fanatic and guide has travelled all over China's Southwest. A restless traveller, he hates picking favourites, but admits there's something about nature in western Sichuān that just can't be beaten.

#### How did you get interested in trekking?

I grew up in the mountains near Lúgū Hú [Lugu Lake]; my family were shepherds. I ended up going to university to become a teacher and even had a government job, but I didn't like it so much. Yi people are half-nomad, half-farmer. I need to be a free guy...free like a bird (laughing).

#### Where's your favourite place to go?

I have many favourites, but Lúgū Hú to Yǎdīng is gorgeous. The terrain changes so much. You've got rivers, valleys, forests and, from June to August, you wouldn't believe the beautiful flowers you can see at Yǎdīng. It takes two weeks to do on horses. You have to be experienced though. It's a little bit tough.

#### Any other favourites?

Tagong Grasslands. It's getting very popular but it's absolutely beautiful and very topographically flat so routes there aren't too difficult. Once I trekked with nomads there. I just asked if I could go out with them to their camp and they said 'OK'.

#### What's so special about western Sichuān?

There's so much life. In Tibet, the terrain is very harsh. In western Sichuān it's so varied: there's a lot of green, a lot of holy mountains. I feel like I get a more rich experience.

#### Where to next?

Hmmm. I think I should go to other provinces and find new routes. I'd also like to go to Dégé. Me and my friends got a jeep and visited about three years ago but didn't stay long enough. There are important temples all over the countryside from every school of Tibetan Buddhism. I'd really like to go back and see more of it.

a lane off Daerma Jie, go up one flight of stairs. The computers are on the 2nd floor.

**Public Security Bureau** (PSB; Gōngānjú; ☎ emergency 110; Tuanjie Lu)

## Sights

There's not a lot to see in Mǎ'ěrkāng itself besides the **Gelugpa Gomba** (Lāma Miào), a small Tibetan monastery. To get there, take the alley to the left of the post office and follow it up for about 30 minutes.

For people-watching, the **Leisure Plaza** (Xiūxián Guāngchǎng; Binhe Lu; 滨河路), a small, central square by the river, is great. Everyone from Chinese business people to Tibetan villagers seems to hang out here at some point during the day.

## Sleeping & Eating

Compared with the rest of Ābà Prefecture, accommodation here is relatively expensive, even in the low season. Budget offerings are generally pretty grim (even by Chinese standards), so they won't likely be of interest to most travellers – even ones on a tight budget.

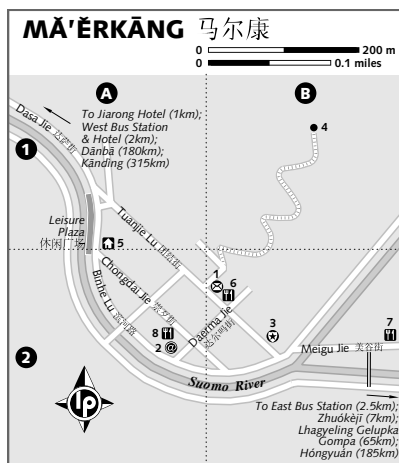
**Mínshān Bīnguǎn** (☎ 282 2918; 13 Binhe Lu; 滨河路13号; s & d Y160; 🍴) This hotel has spotless rooms and pillows like marshmallows, but unreliable hot water. The owners do not bargain – even with Chinese travellers.

**Jiarong Hotel** (嘉绒酒店; Jiāróng Jiùdiàn; ☎ 666 6668; 346-430 Dasa Jie; 达萨街346-430号; d Y680; 🍴) This is a new place with slick, gleaming rooms and spectacularly posh bathrooms. Discounted prices are between Y260 and Y380.

The cheapo **hotel** (酒店; jiùdiàn; ☎ 782 4233; Xīzhàn; 西站; dm Y15, d Y60) at the West Bus Station has friendly owners but not-too-clean rooms. In winter, the 10-bed dorm rooms are occupied to near capacity by nomad tribes and can get pretty rowdy. However, if you have an early bus from this station, the place is worth considering. To get here, go up the stairs just outside the bus ticket office.

There are plenty of restaurants in town, though even ones that came recommended were a bit of a let down – even the classic scrambled egg and tomato dish came in the form of a rubbery omelette slapped on a bed of cold tomatoes. Maybe you'll have better luck than we did.

Meigu Jie in the east of town has a huge string of hole-in-the-wall eateries, from claypot stalls to BBQ stands. For fancier



### INFORMATION

China Post & Telecom 中国邮政&中国电信	1	B2
Internet Café 网吧	2	A2
PSB 公安局	3	B2

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Gelugpa Gomba 喇嘛庙	4	B1
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### SLEEPING

Mínshān Bīnguǎn 岷山宾馆	5	A1
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### EATING

Bakery 面包房	6	B2
Food Stalls 小吃	7	B2
Restaurants 饭店	8	A2

places with more elaborate menus, check out Chongdai Jie in the centre of town.

There's also a good bakery near here on Tuanjie Lu, where you can load up on snacks for day trips and long bus rides.

## Getting There & Away

Mǎ'ěrkāng has two bus stations, both outside of the downtown core. The rickety West Bus Station (西站; Xīzhàn) is 2km northwest of downtown; the more modern and busy East Bus Station (东站; Dōng Zhàn) is about 2.5km east of downtown.

You can buy tickets from either no matter where you are going; just make sure to double- and triple-check which station the bus will actually depart from (staff aren't necessarily as helpful as you'd expect in sorting this out).

The East Bus Station is generally the best place to start for the following daily services:

Dānbā (Y41, 5½ hours, 7am), Zōigè (Y63 to Y68, nine hours, 6.30am), Chéngdū (Y89, nine to 10 hours, 6.30am and 9.30am) and Ābà (Y52, five hours, 7am and 11am).

There's sometimes a direct bus to Sōngpān (Y88, 6am). If not, head to Hóngyuán (红原; Y36, three to four hours, 8am), from where you can then catch onward transport.

To reach Mǎ'ěrkāng, there's a daily service from Dānbā (Y41, 5½ to six hours, 7.30am) and Ābà (Y52, five hours, 7am and 11am).

## AROUND Mǎ'ěrkāng

For intrepid travellers, the forested valley around Mǎ'ěrkāng is sprinkled with Tibetan villages and is well worth exploring. Just get out on the main road and hail down anything buslike heading out of town.

**Zhuókèjī** (卓克基; Choktse) is a compact Tibetan village around 7km east of town. Just above the cluster of stone houses is a derelict watchtower/fortress that once belonged to a local chieftain and in which Mao Zedong is said to have slept when the Long March passed by.

There are several remote monasteries in the area including **Lhagyeling Gelupka Gomba** (Shuǎjǐng Sì), about 65km east of town.

## SŌNGPĀN 松潘

☎ 0837 / pop 71,650

This sleepy town is a popular base for horse treks – an experience right up there with a trip to Jiuzhaigou on the must-do lists of most travellers taking on northern Sichuan.

Sōngpān's bustling core is contained within the (still intact) old town walls and is thick with tourist shops, Tibetan souvenir stands and some interesting architecture, still holding its own against encroaching development. Keep an eye out for the shockingly ornate covered bridges, a handful of traditional wooden buildings and some truly atmospheric teahouses.

Sōngpān has a long-held reputation for faulty electricity. Though not as bad as it used to be, it's still a good idea to bring a torch. Infrastructure upgrades result in a lack of water from time to time as well.

Spring, summer and autumn are all good times to visit. In winter, expect most midrange and top-end hotels to be closed leaving only unheated budget options. Many backpacker-oriented restaurants and businesses also close during this period. Horse treks are still offered

in winter, but you probably won't want to go for more than a day trip. Travellers who've overnighted during this period describe bone-breaking cold that freezes even the hot water in Thermos flasks.

## Information

**Agricultural Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Nóngyè Yínháng; Shunjiang Lu) There's a pretty good ATM here, but it doesn't work for everybody. This bank won't change travellers cheques, but some people have been able to change American dollars in a pinch – just don't count on it.

**China Post** (Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; Shunjiang Lu; ☎ 9-11.30am & 2-5.30pm) On the main street about halfway between the north and south gates.

**Internet café** (wǎngbā; per hr Y6; ☎ 6am-midnight)

On Shunjiang Nanlu just south of the bridge. Emma's Kitchen (p413) has good internet access, too.

**Public Security Bureau** (PSB; Gōngānjú; ☎ 723 2123; Wenmiao Jie) Renewes visas now and has a reputation for efficiency. Some travellers have received same-day service so be nice to the staff! The office is down a side street off Shunjiang Beilu.

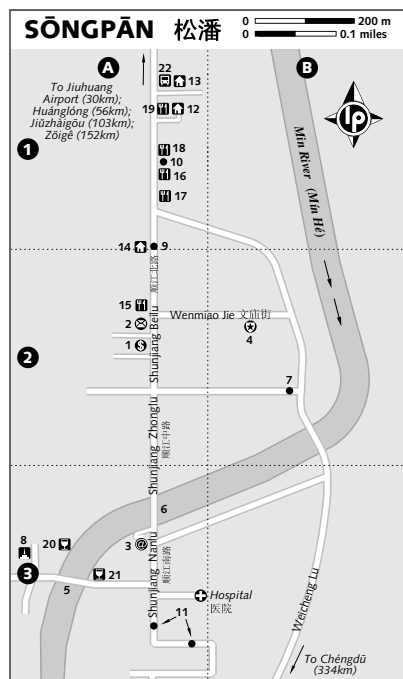
## Sights

The ancient **gates** from Sōngpān's days as a walled city are still intact, and a couple of outrageously ornate, traditional **covered bridges** span the Min River (Mín Hé). On the far western side of the river is **Guānyīn Gé**. Walking up to it will take you through a village-like setting and the small temple offers views over Sōngpān.

## Activities

The areas around Sōngpān are dotted with idyllic mountain woods and emerald-green lakes. One of the most popular ways to experience the scenery is by horse trek. Guides can take you out through pristine valleys and peaceful forests, all aboard a not-so-big, very tame horse. Many travellers – from hardy backpackers to families with children – rate this experience as one of the highlights of their travels in Sichuan.

Treks are organised by **Shun Jiang Horse Treks** (Shùnjiāng Lǐyóu Mǎdù; ☎ 723 1201; Shunjiang Beilu), located about 30m south of the bus station. The guys here have been leading horse treks for years. The vast majority of travellers are utterly happy, but now and again we get reports of lackadaisical if not uninterested (and occasionally gruff) guides. Check with travellers who have recently taken a trip; there will



be loads of them. On offer is anything from one- to 12-day treks and trips can be tailored to suit you.

One of the most popular treks is the four-day trip to **Ice Mountain** (雪山顶; Xuěyǔdǐng), a spectacular ride through as yet unspoiled scenery.

If you're feeling particularly adventurous (and particularly flush) you can make the trip north to Zōigē on horseback, a trek that takes around 12 days. Bear in mind that you will have to cover the cost of the horses on their return journey to Sōngpān, which can make it quite an expensive way to travel.

Rates are very reasonable (Y150 per person the first day, Y100 per person per day after that). You get a horse, three meals a day, tents, bedding, warm jackets and raincoats. The guides take care of everything: you won't touch a tent pole or a cooking pot unless you want to. The only additional charge is entrance to the different sites (Y20 to Y110 each, which can include anything from temples to nature reserves depending on your route), but you will be warned of these before you set out.

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As food consists mainly of green veggies, potatoes and bread, you may want to take along some extra snacks for variety.

Shun Jiang Horse Treks now shares the same address and office space with its former rival **Happy Trails Horse Trek Company** (Kuàilè de Xiǎolù Lǚyóu Mǎduì; ☎ 723 1064), which offers similar trips at similar prices.

People may encourage a post-horse-trek visit to the Sōngpān hot springs, but it's better skipped – the springs aren't actually 'hot' at all.

### Sleeping

Despite Sōngpān's popularity with travellers, the choice of hotels is surprisingly limited. There are several overpriced tourist hotels inconveniently located far on the outskirts of town (and a couple just outside the southeast part of the old walls), but they are completely closed up in winter, just when you need their central heating and hot water most. Budget accommodation is centred on Shunjiang Beilu around the bus station, where about a dozen places offer dorm beds and cheap private

rooms. Figure Y20 to Y30 for a dorm bed, and from Y50 for a simple double room with private bathroom. In the low season, most budget hotels are open but you may have to wait a while for the staff to appear.

**Shun Jiang Guesthouse** (Shùnjiāng Zìzhù Lǚguǎn; ☎ 723 1201, 723 1064; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; dm Y20) Run by Shun Jiang Horse Treks, this simple but clean guesthouse is right above its office, which means you can literally roll out of bed and into the saddle.

**Sōngzhōu Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn** (Songzhou Traffic Hotel; ☎ 723 1818, 723 1258; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; dm Y25-40, d/tr Y180/150) With so many buses leaving (and arriving) in Sōngpān at ungodly early or late hours, the real selling point of this hotel is its proximity to the bus station (it's so close, in fact, that one of the hotel's indoor halls juts out over the station's waiting room). A double room here can go for as little as Y60 in the low season. Rooms range from perfectly serviceable to slightly dumpy, so have a look at a few options before deciding. Don't count on the hot water either.

**Songzhou Ancient Town Hotel** (Sōngzhōu Gúchéng Bīnguǎn; ☎ 132-1984 5998; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; d Y50) Located above the Yùlán Fànguǎn, rooms in this modest hotel have electric blankets and reliable hot water. Welcoming and helpful staff make this one of the better budget options. The only thing to complain about is the frigid chill that hits the rooms during cold weather – despite the electric blankets, it somehow manages to be even colder inside than it is outdoors. Weird.

**Tàiyáng Dàjiǔdiàn** (Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路) Just outside the north gate, this is the only conveniently located upper-midrange hotel in town. It was closed for heavy-duty gutting and renovation at the time of research, but should be reopened by the time you read this and so may be worth checking out.

### Eating

Sōngpān has an excellent assortment of breads for sale, made and sold fresh all day at small stalls on Shunjiang Zhonglu. You'll also see sellers strolling up and down the street here shouldering enormous baskets overflowing with crusty loaves and Tibetan flatbread.

There are also a number of restaurants along Shunjiang Zhonglu, including hotpot and noodle shops. Many have English signs and menus. There's a good bakery along this same street selling bags of cookies and

other goodies handy for taking along on day trips.

**Lánzhōu Lāmiàn** (☎ 723 3916; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; noodles from Y5; ☎ 9am-10pm) This unassuming Muslim restaurant has fantastic beef noodles (牛肉面; niúròu miàn) perfectly spiced and drowning in fragrant coriander.

**Yùlán Fànguǎn** (Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; dishes from Y8; ☎ early-8pm) This is Sōngpān's original hangout for foreign travellers and it remains popular today, despite the mediocre food. There's an extensive English menu offering both Chinese and Western dishes. Don't count on the Western stuff, such as hot chocolate (Y5) or the 'Israeli breakfast' (fried egg, salad and bread; Y10), being available outside of the high season. This place is often open as early as 5am, so it's a good spot to chow down before epic morning bus rides.

**Emma's Kitchen** (Xiǎo Ōuzhōu Xīcāntīng; ☎ 880 2958; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; mains from Y10; ☎ 6.30am-late) This is another popular place for backpackers. Emma is very helpful – trust us, she'll find you – and can sort out almost anything from laundry to travel information. During winter, this place is either closed or open irregular hours.

**Song in the Mountain** (Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; mains from Y10; ☎ 7am-11.30pm) This small restaurant is run by Sarah, daughter of Fis Took Yang, 'the good guide with the bad eye' at Shun Jiang Horse Treks. Both the Chinese and Western dishes get good reviews from travellers. Sarah is also very helpful if you need general travel information on the area.

### Drinking

Teahouses pack the banks of the Min River in the southwest part of town. All have outdoor seating and on a nice day, the clink of cups and hum of gossiping voices give this area a pleasant buzz.

**Yingyuè Cháyuan** (☎ 9am-late) Try this pleasant teahouse, on your right before you cross over the bridge. Its black walls house a pleasant courtyard right next to the river.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Jiuhuang Airport (九黄机场; Jiùhuáng Jīchǎng) is near Chuānzhuīsī (川主寺), a small town almost halfway between Sōngpān and Jiùzhāigōu. The airport was closed for renovations at the time of research but should be open by the time you are reading this.

There are no buses to Sōngpān so you'll either have to catch a taxi or go to Jiūzhàigōu first and catch the early morning bus to Sōngpān the following day. Until recently, the 25-minute taxi ride from Sōngpān to the airport cost Y80, but the price is now set at Y50. However, many taxi drivers still regularly hit travellers up for the old fare, so brace yourself for all sorts of theatrics as they try to cajole the Y80 out of you.

## BUS

Sōngpān's bus station is at the northern end of town. There are daily departures to Chéngdū (Y72 to Y76, eight hours, 6am, 6.30am and 7am). You might also be able to grab a seat on a Chéngdū-bound bus from Jiūzhàigōu or Zōigē that passes through Sōngpān between 8.30am and 10am every day. Buses also leave for Hóngyuán (Y50, five hours, 6.30am) and Zōigē (Y56, six hours, 6.40am and 7.10am). Buses for Jiuzhaigou leave at 7am, 11am and 1pm and will drop you off at either the park entrance (Y27, two hours) or Jiūzhàigōu town (Y34, two hours 40 minutes to three hours). Buses to Huanglong (Y25, two hours) leave at least once a day from Sōngpān's bus station, though service can be irregular from November through to February. For Lǎngmùsì you will need to change at Zōigē.

From Chéngdū's Chadianzi bus station there are three daily departures to Sōngpān (Y74, eight hours, 6.30am, 7am and 7.30am) and from Jiūzhàigōu there is a morning departure to Sōngpān at 7.20am.

## HUANGLONG NATIONAL PARK

### 黄龙景区

Bjewelled with sapphire-bright terraced ponds and luxurious emerald-green foliage, **Huanglong National Park** (Yellow Dragon Valley; Huánglóng Jǐngqū; www.huanglong.com; admission Apr–mid-Nov Y200, mid-Nov–Mar Y80; ☎ 7am–6pm) is a popular destination for its stunning photo possibilities, fresh air and peaceful walks.

The park's name (Yellow Dragon Valley) is due to the yellow-tinged calcium carbonate and limestone deposits found throughout its 1340 sq km terrain. On land, the layered sheaths of yellowed calcium carbonate are said to look like a dragon's skin. In ponds and lakes, limestone deposits are responsible for the waters' golden shimmer on sunny days.

Legend has it that 4000 years ago a yellow dragon helped the King of the Xia Kingdom,

Xiayu, channel the flood water into the sea, thereby creating the nearby Min River.

Crowned by snowcapped peaks, the park's unique scenery, complex ecosystems and endangered species populations (which include the Giant Panda and the golden snub-nosed monkey) landed Huanglong on Unesco's World Heritage List in 1992.

The best time to visit is in September or October when the autumn colours come out and are reflected in the park's waters to stunning effect. Another great time to visit is during the annual **Temple Fair** (庙会; Miào Huì). Held around the middle of the sixth lunar month (usually July), it attracts large numbers of traders from the Qiang minority. Whatever time you come, keep in mind that the elevation here runs from 3120m to 3570m – meaning thinner air and cooler temperatures than you may expect.

The most spectacular ponds are behind **Huanglong Temple** (黄龙寺; Huánglóng Sì), deep in the valley and 7.5km from the road. (The temple was built to honour the mythical dragon of the King of Xia legend.) A round trip along the footpath here takes about four hours, with the trail returning through dense (and dark) forest. Huanglong is usually less besieged by tour groups than Jiuzhaigou, which some travellers find a huge plus. But while some people rave about the valley's beauty and love the peace and quiet here, others find it disappointing, much preferring the scenery at Jiuzhaigou despite the latter's (at times) overwhelming popularity and rapid commercialisation.

No lodging is allowed in the park any more, and outside all you've got are super overly priced options. The nearby town of Chuānzhūsi (川主寺) has almost all of the places to stay. Also, you can't count on seeing many food vendors, so it would be sensible to bring along some water and snacks.

Around 56km from Sōngpān, Huanglong is almost always included on the seven-day Jiuzhaigou tours that run out of Chéngdū, as well as on the horse-trekking tours from Sōngpān. From Sōngpān there's usually one morning bus a day to the park (Y25, two hours). However, from November through to February prepare yourself for sporadic or cancelled service. The last bus back to Sōngpān leaves in the early afternoon, usually around 2pm. From Jiūzhàigōu there's a bus at 7.10am (Y42), but at low-season

times (roughly November through to February) service may be irregular or nonexistent. At present, no buses run to the park from Jiuhuang Airport (九黄机场; Jiūhuáng Jīchǎng). The airport was closed in 2006 for expansion work, but it should be reopened by the time you read this. By then there may also be direct transport added as Huanglong becomes a more popular (and accessible) trip.

## JIUZHAIGOU NATURE RESERVE 九寨沟自然保护区

☎ 0837

With thatches of pillowy greenery, delightfully eccentric waterfalls, 'so blue it can't be real' lakes and a terrific network of trails to take you through it all, the Y-shaped valley of this reserve has become one of the most popular sights in Sichuan. The scenery of **Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve** (Nine Village Gully; Jiūzhàigōu Zìrán Bǎohùqū; ☎ 773 9753; www.jiuzhaigouvalley.com; adult/student Apr–mid-Nov Y220/170, mid-Nov–Mar Y80/70; ☎ 7am–6pm) includes forests and meadows roamed by takins, golden monkeys and pandas. All surrounded by snow-capped peaks, the reserve was deemed so impressive it got the attention of the UN, which proclaimed it a World Biosphere Reserve and placed it on Unesco's World Heritage List in 1992, along with nearby Huanglong National Park.

True, the heart-locking ticket price and army of travellers that descends on the reserve daily is off-putting, but take it in your stride, say 'Pish!' and go anyway – it's a national treasure, well worth a splurge of yuán and time, and you'll never forget a visit to this place.

Jiūzhàigōu means 'Nine Village Gully' and refers to the nine Baima Tibetan villages that can be found in the valley. According to legend, Jiūzhàigōu was created when a jealous devil caused the goddess Wunosemo to drop her magic mirror, a present from her lover, the warlord God Dage. The mirror dropped to the ground and shattered into 118 shimmering turquoise lakes. Those pools of eye candy are now some of the most photographed scenery in the province.

Trees growing unexpectedly out of the middle of rivers, lakes and waterfalls is another of the park's trademarks. This eccentric flourish to the scenery is caused by fertile pockets of calcium in the waterways, which create impromptu flowerpots.

The park is reached by a modern highway connecting Jiūzhàigōu town (42km east of the park) with Chéngdū. Over 1.5 million people come here each year and the highway outside the entrance is packed with monstrous resort-style hotels collectively offering over 20,000 beds – with more being added every year.

Over the years, most original residents have been forced to move in order to 'protect' the park. Those who've been allowed to stay put actually work within the park's confines to keep up appearances.

Technically you're not allowed to strike off into the backcountry here, and though the trail network is excellent it can be a bit disheartening in high-season periods when shuttle buses whiz by every 10 minutes depositing dozens and dozens of people at a time to jostle for a picture in front of the same scenic view.

## Orientation & Information

Buses from Chéngdū and Sōngpān will drop you at the reception centre and ticket office, just outside the park entrance. If you can produce something remotely resembling a student card you'll be given a discount. The price includes entrance to all areas of the park but does not include the bus pass (high/low season Y90/80), which allows you to hop on and off the shuttle buses running between the park's sights.

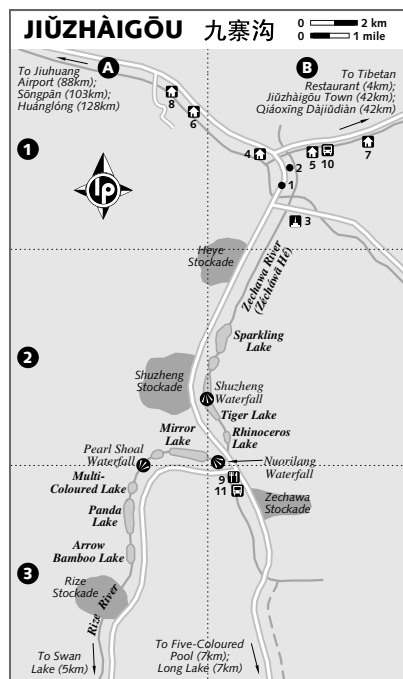
The park is 204 sq km and the touring area is set up within its Y-shaped valley. The first leg from the entrance to Nuorilang Falls (where there is a restaurant and cavernous hall selling souvenirs) is 14km. From Nuorilang Falls along the western fork to Swan Lake and the forest is 18km. From Nuorilang Falls to Long Lake along the eastern fork of the valley is 17km.

An ATM at the park entrance accepts major credit cards.

## Sights

The first official site inside the park is the Tibetan **Zaru Temple** (Zāru Sì; Zaru Gompa in Tibetan). The bus won't stop here but it is only a short walk up from the ticket office. Turn left at the first fork as you walk up the main road. After a short stroll, the temple will be on your right.

If you continue on the main road, you'll follow **Zechawa River** (Zécháwā Hé) to **Sparkling Lake** (火花海; Huǒhuā Hú). This is the first in



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in winter or when there has been little rainfall and the narrow road sees a great deal of traffic from one end to the other. Nevertheless, the two lakes at the far end are both well worth a visit. Nestled between some dramatic slopes, Long Lake in particular can be jaw-droppingly beautiful, especially on clear days when the sun hits it just so, its reflection piercing the pristine blue water with streaks of gold.

### Tours

During summer, various companies in Chéngdū operate tours to Jiuzhaigou and the surrounding area. Most of the trips are advertised for a certain day, but the bus will only go if full. If you are unlucky you may have to spend days waiting, so don't pay first.

A standard tour includes Huanglong and Jiuzhaigou, lasts seven days and starts from Y400 per person. Hotels, food and entry fees are not included in the price. Travel agencies in Chéngdū's Dragon Town Youth Hostel (p365) offer tours, as does the CITS office (p361).

A word of warning: several tour operators in Chéngdū have been blacklisted by travellers for lousy service and/or rudeness. Ask around among travellers to pinpoint a reliable agency.

### Sleeping

The strip of road leading to and from the reserve is packed with behemoth-sized upper-midrange and top-end hotels. There's only a tiny handful of budget ones. Expect a huge hike in prices during the high season (July and August) and on all national holidays.

Note that though the park remains open, accommodation, stores and restaurants outside the Jiuzhaigou Reserve start closing up in November and the area becomes a complete ghost town. Things slowly come back to life as March approaches. If you are headed up here during the off season, call ahead to make sure your hotel (and its kitchen) is open.

Otherwise, there's plentiful accommodation in Jiuzhaigou town, a small but unbelievably noisy and pushy place of 62,000 people, 42km east of the reserve. There's plenty of cheap but pretty desperate-looking budget accommodation here, but you'll be better off at the slick **Qiaoxing Daijiudian** (侨兴大酒店; ☎ 772 8366; Jiuzhaigou Xiānchéng; 九寨沟县城, r with/without bathroom Y350/328; ☺) on the town's main road to the Jiuzhaigou Reserve. Even when the hotel is heaving with people it gives good discounts – sometimes as low as Y100 for a double with bathroom.

To get to or from here to the park you can try to flag down an eastbound bus (around Y10 to Y15, 40 minutes) or take a taxi (20 minutes). Some cab drivers charge Y30 to Y40 for the trip, others charge Y15 to Y20 per person.

Staying inside Jiuzhaigou Reserve is not allowed, but locals may want to put you up for the night anyway. Think twice before accepting. It's not only illegal, but if you are obviously foreign-looking you and your 'non-exit' from the park are more likely to stand out – especially during the low season. Park rangers have been known to keep remarkable tabs on foreigners and are extremely efficient at rounding up stragglers come closing time, driving them down to the park gates themselves.

Accommodation just outside the reserve includes the following.

**Jiutong Binguān** (☎ 773 9879; fax 773 9877; dm Y30, d Y100) Next to the bus stop, this spartan space with concrete floors is a long-time standby and still going strong.

**YouU Hostel** (Yōuyóu Dūjià Liánsuǒ Jiūdiàn; ☎ 776 3111; www.youuhotel.com; No 4 Bldg, Kangba Linka, Zhangzha Town; 漳扎镇, 康巴林卡, 风情村4号楼; dm Y40, r Y180) This newly opened hostel is a welcome addition to Jiuzhaigou. Rooms are clean, and it's one of the few places open year-round. Just be warned: though the staff will go out of their way to make you comfortable in winter (including harvesting armfuls of blankets from other rooms), this place is still freezing.

**Lántiān Binguān** (☎ 877 8888; d Y120-398, tr Y100-200) Above average detailing and appointments make this place a good bet.

**Heye Yingbinguan** (☎ 773 5555; fax 773 5688; d Y290) Just outside of the park entrance, this hotel has lovely rooms with fancy marble bathrooms.

**Sheraton Jiuzhaigou Resort** (Xiláidēng Jiūzhāigōu Fàndiàn; ☎ 773 9988; fax 773 9666; www.sheraton.com/jiuzhaigou; d Y1200) This is one of the biggest hotels on the block and also one of the poshest. Rooms are elegant and the service is impeccable.

### Eating

There isn't a huge choice of restaurants outside the reserve as most tourists tend to eat at their hotels. Several restaurants near the Lántiān Binguān serve up simple Chinese dishes.

Alternatively there is a good **Tibetan Restaurant** (阿布魯孜; Àbù Lúzi; ☎ 889 7603, 844 8309; dishes from Y25; ☺ noon-9pm) that serves very good Chinese and Tibetan food. It's not cheap, but it's a nice place to treat yourself. The restaurant is not very conveniently located and you'll have to get a taxi here (Y10). It's next to Chángqing Fàndiàn (长青饭店).

Inside the park, you can buy expensive water or snacks in the villages. A restaurant inside the colossal souvenir shop at the reserve's Y-junction at Nuorilang Waterfall offers buffets costing Y25 to Y40 most afternoons. If visiting in the off season, everything is likely to be closed so bring your own water and snacks for the day.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Flights currently operate from Chéngdū (Y700, 40 minutes) to Jiuhuang Airport, with flights to and from Běijīng, Chóngqīng and Xī'ān to be added in the future. The airport was closed for renovations at the time of writing but should be reopened by the time you are reading this.

Buses for Jiuzhaigou (Y45, 1½ hours) wait at the airport for arrivals and leave when full. This means that you might have to wait around for a while, as most of your fellow passengers will be hopping off the plane straight onto a tour bus.

Returning to the airport is much easier as a scheduled bus leaves from near the Lántiān Binguān.



**BUS**

Chéngdū can be reached in 11 to 13 relatively painless hours. From Chéngdū's Chadianzi bus station there are four daily buses to Jiuzhaigou (Y110, 7.20am, 8am, 8.40am and 2pm); Chéngdū's tourist bus station also has one (Y110, 8am). If you're coming from Gānsù via Zōigē, you'll have to go through Sōngpān. From Sōngpān, buses to Jiuzhaigou leave at 7am, 11am and 1pm. You'll be dropped at the bus station just outside the reserve's entrance (Y27, two hours) or Jiūzhàigōu town (Y34, 40 minutes from the reserve).

From Jiuzhaigou to Sōngpān (Y28, two to three hours) there is a daily bus that leaves the park at 7.20am; otherwise, flag down buses that start from Nanping and go past the park entrance. The buses won't stop unless you flag them down. The bus station staff will let you know approximately what time the buses will be passing by.

You could also head to Jiūzhàigōu town and catch a bus to Guǎngyuán (Y60, eight hours, 6.30am), gateway to eastern Sichuān and on the rail line to Xī'ān. However, depending on what route your driver is taking, this can be a lengthy trip along winding roads on some very rickety buses.

Between October and April, snow often cuts off access to Jiuzhaigou for weeks on end. Even at the best of times, transport is not plentiful. Hitching to Jiuzhaigou on tour buses has supposedly happened, but it's a rare occurrence indeed.

**Getting Around**

You can certainly walk all over the park but given its size there is no way you will be able to see it all in one day. Shuttle buses zip between the park's sights, leaving on a 'when full' basis from just inside the park entrance between 7am and 6pm, just before the park shuts. A high-/low-season day pass costs Y90/80 (a cost that's increasingly being added onto your park entrance ticket). The bus stops at whatever sights you and your fellow passengers want it to. You can either take a quick picture and hop back on the same bus, or linger, wander or hike to the next stop and pick up another shuttle bus later on.

Guides on the buses explain what's coming up next, though in the low season they are usually sleeping and only reluctantly rouse themselves for those not travelling in groups.

The shuttles follow two routes. The main one runs between the entrance and Arrow Bamboo Lake. For transportation between Rhinoceros Lake and Long Lake you'll have to get off the bus and transfer to another shuttle at the Y-junction near Nuorilang Waterfall.

**NORTHWEST ROUTE**

The epic grasslands in this corner of Sichuān are smattered with isolated Tibetan towns and villages where life is slow, streets are less crowded and there's a real feeling of being on the edge of the world.

The most popular activities in this region are exploring the monasteries or outdoor activities such as horse trekking, but even just travelling from Àbà to Lǎngmùsì can be a thrill. There's nothing quite like bussing through the grasslands and finding your vehicle swarmed by yak herds as veiled nomads thunder by on horses (or, increasingly these days, on motorcycles).

In the winter months, roads often become impassable and, at an average altitude of 3500m to 4000m, temperatures plummet way past the tolerance levels of most mortals. While still cold, early autumn sees little rain and many clear and sunny skies. In winter, the nomadic Goloks, a Tibetan people, stay closer to main roads and towns and do much of their travel by bus. It makes the trips extremely boisterous and songful but also makes seats hard to get – buy your onward ticket as soon as possible.

The first leg of this route is from Chéngdū to Sōngpān (for more details, see Getting There & Away – Bus, p414). Most travellers take a side trip from Sōngpān to Jiuzhaigou at this point. From Sōngpān you can travel 168km northwest to your next overnight stop in Zōigē, and from there it's worth heading to Lǎngmùsì, just inside the Sichuān border, for a day or two.

**Àbà (Ngawa) 阿坝**

Àbà is a lonely-looking place, dwarfed by the vast plains and grasslands that surround it. Qiatang Jie (洽唐街), with a sprawl of one- and two-storey buildings, is this Tibetan town's main artery. On any given day it's flooded with monks, many of them between the ages of six and 15, from the town's monasteries.

Poverty is apparently the reason for the high number of child monks in the area. Locals say

sending poor children to the monasteries is the only way for them to get a good education.

There are three dozen or so monasteries hidden in the surrounding countryside, so there's plenty for intrepid travellers to explore in the region besides the town's temples.

There's an **internet café** (per hr Y3; ☎ 24hr) on Zhongxin Jie (almost at the corner of Qiatang Jie).

**SIGHTS**

The fascinating **Kirti Gomba** is a 'must-visit'. It's surrounded by a unique, maze-like network of corridors containing hundreds and hundreds of prayer wheels of all shapes, sizes and designs. Local pilgrims flock here to spin the wheels and pray as they race-walk through the halls. Be very careful not to get in anyone's way. We learned the hard way what happens when you come between a Tibetan grandma and her next prayer wheel... (ouch!).

The **Seru Gomba** near the bus station is also worth a visit for its great two-eyed stupa, the kind usually only seen at monasteries in Nepal. Certain prayer halls here are off-limits to women; if you're a female heading towards a door and a monk starts yelling at you, that's probably why. Visit in the morning if you can, as the buildings are often locked up by the afternoon.

**SLEEPING**

Accommodation in Àbà is going to be basic no matter how much you spend. No showers and no bathrooms are the rule at most budget accommodation places. Running water (let alone hot water) in these parts can be hit-or-miss too.

Almost all mid- and upper-range hotels cut their water supplies and electricity between October and March. Many close entirely.

**Gānxī Bīnguǎn** (干喜宾馆; dm Y25, d with bathroom Y60) This is about the best of the cheapies and is open year-round. It's pretty gritty but very friendly. Bathroom 'toilets' are holes in the ground. It will be hard to find this place on your own (though centrally located off Qiatang Xijie, the hotel's actual street has no name), so it's best to take a taxi from the bus station (around Y5).

**Juomola Guesthouse Hotel** (珠峰宾馆; Zhūfēng Bīnguǎn; Qiatang Xijie; 洽唐西街; d with bathroom Y120) Of the hotels open year-round, the drab rooms here are by far the most comfortable. Just don't expect perfection: despite staff claims to

the contrary, running water and hot water are no more reliable here than anywhere else, and though there's air-conditioning in each room, staff couldn't find any of the remote controls at the time of research. The hotel can also get noisy at night with all the customer comings and goings from the great Tibetan café (open 10am to late) on the 2nd floor.

**EATING**

Àbà's restaurants are concentrated on Qiatang Jie. Surprisingly, many of the Tibetan ones have English menus.

**Everest A Tibetan Restaurant** (珠藏餐; Zhū Zàngcān; Qiatang Jie; 洽唐街; ☎ 10am-10pm) This restaurant, near the corner of Zhongxin Lu, has a big selection of *momos* (Y0.50 a piece) and comfy seating. The menu is exactly the same as at the Tibetan café on the 2nd floor of the Juomola Hotel Guesthouse.

**Xuēshān Fāndiàn** (雪山饭店; Qiatang Jie; 洽唐街; dishes Y10-15) For Chinese food try this spot between Zhongxin Lu and Pentos Jie. The beef and yellow celery (芹菜牛肉; *qíncai niúròu*; Y15) is particularly good.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Àbà's bus station is 2.9km from downtown. It has daily services to Mǎ'èrkāng (Y52, five hours, 7am and 11am) and Zōigē (Y66, six hours, 6am).

Going the other way, there are daily buses for Àbà from Mǎ'èrkāng (Y52, five hours, 7am) and Zōigē (Y66, six hours, winter/summer 9.30am/9am).

Taxis don't tend to hover at this station, but a city bus is usually on hand to meet arrivals (Y1); it travels straight along the town's main street.

There's an old bus station in the centre of town, but at the time of research it was not in operation.

Taxis are easily hailed around town.

**Zōigē 若尔盖**

☎ 0839 / pop 59,000

A sparse concrete town in the middle of vast grassland, Zōigē is a sleepy place with a vacant, middle-of-nowhere vibe. Don't despair if you end up here on your way to Lǎngmùsì – it certainly isn't the end of the world. People are friendly, there are heaps of Tibetan tea-houses to flop down in and Xiangbala Nanjie (香巴拉南街) is a good street to browse for reasonably priced Tibetan clothing.

While the town's Chinese name is Ruò'ěrgài, it is most commonly referred to by its Tibetan name, Zōigè.

You can visit the **Ta Tsa Gompa** (Daca Si; 达扎寺; Dázāhā Si; ☞ irregular), a Tibetan temple on the northeastern edge of town. You'll have a better chance of finding the buildings open in the morning; much is locked up by noon.

There's also a tiny but spectacular **museum** here with Tibetan artefacts, weapons and the hand print of the fifth Dalai Lama. Because of the items' value, monks don't open the museum for the average traveller – only for VIP guests. But if your visit coincides with a VIP delegation you may be able to tag along.

### SLEEPING

Budget offerings in Zōigè are uniformly basic with limited washing facilities and sporadic hot water. Though it can get brutally cold here, it's almost impossible to find accommodation with heating or hot water during winter. Many midrange hotels shut down entirely by mid-December.

**Hóngyùn Kèzhàn** (鸿运客栈; ☎ 828 2829; Shuguang Jie; 曙光街; dm Y20) Only 100m from the bus station on the same street, this friendly place is ultra basic, but still bright and airy and with very clean rooms. There's communal toilets but no showers on the premises. To get here, walk out of the bus station, cross the street and walk left past Xiangbala Nanjie. The hotel will be on your right just before the next intersection.

**Mǎ'ěrtáng Jīnxīn Mùrén Zhījiā Lǚguǎn** (玛尔塘金鑫牧人之家旅馆; ☎ 896 8772; 9-10 Mingzhu Jie; 明珠街9-10号; dm Y30, r without bathroom Y60) Its business cards wax poetic (in both Chinese and Tibetan) on love, compassion and world peace, so it's kind of hard not to have a soft spot for this place. Located near a cluster of nice Tibetan teashops, it's got very basic rooms, clean wood floors and a dingy common bathroom with a hot (for most of the time) shower. Turn left out of the bus station, walk 125m or so until Mingzhu Jie and turn left again.

**Ruò'ěrgài Fàndiàn** (若尔盖饭店; ☎ 229 1041; Shangye Jie; 商业街; r Y200-280; ☞) Tidy rooms here have dirty carpets, cheap furniture and a reliable but limited supply of hot water. To work your room's air-conditioning, you'll have to hunt down the remote control (there's only one for the entire hotel).

The desk staff here are lovely, however, and very helpful. Note that this hotel often shuts down completely in winter. Enter through the lane around the corner on Duoma Beijing (多玛北街).

**Ruò'ěrgài Dàjiùdiàn** (若尔盖大酒店; ☎ 229 1998; Shangye Jie; 商业街; r Y428-488) The swankiest option in town, this new hotel has the clean, modern rooms of any other good upper-end Chinese hotel. Though open year-round, it cuts the central heating, hot water and hall lights during winter, making the discount low-season rate of Y140 seem terribly overpriced.

### EATING & DRINKING

There are not a lot of memorable eating experiences to be had in Zōigè, but the food is certainly decent enough. This town (and its restaurants) has a tendency to shut down early – don't leave dinner later than 8pm.

There are a couple of good, simple restaurants on Shangye Jie (商业街), both near the Ruò'ěrgài Fàndiàn.

**Lóngxīng Xiǎochī** (隆兴小吃; mains Y8-12; ☞ 9am-8pm) This is a terrific place to look out for here. Everything is good, especially the *máopò dòufu* – perfectly spiced and served in huge bowls.

**Lóngchéng Shāwū** (隆城砂锅; mains Y12-18; ☞ 10am-8pm) A couple of doors down, this restaurant serves killer hotpot dishes – especially the chicken and taro (芋儿鸡; *yù'ér jī*; small/large Y12/15) variety.

For yak butter tea (Y10 to Y15 per pot), head to Jingpin Jie (精品街) or Mingzhu Jie (明珠街) where there are several Tibetan teahouses.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Zōigè's bus station is on Shuguang Jie. It has daily buses to Sōngpān (Y56, six hours, winter/summer 6.30am/6am) and Àbà (Y66, six hours, winter/summer 9.30am/9am).

A spectacular new road to Lǎngmùsì is almost completed (really, it looks like a friggin' airport runway). It's cut down travel between the two places to a 100-minute bus ride (Y25, winter/summer 2.30pm/2pm), though expect hold-ups as they put finishing touches on the road's tunnel.

Despite only taking about 80 minutes by car, many taxi drivers still charge the Y300 to Y400 they demanded when the trip took 3½ hours. Do your best to get a better rate.

## Lǎngmùsì (Namu) 朗木寺

☎ 0941

Lǎngmùsì is a fabulous village bookended by alpine scenery to the west and grasslands to the east. Inhabited by Tibetans, Huí Muslims and Han Chinese, it's one of northern Sichuan's most interesting stops and is becoming as well known for its horse treks as Sōngpān. A massive new expressway between here and Zōigè opened in 2006, cutting travel time between the two places from 3½ hours to 80 minutes.

Lǎngmùsì is best visited in the high season, from spring to autumn. In winter, pretty much all backpacker-oriented accommodation, bars and restaurants are closed, as is the horse trek office.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Despite Lǎngmùsì's increasing popularity (as evidenced by the dozen or so Western-oriented cafés and bars in town), the surrounding countryside is filled with *gompas*, temples, caves, and hills used for sky burials. Its terrain is just begging to be explored, and the possibilities for walks are endless. Horse treks are also a popular way to see the countryside and can be arranged at **Langmusi Tibetan Horse Trekking** (朗木寺马队; Lǎngmù Sī Mǎduì; ☎ 667 1504). Its opening hours are seasonal; you'll find it on the road perpendicular to the main road, just opposite where the buses drop you off.

You can also check out the **Dacheng Lamo Keri Gompa** at the far end of town from the bus stop. Built in 1413, this monastery is home to about 700 monks who study medicine and astrology in addition to sutras and tantrics. Morning is the best time to find the buildings open.

The 900-year-old **Serchi Gompa** (admission Y16; ☞ irregular) is on a hill opposite the Keri Gompa. Cross the dirt road and follow the smoke up to the monastery.

Keep an eye out for a small **mosque** (清真寺; Qīngzhēn Sì) as you head back to the village. Though locked up when we visited, its exterior is just gorgeous.

### SLEEPING

**Nomad's Hostel** (旅朋青年旅馆; Lǚpéng Qīngnián Lǚguǎn) This backpacker-friendly place is on the main street and is closed in winter.

**Yuèlái Bīnguǎn** (悦来宾馆; ☎ 667 1509; dm/r Y15/50) Down the sidestreet from the intersection where buses stop, this hotel run by a friendly Huí family has simple but tidy rooms year-round; bathrooms are pretty grubby.

**Langmusi Hotel** (朗木寺大酒店; Lǎngmùsì Dàjiùdiàn; ☎ 667 1588; r Y300) At the opposite end of town from the bus stop, this is a lovely new hotel with spotless rooms, friendly staff and two full-time English guides to show guests around. It's open year-round with rates sometimes discounted to Y100 in the low season.

### EATING & DRINKING

The main street is packed with restaurants, especially the intersection where the buses stop. Delicious fresh bread is also served everywhere from stands and street carts.

The places mentioned here are backpacker-oriented joints good for food and info, but closed outside of the high season.

**Shanghai Times Restaurant & Bar** (上海时光; Shànghǎi Shíguāng; ☎ 667 1508; mains Y10-15) This place has an English menu and is right at the crossroads where the buses stop. The kitchen is closed in the low season, but if the lovely owner is around she'll make you a pot of coffee for Y10 and let you hang out anyway.

**Leisha's Restaurant** (丽莎饭馆; Lìshā Fànguǎn; ☎ 667 1179) Nearby on the main drag, Leisha's has been handing out info to backpackers for years – it's one of the best sources of information in town.

**Zàngxiāng Yuán** (藏香园; ☎ 667 1349) At the opposite end of town, this is a bar in a traditional building promising whisky, vodka and cold beer. Its massive wooden outdoor terrace is next to a stream – definitely the nicest outdoor seating in town.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There's daily service to Zōigè (Y12, 1½ hours) and Hézuò (合作; Y28, three hours, 7.30am and 12.30pm) in Gǎnsù province.

From Zōigè, buses leave for Lǎngmùsì daily (Y25, winter/summer 2.30pm/2pm).

## SOUTHERN SICHUĀN

Southern Sichuan has about the quirkiest mix of sites in the whole province, including Gōngxiàn County's hanging coffins, the wackily ornate teahouses and giant dinosaurs of Zigong and the outdoor activities and Yi villages of Xichang.

Improved transport has made these places more popular with Chinese travellers, but they are still relatively unvisited by foreigners and many hotels in this area, including

upscale ones, are terribly shy with their non-Chinese guests.

Altogether, it makes for a fascinating region, worth visiting on its own or taking as a back-door route to Guizhou or Chongqing.

## ZIGONG 自贡

☎ 0813 / pop 693,000

Zigong is a pleasant surprise. On the surface, it's much like any other small-sized but modernising Chinese city. But scratch the surface and you'll find Zigong's geographical situation has left it with a mix of off-beat sights that range from a nationally renowned dinosaur museum to some of the most ornate and dramatic guild halls you'll see in China's Southwest.

Zigong has been important for centuries because of its huge underground salt wells – a mineral refined here for more than 2000 years. As early as the 10th century, boreholes were being drilled thousands of feet into the ground. The salt-laden brine was then brought to the surface, boiled and dried by burning the natural gas that accompanied it.

Salt was a valuable commodity so far from the sea and an important way to both pay and raise taxes. Merchants grew wealthy and decorated the town with halls and temples to protect the source of their wealth.

Today, Zigong remains an important centre of salt production.

### Information

**Bank of China** (Zhongguo Yínháng; Ziyou Lu; ☎ 8am–6pm) Has an ATM and will change cash, but not travellers cheques.

**China Post** (Zhongguo Yóuzhèng; Jiefang Jie) On a pedestrian lane in the centre of town.

**Internet café** (wǎngbā; Ziyou Lu; per hr Y1.50; ☎ 24hr)

### Sights

**ZIGONG DINOSAUR MUSEUM** 自贡恐龙博物馆

This **museum** (Zigong Kǒnglóng Bówùguǎn; ☎ 580 1235; admission Y40; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm) is the pride of Zigong. Don't be put off by the battered building and weathered animatronic dinosaurs lurking in the trees and ponds. Inside, the museum has put together a wicked collection of dinosaur skeletons, bones and fossils and those in the main hall are shown off to great effect against dramatic backdrops.

The superstar of them all is the 20m-long **Omeisaurus**, which once weighed in at 40

tonnes. Scientists say its immense weight and huge neck suggest it spent most of its time in marshy bogs or lakes with just its head poking above the surface.

There are also a number of huge, ancient dino bones that are out for visitors to touch, and a football-field-sized interior **excavation site** with a walkway around its circumference. Flurries of small lights illuminate the mish-mash of bones – tracing the various spines, legs and flippers of the 170-million-year-old animals is fascinating. There are more bones and fossils upstairs along with exhibits on the history of the excavation and museum itself.

Outside on the museum grounds, a new but much smaller excavation site is under way. At the time of research there wasn't a lot to actually see in it, but it was still interesting to peer over the edge and see how the work was coming along.

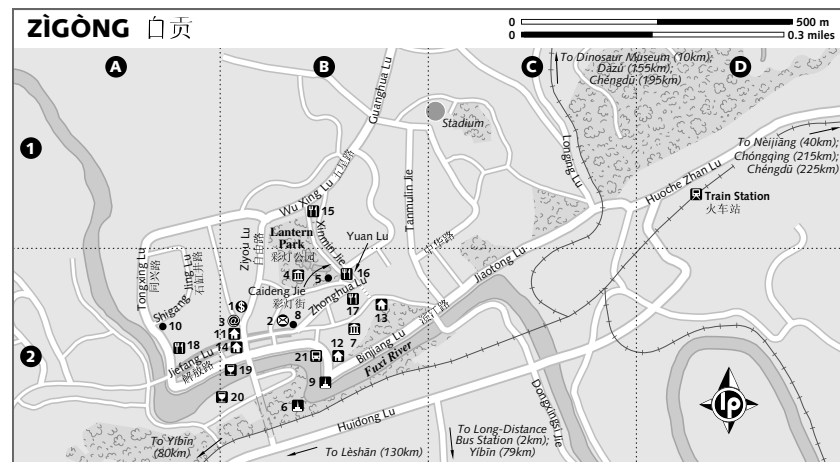
Why so many dinosaur bones in Zigong? Nobody really knows. They started being uncovered in 1972, at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Excavations started in earnest in the Dashanpu suburbs of Zigong, 10km northeast of the town centre. Since then over 100 dinosaurs (*kǒnglóng*; 'terrible dragons' in Chinese) have been found.

Initially, scientists were puzzled as to why so many fossils were concentrated at one site, but it is now believed that the already dead animals were washed here from the surrounding areas during a massive flood. This created a huge jam of dinosaur carcasses, which were then covered by silt and compressed over the millennia.

To get here from town, catch bus 35 (30 to 40 minutes) heading east on Binjiang Lu and ask to be let off at the museum. A taxi here takes 15 minutes and costs around Y18; it will cost Y28 if the driver takes the expressway and charges you the tolls.

### SALT INDUSTRY HISTORY MUSEUM

This **museum** (Zigongshi Yányè Lìshǐ Bówùguǎn; ☎ 220 2083; 89 Dongxing Si; 东兴寺89号; admission Y20; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm) is devoted to the region's salt industry and does a good job of telling the story through terrific historical photos and modest but effective interactive exhibits. It's all housed in an old guild hall, originally built by salt merchants from Shaanxi in 1736 and later used as a Kuomintang hideout. The building has so many swooping angles and



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startlingly jaunty carvings, it's more than worth a visit in and of itself. It was most recently renovated in 1872.

Most of the exhibit areas were closed for renovations at the time of research, but a peek behind the construction curtains revealed some sleek new installations and great English captions going up.

### Walking Tour

The interesting features that make Zigong so much more than just another provincial city are best seen on foot.

Start at the west end of town, where Shigang Jing Lu intersects with Tongxing Lu. **Xiǎoqiáo Jǐng**, one of Zigong's ancient salt wells, is on the corner. Though the well itself is filled in, you can still see the wooden poles and pulleys used to haul the brine up to the surface. Black-and-white photos around the base depict fascinating glimpses of old Zigong, including the salt wells in action and bustling port scenes.

Walk south to Binjiang Lu for a riverside view and a 300m stretch that's packed with dozens of teahouses.

**Wángyē Sì**, on the river near the Shāwān Fàndiàn, is certainly one of the most impressive temples in town; it's now an excellent teahouse with a view across the river to **Fázàng Sì**. Both temples were built to protect the salt trade and to ensure a safe journey for the cargo boats transporting salt downstream.

From here, backtrack past the Shāwān Fàndiàn and take the first right on to Zhonghua Lu, where you will pass a magnificent **teahouse**, so dark and dramatic that it looks out of place amongst the modern nearby buildings.

Continue on along the street until you reach an open paved area, usually packed with all kinds of food stalls, then head uphill along the narrow alley just west of Caideng Jie for a gander through the **Flower & Bird Market**. This area is packed, rain or shine, with elaborate plants and brightly coloured birds. Continue

up the lane and you'll reach the south entrance of **Lantern Park** (Cǎidēng Gōngyuán; admission Y1; ☎ 7am-11pm), a popular family meeting place. It's not the most attractive park but it can be a fascinating place to visit in the weeks leading up to the Lantern Festival, when the grounds turn into a giant workshop and literally every square kilometre of grass and pavement is covered with materials as craftspeople work on floats and other decorations.

The **Colourful Lantern Museum** (Cǎidēng Bówiguǎn), on the western side of the park, was closed at the time of research, but should be open by the time you read this.

### Festivals & Events

Zigong's **Lantern Festival** is renowned throughout China and is held over 40 days during the first and second lunar months (normally starting sometime in February). Everything from small lanterns to huge floats are illuminated throughout the city, especially at Lantern Park (Cǎidēng Gōngyuán).

### Sleeping

**Tiānxiáng Dàjiùdiàn** (☎ 220 9067; 1 Jiefang Lu; 解放路1号; s/d Y60/80) Despite battered, smelly halls, this is a good central budget option with plain, clean rooms – you'll find the best ones on the 5th floor or higher. Cheerful, easygoing staff are another bonus.

**Shāwān Fàndiàn** (☎ 220 8888; fax 220 1168; 3 Binjiang Lu; 滨江路3号; d/Y118-238, ste Y350) This cavernous monster has friendly service and some of the best-value rooms in town. Multicoloured cushions give the rooms a bit of pizzazz, something you don't usually see in this price range. The only caution concerns the bathrooms: some are nursing ferocious rust problems around the drains and pipes. Rooms with a river view are generally around Y20 more expensive than (quieter) digs at the back of the hotel.

**Rongguang Business Hotel** (Róngguāng Shāngwù Jiùdiàn; ☎ 211 7777; 25 Ziyou Lu; 自由路25号; s/d Y288/268) One of the newer operations in town, rooms here are low-key and comfortable and many are bright with natural light. Everything is spic-and-span and bathrooms have modern sinks and toilets. Discounts here can be phenomenal, running as low as Y80 to Y120 in the low season.

**Xiongfei Holiday Hotel** (Xiōngfēi Jiànrì Jiùdiàn; ☎ 211 8888; fax 211 8811; 193 Jiefang Lu; 解放路193号; s & d from Y520; ☎) Reception staff here aren't generally very comfortable with foreigners, but

rooms in this hotel's new business wing are outstanding. Sometimes discounted as low as Y250, most are outfitted with computers and internet access and a breakfast buffet is included in the rate. Just prepare yourself for the long trek from the lobby to the business wing – the route winds through several long corridors and necessitates elevator rides in separate parts of the hotel.

### Eating

Zigong is a great place for street food and quick eats.

Zhonghua Lu is packed with barbecue (*shāokǎo*) and noodle stalls. Brace yourself if buying around lunch time – you'll be battling with dozens of hyper school children to place your order.

The area around Lantern Park is also good to check out. If you're on the hunt for coffee, there's a Western café (Caideng Jie) opening beside the northern entrance that may be worth checking out. Meanwhile, just south of the park there's a flat paved area where dozens of food stalls set up year-round.

If you want something a bit more formal, head to the southern part of Tongxing Lu, where several indoor, sit-down restaurants specialising in Sichuan fare line the eastern side of the street.

### Drinking & Entertainment

If you are looking for something besides karaoke with your beer, there's not a lot in Zigong to recommend. However, teahouses are all over town. Dozens line the edges of the Fuxi River, especially its south bank.

**Wángyē Sì** (Binjiang Lu) A teahouse by day, beer replaces green tea most nights at this former temple. However, the atmosphere is hit or miss. One weekend it may be packed, while the next it doesn't get much more exciting than a few people sitting around playing cards. This place is usually open by 10am at the latest; closing time depends on the crowd.

### Getting There & Away

#### BUS

Zigong's long-distance bus station (长途汽车站; Chángtú Qìchēzhàn) is 2km south of the town centre and has daily services to Chéngdū (Y70, three hours, every 40 to 60 minutes from 7am to 7pm), Chóngqing (Y69, three hours, every 40 to 60 minutes from 6.40am to 6.30pm), Dàzú (Y44, two

hours, 8.30am and 2.50pm), Nèijiāng (Y14, 50 minutes, every 30 minutes from 7.20am to 7pm), Yibin (Y23, one hour, hourly from 7.30am to 7pm), Lèshān (Y35, three hours, 6.10am and 4.45pm) and Ēméi town (Y35, three hours, 6.30am).

#### TRAIN

With those great bus connections, Zigong's train station is fairly quiet. Trains to Yibin depart at 3pm (Y9), 4pm (Y4.50) and 5pm (Y4). To Chéngdū there is a morning train at 10.46am (Y35). A night train bound for Chéngdū passes through at 11.46pm, but you can't reserve sleepers in Zigong. To Chóngqing, the train pulls out at 11am (Y25).

### Getting Around

A taxi between the town centre and long-distance bus station will cost around Y8. Bus 35 goes out to the Dinosaur Museum.

### YIBIN 宜宾

☎ 0831 / pop 244,500

Yibin may be a bland, bustling city but it's the jumping-off point to some of southern China's most exciting day trips and is a convenient transport hub.

Yibin's Min and Jinsha Rivers merge at the eastern end of town to form the Yangzi River, or Cháng Jiāng. The city is known in China for being home to the first port on the Yangzi River.

The city's lost much of its traditional architecture and neighbourhoods to modernisation in recent years. So these days, besides its proximity to some intriguing sights further south, Yibin is mostly known for its liquor distilleries, especially Wuliangye (Five Grain Liquor) and Yishouye.

### Information

**Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; 45 Nan Jie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Credit card advances and cash exchanges here are no problem. Only one employee in the entire bank is trained to handle travellers cheques. If she's sick, has the day off or is on vacation you're out of luck.

**China International Travel Service** (CITS; Zhōngguó Lúxíngshè; ☎ 820 4518; Dongmen; 东门; ☎ 8am-6pm) Located at Yibin's old East Gate, staff here aren't too interested in independent travellers, but a couple of the employees may help you out anyway just for a chance to practise their English.

**China Post** (Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; Nan Jie) South of the bank.  
**China Telecom** (Zhōngguó Diànxìn, Xī Jie) There are also heaps of other places southwest of the traffic circle where you can make long-distance calls.

**Internet café** (wǎngbā; 2nd fl, Minzhu Lu; per hr Y2; ☎ 24hr) Best place in town; bright and clean with fast connections and comfy chairs.

**Public Security Bureau** (PSB; Gōngānjú; ☎ emergency 110; lane off Minzhu Lu)

### Sights & Activities

As it lurches towards modernisation, Yibin's interesting back streets and traditional wooden architecture have all but disappeared. There's not much of interest in the city itself these days.

The geographical centre of town is the elaborate **Grand Viewing Pavilion** (Dàguān Lóu), with roads leading off in all four directions.

North of here is the **Zhōnggǔ Lóu**, an old bell and clock tower. After its construction in 1932, the city stopped banging drums to indicate the time.

The **East Gate** (Dōng Mén), along the Min River (Mín Hé), is the last remaining example of the traditional city gates. It and the area around it have been heavily renovated and landscaped and are now known as **Shuǐ Dōngmén Guǎngchǎng**. There's also a **teahouse** (*cháguǎn*) on the grounds here for those who want to linger. Across from here a walkway has been built along the edge of the river, which you can follow, reaching another renovated square and eventually the Jinsha River (Jinshā Jiāng).

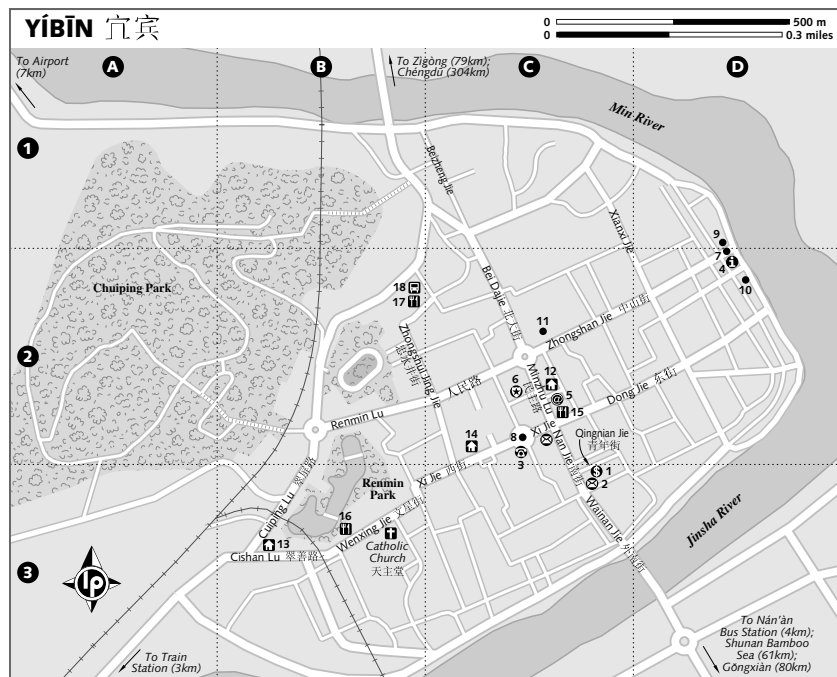
On the other edge of town is **Chuiqing Park** (Chuīqīng Gōngyuán), where a less-than-beautiful concrete pagoda gives good views of the city below.

### Sleeping

Yibin has a big choice of midrange and top-end hotels, but there are not a lot of budget places to recommend – surprising for a city of this size.

**Jingmao Hotel** (Jīngmào Bīnguǎn; ☎ 701 0888; fax 701 0800; 108 Minzhu Lu; 民主路108号; d Y120) Foreigners send the staff here into near hysterics, so a little Chinese or a phrasebook would be helpful. Once you've got that out of the way, the rooms, though bland and off some terribly dark and neglected halls, are pretty good for this price range.

**Jinyuàn Bīnguǎn** (☎ 822 5634; Cishan Lu; 慈善路; s & d Y258) You'll get a warm welcome here as



INFORMATION		SLEEPING		EATING	
Bank of China 中国银行	1 C3	Shuidongmen Guangchang 水东门广场	9 D1	Cite Coffee 西堤岛咖啡	15 C2
China Post 中国邮政	2 C3	Zhonggulou 钟鼓楼	10 D2	Dumpling Stalls & Bakeries 小吃面包房	16 B3
China Telecom 中国电信	3 C2	CITS 中国旅行社	4 D2	Restaurants 饭店	17 B2
Internet Café 网吧	5 C2	PSB 公安局	6 C2		
		SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		RESTAURANTS	
		Jingmao Hotel 经贸宾馆	12 C2	Beimen Bus Station 北门汽车站	18 B2
		Jinyuan Binguan 金苑宾馆	13 B3		
		Yibin Grand Hotel 宜宾大酒店	14 C2		
		Grand Viewing Pavilion 大观楼	8 C2		

staff are comfortable with foreigners, distinguishing this hotel from a lot of other places in town. The halls can be quite battered, but the rooms, though sometimes on the small side, are clean and tidy. Discounts are as low as Y130 in off-season periods.

**Yibin Grand Hotel** (Yibin Dajūdiàn; ☎ 818 6666; fax 818 6699; 20 Xi Jie; 西街20号; s Y580, d Y418-580; 25) Staff can be pretty shy with foreigners, but the bland rooms are quite comfortable and a good buffet breakfast is included in the room rate. The only quibble some may have with this place is the muzak: it's not only blasted into halls, but seems funnelled into some of the rooms as well. Bring earplugs – they might be

the only thing between you and 'Jingle Bells' (the string version, what's more).

### Eating & Drinking

The streets of Yibin are lined with countless stalls dishing up snacks and fast food from dawn until dusk.

Zhongshui Jing Jie, the road leading up to Beimen bus station, is the best place to hit for noodles – restaurants here have everything from chilli-infused Chinese to coriander-sprinkled Muslim varieties. For dumpling stalls and bakeries head to Wenxiang Jie.

If you are looking for decent coffee, Minzhu Lu just north of Dong Jie seems to have noth-

ing but Western-style cafés, many of which double as bars at night. **Cite Coffee** (Xitidao Kafei; ☎ 898 1666; 18 Minzhu Lu; 民主路18号; mains from Y16; ☎ 9am-2am) has the nicest atmosphere.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Yibin airport, 7km northwest of town, has flights to Künming (Y510, one hour, two daily, usually evenings), Běijīng (Y1400, two hours 35 minutes, daily), Guǎngzhōu (Y1130, one hour 50 minutes, daily) and Shànghǎi (Y1500, two hours 10 minutes, Monday, Friday and Sunday). At the moment, there are no flights to Chéngdū, Guǐyáng, Chóngqīng or Xīchāng.

#### BUS

Yibin has three bus stations – Nán'àn, Beimen and Ximen – though only the former two are likely to be of interest to travellers.

From the Beimen station, there's daily service to Chéngdū (Y97, four hours, every 20 to 50 minutes from 7am to 6pm), Chóngqīng (Y81 to Y95, four hours, every 30 to 50 minutes from 6.45am to 6pm), Lèshān (Y57, four hours, 8.40am) and Zīgòng (Y23, 50 minutes, 7am to 7pm). There are also daily buses for Lúzhōu (泸州; Y27, every 30 to 40 minutes from 7am to 5pm), from where you can continue on to Chishuǐ in Guizhōu province. There are no buses heading southwest to either Xīchāng or Künming.

If going to the Hanging Coffins, the Nán'àn station (南岸汽车站) has buses to Luòbiǎo (Y30, three to four hours, 2pm) and Gōngxiàn (Y16, two to three hours, every 30 minutes from 6.20am to 7pm). If travelling to the Bamboo Sea, it also has buses to Chángning (Y11.50, one hour, every 20 minutes from 6.30am to 7pm) and Wǎnlǐng (Y4.50, 20 to 30 minutes, every 20 to 30 minutes from 7am to 5.40pm).

#### TRAIN

Yibin's train station is 3km south of the town centre.

There is an early morning train to Chóngqīng (Y34, nine hours) departing at 6am, as well as an overnight sleeper at 9.22pm (Y74). To Chéngdū there is a slow train leaving at 9.08am (Y28) or a faster one at 10pm (Y47). Two departures a day stop at Zīgòng, the faster one at 9.08am (Y12); however, it's much faster to take a minibus.

### AROUND YIBIN Shunan Bamboo Sea 蜀南竹海

This park (Shúnán Zhúhǎi; admission Y63; ☎ ticket office 8am-5.30pm) was made out of one of the largest swaths of bamboo forest in China's Southwest and covers a terrain of 120 sq km.

The scenery, spread out over crumpled hills and modest valleys, is remarkable, with swaying tufts of bamboo bobbing near waterfalls and pools of inky black water. This one-of-a-kind scenery is a major draw for movie and TV directors and many period films and miniseries have been filmed here.

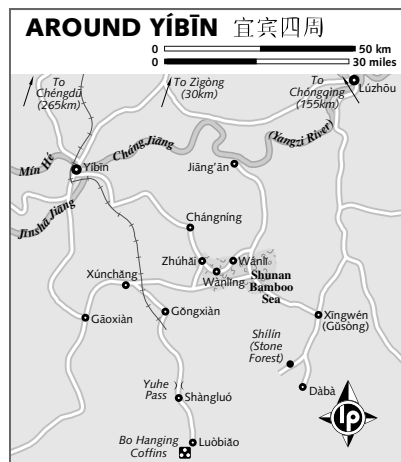
Some 30 types of bamboo are found throughout the park, including Nan, Mao, Golden, Fishpole, Turtleback and Flower Bamboo, all of which have been used to produce everything the local people have needed over the centuries, from needles to furniture to paper to jewellery.

The scenic area was created by cordoning off this bamboo-rich part of the countryside, 61km south of Yibin. Though it's called a park, it's almost indistinguishable from other parts of the nearby region except that it has been developed for tourism. For the villagers inside the park, life goes on as usual and you'll see locals everywhere, cutting down bamboo stocks, carrying bamboo bundles on their shoulders and whittling away at it on the side of the roads. Bamboo carvings, dishes or other souvenirs are sold at almost every shop in the area.

The park continues to be developed, and more hotels and shops are added each year. Despite this, the Bamboo Sea still isn't very tourist-friendly for individual travellers, as transportation can be awkward.

Distances between the sights are significant and if you haven't come with a hired car it can be time-consuming to get around. In the high season there are usually private motorcycles and taxis hovering at the entrance so you can negotiate transport. On colder days or slow months, you are likely to be on your own. You can flag down public buses that go from village to village, but this doesn't give you very much flexibility if you want to see some of the more off-the-beaten-track sights.

So, despite having to deal with lots of boisterous tour groups, the high-season summer months are probably the best time to visit – at least the group travellers ensure that hotels and restaurants are open and there's a better



chance of flagging down rides from one place to another.

The low season is still doable – you'll have the place pretty much to yourself – but it can be a challenge even for the most independent-minded travellers. Many hotels and restaurants are closed, fog devours some of the most picturesque views and constantly hustling for infrequent (and at times very expensive – the drivers know you have no other choice) transportation can be a drain.

Whatever time you visit, the bamboo forest is probably best enjoyed as a one- or two-night trip if you are coming by public transport, though it could certainly be done as a day trip from Yibin at a push.

## SIGHTS

The ticket gate for the Bamboo Sea is at the western edge of the park. Buses will let you off to buy your ticket before continuing on to Wanling village (万岭) where you get off. However, if you see motorcycles or taxis at the entrance, you can negotiate with them instead of continuing on with the bus.

Though some of the sights listed here had posted admission fees of Y5 to Y15 on top of the park entry fee, at the time of research, there was no-one around collecting them from visitors.

In Wanling, you can check out the **Bamboo Museum** (竹海博物馆; Zhuhai Bówùguǎn; ☎ 820 5146, 498 0561; admission free; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm). It's a creaky drafty place, but the 1st floor has some wonderful displays of bamboo weap-

ons and the 2nd floor has bamboo clothes, carvings and furniture. Continue south to the waterfalls of **Forgetting Worries Valley** (忘忧谷; Wàngyōu Gǔ) or turn left for the inky pools of **Black Brook Valley** (黑溪; Hēixī) and a rusty old **cable car** (one way/return Y30/40; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm high season, closed low season), which gives you a worthwhile bird's-eye view of the forest, its pools and waterfalls.

At the top of the cable car is **Looking at the Sea Pavilion** (观海楼; Guānhǎi Lóu), which gives a view down onto the billowing canopy of wispy bamboo heads that give the Bamboo Sea its name. A short walk away is **Jadeite Corridor** (翡翠长廊; Fěicuī Chánglǎng), a red-dirt road cutting through towering 20m-high bamboo – a scene captured on everything from bus station walls to baseball caps.

If you're looking for some exercise and fresh air, a longer hiking trail ascends between Wanling village and **Lóngning Si** (龙吟寺), from where you can meet up with the road and carry on to Jadeite Corridor or continue southeast to **Fairy Cave** (仙寓洞; Xiānyù Dòng) or get transport further afield to **Tiānhuáng Si** (天皇寺).

From Jadeite Corridor you can head back down to Wanling by the cable car or along the southern paved road. While this road does offer a few nice views, you aren't going to see a lot more than pavement and bamboo trunks, so you might consider making this 8km trek by flagging down transportation if you don't have any already.

## SLEEPING

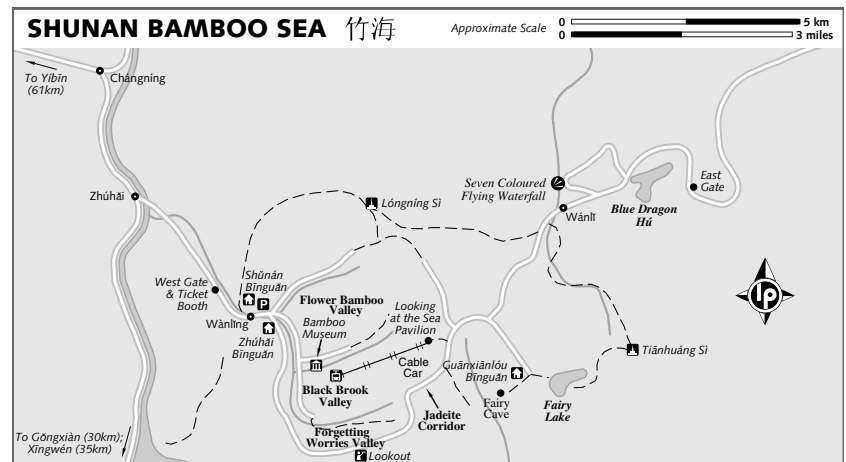
Hotels in the park are not necessarily open year-round. If you're visiting in the off season, it's a good idea to call ahead, and, if coming in winter, ask if the heat and electricity will be turned on.

New hotels seem to be under construction all over the place, usually around the car parks.

**Zhuhai Binguǎn** (Bamboo Sea Hotel; 竹海宾馆; ☎ 498 0000; d from Y170) Overlooking Wanling, this weathered hotel is conveniently located and in a beautiful setting.

**Shúnán Binguǎn** (蜀南宾馆; ☎ 498 0555; d Y228) For something more upscale, try this place on the opposite side of town.

**Guānxiānlóu Binguǎn** (观仙楼宾馆; ☎ 497 0162; r Y280–360) If you want to stay deeper in the park, this hotel is near the Fairy Cave in the park's southeast.



## EATING

Finding something to eat here is no problem – food stalls and simple restaurants are everywhere. There are a number of restaurants around the car park in Wanling, as well as across from the Zhuhai Binguǎn and near Looking at the Sea Pavilion.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Yibin's Nan'an station, take a bus to Changning (Y11.50, one hour, every 20 minutes from 6.30am to 7pm), then on to Wanling (Y4.50, 20 to 30 minutes, every 20 to 30 minutes from 7am to 5.40pm), the biggest village inside the Bamboo Sea perimeter.

You may see a posting for a direct bus to the Bamboo Sea from Yibin (2.30pm). Not only is this bus service frequently suspended, but it actually only goes to Zhuhai (Bamboo) village – several kilometres from the Bamboo Sea's ticket booth and entrance.

Buses back to Changning leave Wanling until at least 5pm. Buses from Changning back to Yibin run until at least 6pm.

## Bo Hanging Coffins 悬棺

It's a hell of a slog to get here, but the so-called **hanging coffins** (xuánguān; ☎ 401 1002; admission Y20; ☎ 8am–7pm) are one of the more original sites in Sichuan and will definitely appeal to travellers looking for something a little offbeat.

Hundreds of wooden coffins were placed in caves and precariously balanced on wooden stakes in the cliffsides of the Deying Valley. Anywhere from 10m to 130m above ground,

the coffins are attributed to the ancient Bo people. The oldest coffins date back roughly 1000 years, while the most recent addition was put there only about 400 years ago.

While small numbers of hanging coffins are found in Yunnan province and other parts of China's Southwest, the largest number and best preserved coffins are here. Once, there were almost 300 of them, though at least one coffin plummets to the ground every 18 months, decreasing their number over the last two decades. Conservationists are working to stabilise the coffins, hoping to preserve the remaining ones.

Nobody really knows why the coffins were put in the cliffs, how they got the coffins up there in the first place or what happened to the Bo people who have since disappeared (see the boxed text, p430). The mystery just adds to the enigma of the place.

While you can see a few of the coffins on a cliff before the entrance gate (ie without buying a ticket), once inside there are a greater number of coffins and stairs that allow you to climb up on the cliff faces for a better look.

You can also check out the small **museum** just inside the grounds near the ticket office. There are some interesting pictures, a skeleton and a couple of coffins you can inspect up close – no English captions though.

There's not much else to do at the site once you've gawked at the coffins, but they do pack enough of a punch to make the trip worth it. You could do some nice walks in the surrounding valley if you wanted to linger.

**WHO WERE THE BO?**

Though some people believe the Tujia people of northeastern Guizhōu may be distant relatives, the Bo, their origins and their eventual evaporation from history continue to baffle archaeologists.

Though the Bo are mentioned in some ancient Chinese texts, it is only briefly. Most of what scientists can glean of their customs and habits has been because of the coffins. Objects discovered in the hanging coffins indicate the Bo were good horsemen with a sharp social divide.

All adult skeletons examined were also discovered to have had their teeth removed while alive, suggesting the Bo deliberately knocked out their own teeth for religious or decorative purposes.

Some see the hanging coffins as the Bo's attempt to help their deceased's spirits towards the heavens, as evidenced by one man buried with 29 shirts and 13 trousers, apparent preparation for a long journey.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Yibin's Nán'ān bus station has at times had direct service to the coffins, but it was not running at the time of research. Most people get to the coffins from Yibin via Gōngxiàn (珙县; Y16, two to three hours, every 30 minutes from 6.20am to 7pm). From Gōngxiàn take another bus south over the Yuhe Pass to Luòbiāo (洛表; Y13, 2½ hours, every 50 minutes).

The coffins are a further 3km walk south of Luòbiāo. The bus will drop you at a fork in the road; head down the road on the right.

Buses return hourly to Gōngxiàn between 6am and 5pm. From there, you can get buses back to Yibin until 6.40pm.

The coffins are not easily visited as a day trip. It takes three hours just to get here if you hire a car (Y300 to Y400), and up to five hours by bus – it's doable, but you must leave early.

Whether you come by bus or car, the way here, especially between Xūnchǎng (巡场) and Luòbiāo, will take you through some of the ugliest and most heartbreakingly polluted towns and villages you're likely to see in Sichuān. Also, road conditions in some places are horrible, especially between Gōngxiàn and Luòbiāo.

**Stone Forest 石海**

Xīngwén's Stone Forest (Shíhǎi Dòngxiāng) is an increasingly popular sight and if you've hired a car, a visit here is a nice add-on to a Bamboo Sea trip. By bus it can be done as a day trip from Yibin.

As recently as a few years ago, this could almost have been considered an off-the-beaten-path sight; few people made it out here. Improved roads and tourist develop-

ment in the region, however, mean Chinese tour buses have discovered this place and some of the caves and sights can be crowded and noisy in summer.

Outside of the high-season summer months, this place retains some of its rugged, untouched feel. It has some impressive caves and there can be a real primeval feel about the place, though, like the Bamboo Sea, during off-peak periods, it can at times feel almost too deserted.

The big draw here is **Big Funnel Cave** (admission Y50; ☎ 8am-6pm), an enormous cave with dramatic lighting and limestone formations. Coming out of the cave at the other side there are a few restaurants and souvenir shops, but they will likely be closed outside of the peak season.

There are also plenty of other stone formations outside. The routes are marked with English signs.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Shílín (石林) village and the Stone Forest can be reached via Xīngwén. To reach Xīngwén (also known as Gūsòng), take a bus from Yibin (Y19.50, three hours, every 90 minutes from 7am to 6pm). You can also reach Xīngwén from Xūnchǎng (Y13, two hours).

From Xīngwén, buses run hourly from the west bus station to Shílín village (Y8, 30 to 40 minutes), 21km away. Be sure to ask for the village itself or you'll be dropped at the entrance to the cave. From Shílín, buses run hourly(ish) back to Xīngwén. Catch them at the crossroads leading into the village.

Xīngwén bus station has regular services to Yibin and Xūnchǎng until about 5pm.

If heading from Xīngwén on to Chishuǐ in northern Guizhōu, you can get a bus to

Lúzhōu (Y27, three hours) and buy your onward ticket to Chishuǐ, some 2½ hours east.

**XĪCHĀNG 西昌**

☎ 0834 / pop 129,200

Squirrelled away in Sichuān's south, Xīchāng is a terrific little city – clean, laid-back and one of the most welcoming places in the entire province. It's the capital of the Liángshān (Cool Mountains) Yi Autonomous Prefecture so there's great possibility for off-the-beaten-path exploration of the region's Yi villages and surrounding countryside.

Xīchāng is also a great jumping-off point for the back-door route into Yúnnán.

Little of the town's traditional character remains. New construction has left little other than forgettable modern buildings thrown up around vast, soulless boulevards.

For a little more character, you'll have to head up to the northeast of town where there's still some traditional architecture and a mix of Han, Yi and Huí people buying and selling at small markets.

Xīchāng is also home to China's major satellite launching operation – which is why you'll see more space-related statues and souvenirs than usual.

On the edge of town is the large Qióngǎi Hú, where you can watch the fishermen. There is also a big torch festival here in July.

Mild weather makes the city pleasant to visit year-round, even in the winter months.

**Information**

**Bank of China** (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Sanchakou Lu)

Changes travellers cheques and cash Monday to Friday from 8.30am to noon and 2pm to 6pm.

**China Post** (Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; 45 Chang'an Donglu)

Centrally located next to Yóudián Bīnguān.

**Internet café** (wǎngbā; Longyanjing Jie; per hr Y2;

☎ 24hr) Head down the lane off Longyanjing Jie. The computers are up the external stairs on the 2nd floor.

**Public Security Bureau** (PSB; Gōngānjú; ☎ emergency 110; lane off Shita Jie)

**Tourist Information Booth** (Lǚxīng Zīxún Fúwù

Zhōngxīn; ☎ 323 0166; Yuecheng Sq; ☎ 8am-8pm) No English is spoken here but this little booth is still the best source of travel information. It has a touch-screen station with heaps of info about sights, accommodation and transportation, with an 'in English' option.

**Xīchāng International Travel Service** (XITS; Xīchāng Lǚxīng Shè; ☎ 610 3155) Down a long, narrow lane off Shengli Nanlu, Yi Duan, this place can arrange tours of the Satellite Launching Centre. However, the office is irregu-

larly staffed. If you are lucky, one of the neighbours may offer to phone an employee for you.

**Sights**

The **old quarter** (古城; *gǔchéng*) in the north-east is the most atmospheric part of the city. Centred on the south gate of the old walled city, streets here are often overflowing with Yi traders selling vegetables and medicines. Check out the riverside **market** along Shunhe Lu, then stroll along Nan Jie, a narrow street of rickety old wooden buildings clogged with locals.

**Shangye Buxing Jie** situated nearby is a packed pedestrian-only street of three- and four-storey buildings housing everything from fast-food restaurants to clothing and shoe stores.

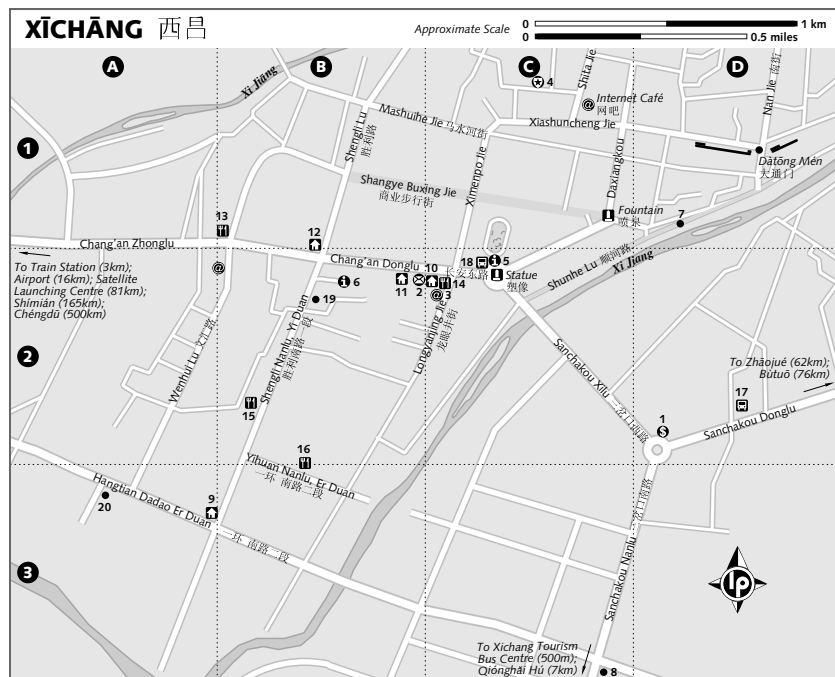
**Torch Square** (Huóbǎ Guangchǎng) in the south of town is also worth a visit. One of the biggest urban projects is going on here, with a huge cultural and arts centre being built along with an outdoor amphitheatre. Still under construction at the time of research, the cultural centre, a sloping grey building with all kinds of odd angles and slashes of red, is shaping up to be a pretty stunning piece of architecture. Locals flock here on weekends to walk and check out the progress.

**Qióngǎi Hú** (邛海湖; Qionghai Lake), dotted with villages and parks and surrounded by temples, is the area's most popular site. About 7km from town, bus 22 (Y1) goes directly to the lake. You can spend the whole day just hopping on and off the bus wherever it looks like it might be interesting to explore.

Fishing boats dot the lake year-round and seafood is the local speciality. You'll see people frying up fresh catches at stalls in most of the area's villages. The BBQ fish at **Xiǎo Yúcūn village** (小渔村) has a particularly good reputation.

You can also take boats from one side of the lake to the other – though you may not find anyone around during low-season months. Prices depend on the type of boat and how many people there are, but figure Y15 to Y20 per person for 30 minutes as a starting point. Windsurfing equipment is also available for rent during summer.

The Buddhist and Taoist complex of **Lú Shān** rises from the western shore of the lake. The majority of the eight temples were razed during the Cultural Revolution, however, a walk up the hill takes you past 2000-year-old



INFORMATION	
Bank of China 中国银行	1 D2
China Post & Telecom 中国邮政&中国电信	2 B2
Internet Café 网吧	3 C2
PSB 公安局	4 C1
Tourist Information Booth 旅行咨询服务中心	5 C2
XITS 西昌旅行社	6 B2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Market 市场	7 D1
Torch Square 火把广场	8 C3
SLEEPING	
Conily Inn 凯丽莱酒店	9 A3
Wumào Bīnguǎn 物资宾馆	10 C2
Yóudiàn Bīnguǎn 邮电宾馆	11 B2
Yuedu Holiday Hotel 月都假日酒店	12 B1
EATING	
Bakery 面包房	13 B1
Good Wood Café 咖啡馆西餐	14 C2
JiaJia Supermarket 家佳超市	15 B2
Restaurants 饭馆	16 B2
TRANSPORT	
East Bus Station 客运东站	17 D2
No 6 Buses to Train Station 6路汽车到火车站	18 C2
Plane Ticket Office 航空售票处	19 B2
Train Ticket Office 火车票售票处	20 A3

cypress trees that date from the Han dynasty, offering excellent views of the lake and surrounding mountains.

About 15 minutes' walk up Lú Shān lies the **Liángshān Yì Minority Slave Museum** (凉山彝族奴隶社会博物馆; Liángshān Yìzú Nǚlǐ Shèhuì Bówùguǎn; admission Y30; ☎ 8am-5pm). Captions are in Chinese only, but the collection of weapons, black-and-white photos and detailed local maps are still interesting.

To reach Lú Shān and the museum, take bus 22; the ride takes about 20 minutes. Once you get off, continue walking southeast and take the second small road uphill on the right. This will take you to the bottom of the stairs

leading up the hill. The museum will be on your right.

### Sleeping

Xichang is drowning in midrange and top-end hotels. There's not a lot of great new budget choices but a couple of old standards are still very good.

**Wumào Bīnguǎn** (☎ 322 3186; 13 Chang'an Donglu; 长安东路13号; s & d Y50-80) By far the best budget place in town, the halls here are as cold and clinical as a mental asylum's, but the simple rooms are clean and neat as a pin. Add Y10 if you want one with air-conditioning. The rooms are vastly different in size, decoration

and type of toilet (ie squat or Western), but the price difference is often due to something simple such as the newness of the furniture or thickness of the blankets.

**Yóudiàn Bīnguǎn** (☎ 322 3312; 57 Chang'an Zhonglu; 长安中路57号; s/d Y120/90) Once you get past the somnolent staff and decrepit halls, the rooms here are actually quite nice – clean with big, albeit dark, bathrooms. It also doesn't use the cloying, sickly smelling, pseudo-lemon-scented air freshener that's seemingly *de rigueur* at most other hotels in town.

**Yuedu Holiday Hotel** (Yuèdù Jiànrì Jiùdiàn; ☎ 323 4888; 14 Chang'an Lu; 长安路14号; s/d incl breakfast Y300/228) Centrally located, this hotel has a terrific, friendly staff. Though slightly old-fashioned, rooms are in tiptop shape and there's little substantial difference between them and rooms at other hotels in town costing double and triple the price.

**Conily Inn** (Kǎilǐlái Jiùdiàn; ☎ 320 0888; 88 Shengli Nanlu; 胜利南路88号; d incl breakfast Y388-568) This four-star league hotel has the best reputation in town. Though none of the staff speaks English, they're all terrific, from the cleaners to the desk staff. Rooms are clean and comfortable across the board and the difference between the cheap and more expensive doubles is negligible. The only turn-off is the cockroach traps in some rooms.

### Eating

A local speciality is *qìguō* (汽锅), an earthenware pot that has its soupy contents heated up by steam through a hole in the middle. Restaurants all over town serve *qìguō*; try the northern end of Shengli Nanlu. Another local treat is steamed oat bread made by Yi people and sold on the roadside in the mornings.

For a more fussy eating experience, try one of the restaurants on Yihuan Nanlu, Er Duan (you'll have no problem spotting them – hosts will be outside dressed up in Yi garb).

**Good Wood Café** (Kǎifēiguǎn Xīcān; ☎ 888 8099; Longyanjing Jie; 龙眼井街; mains Y22-38; ☎ 9am-2am) This café has an English menu, but the food (whether Chinese or Western) isn't that great (chocolate sundaes come festooned with Pringles potato chips, for example). But the atmosphere is cosy, the chairs plush and it's a good stop for coffee or a beer.

The **JiaJia Supermarket** (Shengli Donglu; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) is a great place to pick up food for day trips and long bus rides. There's also a good **bakery** (☎ 9am-7pm) on Wenhui Lu.

### Shopping

If your dream is to own a model 'Long March' rocket or a 'The East is Red' satellite, you've definitely come to the right place. There are quite a few shops flogging such space-themed souvenirs alongside bottles of Pepsi-Cola or sacks of sunflower seeds.

Also keep your eyes open for Yi wares – red, yellow and black lacquered bowls and dishes, long pipes and embroidered clothing – though you will find a better selection for better prices at one of the region's surrounding villages or at shops along Qióngzhài Hú.

### Getting There & Away

Xichang has become increasingly well connected to the rest of Sichuan as well as Yunnan in recent years. However, it is still a good idea to buy your onward ticket as soon as possible if you are on a tight schedule.

It's not uncommon for economy seats on flights to be sold out one to two days in advance.

There are no direct train, bus or flight services heading northeast of here to Yibin or Zigong.

### AIR

Monday to Friday, there are four flights daily from Chengdū to Xichang (Y340 to Y460, one hour, 7.20am and 8.40am; Y480 to Y570, noon and 3.50pm). On Saturday and Sunday only the afternoon flights are offered.

From Xichang to Chengdū, flights leave at 9.05am, 10am, 5.10pm and 6pm, Monday to Friday. Saturday and Sunday flights leave at 1.40pm and 5.35pm. Flights out of Xichang are not usually discounted and run between Y480 and Y570.

You can buy tickets at the **plane ticket office** (Hángkōng Shòupàoqiū; ☎ 888 8777; Shengli Nanlu Yi Duan; ☎ 8am-8pm) downtown.

The airport is 16km north of town. A free shuttle bus meets incoming flights and will let you off wherever you want downtown. It takes 15 to 20 minutes to get into town.

A metered taxi from the airport to town costs around Y35, but taxi drivers may hit you up for Y50.

### BUS

There are several bus stations in town. Xichang's modern and gleaming Tourism Bus Centre (Xichang Qichē Lǚyóu Kèyùn Zhōngxīn) on Sanchakou Nanlu is the main



**YI SLAVE SOCIETY**

Each Yi clan belongs to a different caste, which up until the 1950s was the basis of a slave society.

The Black Yi, the aristocrats and landowners, made up 7% of the population and owned 80% of the land. The White Yi made up around 50% of the population and had no freedom of movement. A Black Yi who committed murder could offer a White Yi as compensation to the family of the deceased. The White Yi also had to offer a fixed amount of time each year working in the Black Yi's fields. The lowest of the two classes, the Ajia (33%) and Gaxi (10%), were freely bought and sold as slaves and had no rights.

The Yi were famous for their slave-raiding trips into Han territory. Han traders only dared enter the Liángshān Shān under the protection of a local chief. During the Nationalist era, several powerful Sichuān warlords were of Yi descent. Slave society existed in the Liángshān region until 1959, when the communists forced the transition to a socialist society.

hub and of most use to travellers. There's a daily bus to Chéngdū (Y123, 8.30am), but delays caused by ongoing roadwork means this trip will take a minimum of 12 hours (up from a mere eight). Most people are just taking the train these days. There's also daily service to Lúgū Hú in Yúnnán (Y68, seven to eight hours, 9am – make sure you don't buy a ticket for Sichuān's Lúgū village by mistake!), Pānzhihūa (Y40, six hours, 11am), Pūgé (Y17 to Y26, two hours, every 40 minutes from 7am to 5.40pm) and Kāngdìng (Y88, 6am – nobody seems to know how long this trip takes). There's also a daily sleeper bus for Kūnmíng (Y122, 12 hours, 2pm).

Head to the dark, rickety **East Bus Station** (Kèyùn Dōngzhàn; Sanchakou Donglu) for daily service to Mùlǐ (Y59, eight hours, 7.40am, 8.20am and 9am), Bùtuō (Y21, four to five hours, every 20 minutes from 6.30am to 5pm) and Zhāojié (Y24, two to three hours, every 30 to 40 minutes from 7am to 4.45pm). It can get chaotic here around departure times, with dozens of villagers clamouring for the same tickets.

**TRAIN**

Xīchāng's train station is a few kilometres west of town (reachable on bus 6), but there's a useful ticket office on Hangtian Dadao Er Duan.

Roadwork between here and Chéngdū means people are abandoning buses for train travel, so hard-sleeper reservations are even more difficult to come by than usual.

There's one train a day to Jiājīāng (for Lèshān; Y100, seven hours) and Chéngdū (Y180, 11 hours), leaving at 3.14am and 11.21pm respectively. There is another train that continues north all the way to Xī'an

(Y300), departing daily at noon. A notoriously crowded train to Kūnmíng passes through town at 9.50pm (Y120).

**AROUND XICHANG  
Satellite Launching Centre  
卫星发射中心**

China's major **satellite rocket launching centre** (*wèixīng fāshè zhōngxīn*) is one of South-west China's more offbeat sites. Located in the Shaba Valley 65km north of Xīchāng, the centre now acts as a commercial venture and has launched several countries' satellites on the back of its Long March rockets.

China's own satellites come under the wonderfully named 'The East is Red' satellite system. The country launched its first satellites during the Cultural Revolution; the first thing it did was broadcast the speeches of Chairman Mao around the world.

Unfortunately, the rockets have had a nasty habit of plummeting back down to earth onto unsuspecting villages. It is believed that there have been several major accidents in the area resulting in a considerable (four-figure) loss of life.

Remarkably enough, Chinese tour groups still regularly visit the launch centre, though foreigners require a special permit to join them. Tourists can visit the control centre, launch pads and the small onsite museum before grabbing a bite to eat in the space canteen. In Xīchāng, the XITS (p431) can arrange tours for around Y118.

XITS will also assist you in applying for your permit, done through the local military rather than the PSB; unfortunately, this can take up to two weeks. Whether you actually get the permit is hit and miss, but it's certainly

worth a try. You definitely won't get one if there are any launches imminent or if there have been any recent catastrophes.

The XITS sometimes keeps irregular hours. Contact them well in advance if you are interested in visiting the site so they know to expect you and so you can fax a photo of your passport ahead of time. If you can't get a hold of them, call or go to the Xichang Tourist Booth (p431), where someone might know if any other agency in town has started issuing permits.

**Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture  
凉山彝族自治州**

If you're interested in exploring Yi territory beyond the metropolis of Xīchāng, head out to one of the smaller towns or villages in the area that make up the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (Liángshān Yízú Zìzhìzhōu).

**Pūgé** (普格), a busy market town populated almost entirely by traditionally dressed Yi, makes a terrific day trip from town. The bus journey to Pūgé passes through some beautiful scenery and tiny Yi villages where you can hop off for an hour or two until the next bus from Xīchāng passes by.

Buses for Pūgé (Y17 to Y26, two hours, every 40 minutes from 7am to 5.40pm) leave from Xīchāng's Tourism Bus Centre; the last bus returns from Pūgé at 5pm.

Other Yi towns in the region include **Bùtuō** (布拖), famous for having perhaps the largest torch festival, and **Zhāojié** (昭觉), which has the highest percentage of Yi in its population. You can reach both towns by bus from Xīchāng (see p433).

If you are headed up to Kāngdìng you will also see many remote Yi villages around

**Tuōwū**. It's possible for die-hard explorers to visit more remote Yi towns by heading overland to Lèshān and stopping in Zhāojié.

**Luóji Shān 螺髻山**

Also in this region is Luóji Shān, a 4358m-high mountain named for its resemblance to a spiral snail shell. With hot springs, waterfalls and glacial lakes, Luóji Shān has become a popular spot for local tourism.

The climb to the top, however, is not as popular, although the steep ascent to the summit is estimated to take only three or four hours. The forested range in which Luóji Shān is situated offers further opportunities for exploration. Places to head for are **Five Colour Lake** (Wūsè Hú) and **Big Lake** (Dà Hǎizi). April and May are usually the best times for hiking. You need to bring your own camping equipment, all food supplies and a good map of the area. For more information drop into Xīchāng's Tourist Information Booth (p431).

Buses for the mountain leave from Xīchāng's Tourism Bus Station.

**Mùlǐ 木里**

Mùlǐ is a remote Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture set deep in the 4500m-high Taiyang Mountain Range, or 'Mountains of the Sun', 245km west of Xīchāng. The region has several Tibetan monasteries, including the Mùlǐ Dási, and backs into the three holy peaks of the Yading Nature Reserve.

You can get a bus to Mùlǐ from Xīchāng's East Bus Station (Y59, eight hours, 7.40am, 8.20am and 9am). You could combine a visit to Mùlǐ with a trip to Lúgū Hú in Yúnnán and then continue on to Lijiang.

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