

Trekking

Towns, dzongs and temples are one aspect of Bhutan, but the majority of the country is deep forests with a scattering of tiny settlements and high grazing lands. A trek provides the best opportunity to experience the real heart of Bhutan and to get insight into the rural culture of the kingdom through contact with people in remote villages and the staff accompanying you.

Many places feel so remote that you can imagine you are the first person ever to visit. As you sit contemplating this, read about the invading armies or royal processions that preceded you decades – or centuries – ago and you will be amazed at what these people accomplished.

TREKKING IN BHUTAN

Government rules dictate that all treks must be arranged as camping trips. This also happens to be the only practical solution because there are few villages in the high country and no lodges or hotels in the hills.

A Bhutanese crew treks with you to set up camp, cook and serve meals. You carry a backpack with only a water bottle, camera and jacket. The rules specify that a licensed guide accompany all trekkers, but there is still a very limited number of guides who

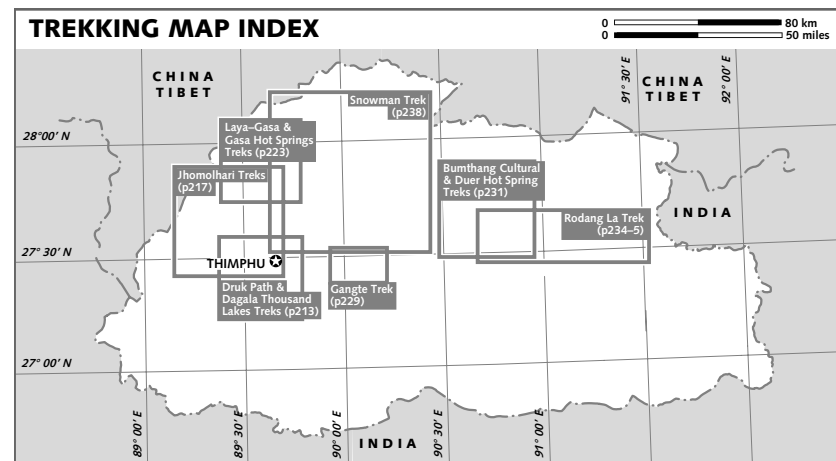
are seasoned trekking guides. The Department of Tourism (DOT) operates a guide training and registration program to try to overcome this shortage, but you might still find that you have more camping experience than your guide.

Treks in Bhutan do not use porters. All your personal gear, plus tents, kitchen and food, is carried by pack horses or, at higher elevations, yaks. There are so few villages and facilities along trek routes that the people driving the pack animals carry their own food and tents and camp each night alongside you.

You will sleep in a tent with foam pads placed on the floor as a mattress. All your gear goes into the tent with you at night. Because there are also tents for the Bhutanese guides and the packers, you do not need to camp near villages and can trek comfortably to remote regions and high altitudes.

Often you will arrive at your camp at 3pm and will not dine until 6pm or 7pm. Unless you choose to do some exploring, there will be several hours of sitting around before dinner. It can also be quite cold in the dining tent, so you will need to dress warmly for meals.

For information on trekking companies abroad and on Bhutanese tour companies, see p257.



A Trek is...

A WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

Most of Bhutan's landscape is covered with forests, and nowhere is this more obvious than on a trek. All treks climb up and down hills, passing through various vegetation zones with a great variety of trees. As there is a lot of wild-life in the hills of Bhutan, and most treks are in protected areas, there is a chance, albeit small, of seeing wildlife in its native habitat.

Once you step off the road to start the trek you are in true wilderness much of the time. Although there are established trails, there are no planes flying overhead, no roads and very few villages; instead there are views of snowcapped peaks and forested hillsides stretching to eternity.

LONG

A short trek in Bhutan is three or four days in duration, an average trek is a week, but a trek of 25 days or more is possible. Every day your walk leads you one day further into the hills and you will have to walk that same distance to get back to a road. Make proper preparations before you start so that three days into the trek you don't find that you are ill-equipped, exhausted or unable to cope with the thought of walking all that distance back.

PHYSICALLY DEMANDING

A Bhutan trek is physically demanding because of its length and the almost unbelievable changes in elevation. If you add all the climbing in the 14-day Laya-Gasa trek, for example, it is more than 6800m of elevation gain and loss during many steep ascents and descents. On most treks, the daily gain is less than 500m in about 18km, although 1000m ascents are possible on some days. You can always take plenty of time during the day to cover this distance; the physical exertion, although quite strenuous at times, is not sustained. You can take time for rest, but the trek days in Bhutan are long, requiring seven to nine hours of walking and you do have to keep moving to get to camp before dark.

Many of the climbs and descents are on rocky trails. Bhutan is amazingly rocky and on many routes the trail traverses long stretches of round river rocks. It requires some agility to hop between these. The trail is often extremely muddy, sometimes requiring a diversion to keep your feet dry. It can be a tricky balancing

act on stones and bits of wood to get across stretches that have been ground into sloppy mud by the hooves of passing horses, yaks and cattle.

Many of the treks are on old trade routes that fell into disuse once a road was built. Some trails, especially in eastern Bhutan, have had little or no maintenance for 20 or 30 years. It's always possible to encounter snow, especially on high passes.

Probably the only physical problem that may make a trek impossible is a history of knee problems on descents. Throughout the Himalaya the descents are long, steep and unrelenting. There is hardly a level stretch of trail in the entire Himalayan region. If you are an experienced walker and often hike 20km to 25km a day with a backpack, a trek should prove no difficulty. You will be pleasantly surprised at how easy the hiking can be if you carry only a light backpack and do not have to worry about setting up a camp, finding water and preparing meals.

Previous experience in hiking and living outdoors is, however, helpful as you plan your trek. The first night of a two-week trek is too late to discover that you do not like to sleep in a sleeping bag.

Another unpleasant aspect of a trek in Bhutan is attacks by leeches during the rainy season. Leeches are rare during the normal trekking seasons, but if you want to see alpine flowers you need to come during July and August when the rain and leeches make life more difficult.

NOT A CLIMBING TRIP

A Bhutan trek will not allow you to fulfil any Himalayan mountaineering ambitions. Bhutan's regulations prohibit climbing any peak higher than 6000m because of local concerns for the sanctity of the mountain peaks, which are revered as the home of deities.

WHEN TO TREK

The most important consideration as you decide when to trek is weather. Most trekkers come in autumn; spring is the second most popular season. The high tourist season is during the period of best weather in autumn. Flights and hotels are fully booked and you will probably meet other trekkers on the popular routes.

Winter snow and summer rain limit the ideal trekking season in Bhutan to two brief periods. Late September to mid-November is

MOUNTAINEERING

The mountains of Bhutan are ruggedly beautiful and though there are no 8000m-high peaks they are still largely unexplored. Also, there remains uncertainty over the name, location and height of many peaks. Jhomolhari was a famous landmark on the trip to Everest for early mountaineers. On the approach march for the 1921 British Everest Expedition, George Leigh Mallory described it as 'astounding and magnificent', but he remained 'cold and rather horrified' by the mountain. It was climbed from Tibet in 1937 by F. Spencer Chapman and Passang Lama and again in 1970 by a joint Indian-Bhutanese team.

Michael Ward and Dr Frederic Jackson made an extensive survey of Bhutan's mountains in 1964-65. Climbing several peaks of around 5500m, they categorised the Bhutan Himalaya as a defined group of mountains. Bhutan opened its mountains to climbers for a short period from 1983 to 1994. A Bhutanese expedition scaled the 4900m-high Thuringang, north of Thimphu, in 1983. Jichu Drakye was attempted three times before it was successfully climbed in 1988 by an expedition led by Doug Scott. In 1985 Japanese expeditions climbed Gangri (7239m), Kari Jang, Kang Bum (6526m) and Masang Gang (7165m). Gangkhar Puensum (7541m) remains the highest unclimbed peak in the world after unsuccessful attempts by Japanese and British teams in the 1980s.

The government decided to prohibit mountain climbing after villagers living near the peaks asked it to for religious reasons.

recognised as the best time for trekking and the March to April period is the next best time. No matter when you trek you will have rain.

During autumn, nights are cold in the mountains, but the bright sun makes for pleasant daytime temperatures – in the high 20s, falling to 5°C at night, between 1000m and 3500m. At higher altitudes, temperatures range from about 20°C down to minus 10°C. Mornings are usually clear with clouds building up after 1pm, but they typically disappear at night to reveal spectacular starry skies. Most high passes are snowbound from late November until around February and in some years the snow does not disappear until April or May.

Late March to mid-May affords warmer weather and blooming rhododendrons, but there is a higher chance of rain or snow if you trek during this time and high country treks in March are often snowed out. There will be long periods of constant rain during a monsoon trek between May and August. Alpine wildflowers are in bloom during August and September, but the mud is deep and there are no mountain views. The ardent botanist (or the insane) might select July and August for a trek.

GUIDES & CAMP STAFF

A small but efficient number of trek staff will accompany you. If you are trekking with a small group, the guide and cook will team up to handle the logistics. With a large group, the team will include a 'trek organiser' who will see that the loads are packed, tents set up and

pack animals loaded on time. English names, not Dzongkha, are used for the various job titles. In addition to the cook and guide, there will be one or more 'waiters' who serve food and handle the kitchen chores.

Pack Animals

There is a well-organised system for arranging pack animals in Bhutan. Contractors at the starting point of each trek arrange for horses to carry the gear. The animals' owners accompany the trek to arrange the loads and see that they get where they are supposed to each day. The ancient *dolam* system in Bhutan allocates specific grazing grounds to each village. For this reason, pack animals don't cross *dzongkhag* boundaries. Messages are sent ahead so that replacement animals are, hopefully, waiting at the boundary. At higher elevations, yaks carry the loads.

Food, tents and camp gear are packed in large, rectangular, covered baskets called *zhim*, which are then lashed to a wooden pack saddle. Trekkers' duffel bags are usually placed inside a jute sack for protection and then tied onto the animals. The process of saddling and loading the animals in the morning is a slow and tedious chore.

You won't have much to do with your pack animals, except at camp, but you will probably pass them, and other pack animals, along the trail. Stand off to the side to let horses pass, but with yaks you must get as far as possible off to the side of the trail because they are much

YAKS

Westerners tend to oversimplify the many manifestations of the yak into this single word, yet it is only the full-blooded, long-haired bull of the species *Bos grunniens* that truly has the name yak. In Bhutan the name is pronounced 'yuck' and females of the species are called jim. Females are prized for their butterfat-rich milk, used to make butter and cheese.

Large, ponderous and clumsy looking, yaks have the ability to move very quickly when startled. They are used as pack animals for seasonal migration to alpine pastures in Laya and other high regions of western Bhutan. If you are trekking with yaks, give them a wide berth, and don't put anything fragile in your luggage. If an animal becomes alarmed, it charges up a hill and your baggage falls off and gets trampled as the yak bucks and snorts when its keeper tries to regain control.

Though some yaks are crossbred with local cows, there are many purebred yaks in Bhutan – massive animals with thick furry coats and impressive sharp horns.

more skittish and won't pass if you are close to them. Yaks are dangerous, especially their sharp horns. Stand on the uphill side of the trail so you don't get pushed off as the animals pass.

TREKKING FOOD

You can rely entirely on the camp meals and not carry any food with you to Bhutan. You might carry a small supply of chocolate bars or trail mix for snacks, or a few packets of seasoning to liven up soups, but it's not necessary. Your cook can look after any special dietary requirements if given advance notice.

Because there is almost no fresh food available on trek routes, the entire supply must be carried from the start of the trek. As you begin the trek, fresh vegetables and meat are available and camp meals tend to be even better than those available in Thimphu. On a longer trek, the fresh food goes off after the first week or so and you are largely reduced to tinned food.

Meals usually include a rice dish, a potato dish or, frequently, both. The cook prepares meals over stoves fuelled by bottled gas, and most Bhutanese trekking cooks are adept at producing a reasonable variety of Western and Asian dishes. They often add interesting Bhutanese touches, such as cheese sauces, but know to avoid hot chillies unless you specifically request them.

The midday meal is often a packed lunch and may consist of fried rice or noodles, boiled potatoes or chapatis. It is normally accompanied by tea from a large flask. Sometimes the cook loads a lunch horse with a gas cylinder and a basket of food and produces a hot lunch on the trail, but this is infrequent because on most trekking days there is not a good place to cook and eat at the right time.

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

There is no trekking gear available in Bhutan; you must bring all your equipment. Everything on the Personal Equipment Check List (p207) is useful, and most of it necessary, on a long trek. All of this gear (except perhaps the sleeping bag) will pack into a duffel bag weighing less than 15kg.

Some gear will not be necessary on your trek. You might be lucky enough to trek during a rare warm spell and never need a down jacket. It might be so cold and rainy that you never wear short pants. However, these are unusual situations, and you should be prepared for extremes.

Make a special effort to reduce the weight of the baggage you bring on the trek. Each pack animal carries 30kg and it is expected that one animal will carry the luggage of two trekkers. Hence, any baggage over 15kg is a complication.

What is Provided

The trek operator will provide two-person tents with foam mattresses, as well as eating utensils and kitchen equipment. Government rules specify that the trek operator should also provide a first-aid kit and a pressure bag (Portable Altitude Chamber) for high-altitude treks, but you should still carry your own supply of basic medical needs.

Trek operators expect you to bring your own sleeping bag. There are no sleeping bags available for rent in Bhutan.

General Trekking Clothing DOWN- OR FIBRE-FILLED JACKET

You should bring a good jacket on a trek. Most ski jackets are not warm enough and

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TREKS IN NEPAL & BHUTAN *Robert Peirce*

People used to trekking in Nepal will find that conditions are generally similar in Bhutan. The differences that do exist are mostly due to geography. The hillsides in Bhutan tend toward the near-vertical. This means there are fewer farms, villages and reasonable camp sites.

Because geographical considerations make the distance between camp sites greater than the average distance between camps in Nepal, trekking days tend to be longer. Side-hill climbing on steep slopes also means that you do more up-and-down climbing to get around vertical cliffs, avalanche tracks and side canyons. The trails are generally good but, through centuries of use, in many places they have been worn down to paths of scattered rounded rocks or just plain mud.

You may not see other trekkers on the trail but, because camp sites are designated, you are likely to share your camp spot with other parties on the popular Jhomolhari and Laya-Gasa treks. On other treks you probably won't see another group at all. Generally speaking, the trekkers are older than those trekking in Nepal. This, I assume, is because older, settled people are better able to afford the high cost of travel in Bhutan. In some camp sites there are huts that can serve as kitchens for your crew, or used as dining rooms, but most of the time meals are served in a dining tent. There are no Nepali-style teahouses or trekkers' lodges in Bhutan.

In my experience, trekkers' meals in Bhutan compare well with restaurant meals. If you are used to Nepal's two-hour-plus lunch breaks, you'll learn to adjust to a much shorter midday stop here. In Nepal, the crew takes time to cook a hot meal while the members nap. In Bhutan, they bring along a hot dish in an insulated container (with other goodies) for what amounts to a glorified trail lunch. The crew tends to be much smaller than crews in Nepal. Three or four people do the work of five to seven or more. Maybe one reason for this is that there are fewer security problems in Bhutan and thus no need for extra people to guard the camp.

In most places in Nepal, the local people have become accustomed to trekkers but in Bhutan you are still a curiosity. People stare at you with open, friendly faces or greet you warmly as you pass – even come up to you and shake your hand. You become used to kids running to greet you, shouting, 'Bye-bye'. Some have not learnt that it is a no-no to ask for pens. Others startle you by bowing low and bidding, 'Good morning, sir'.

most so-called expedition parkas are too heavy and bulky.

Your jacket can serve many functions on the trek. It will become a pillow at night and on long car trips and can also protect fragile items in your backpack or duffel bag. If you are extremely cold, wear your down jacket to bed inside your sleeping bag.

Artificial-fibre jackets (filled with Polar-guard, Thinsulate or Fibrefill) are a good substitute for down and much cheaper.

JUMPER OR PILE JACKET

Two light layers of clothing are better than a single heavy layer, and one or two light jumpers (sweaters), shirts or polypropylene layers are superior to a heavy jacket.

Pile jackets made of polyester fleece come in a variety of styles and thicknesses. They are light, warm (even when wet) and easy to clean.

HIKING SHORTS OR SKIRT

Most treks are at altitudes where it is cool, even during the day, so most people are com-

fortable in long pants. Pants, however, pull at the knees and are hot, so some prefer shorts. Either cut-offs or hiking shorts with big pockets are fine, but only for men. Skimpy track shorts are culturally unacceptable.

Women should consider a skirt, perhaps over a pair of shorts. Many women who have worn skirts on treks are enthusiastic about them. The most obvious reason is the ease in relieving yourself along the trail. There are long stretches where there is little chance to drop out of sight, and a skirt solves the problem. A wrap-around skirt is easy to put on and take off in a tent. Long 'granny' skirts are not practical because you will be walking through mud. Slacks are also culturally correct.

RAIN GEAR

It is almost certain to rain at some time during your trek. The condensation inside a waterproof jacket can make you even wetter than standing out in the rain. Gore-Tex jackets are supposed to keep you dry by allowing the

jacket to breathe, but in Bhutan you'll sweat a lot on the steep hills and jackets don't always work as advertised.

One way to keep dry while hiking in the rain is to use a poncho – a large, hooded tarp with a hole in the centre for your head.

Another way of keeping dry is an umbrella. This is an excellent substitute for a poncho (except on windy days) and can serve as a sunshade, a walking stick, an emergency toilet shelter and a dog deterrent.

T-SHIRTS OR BLOUSES

You'll spend a lot of time walking in short sleeves – what the equipment catalogues call the first layer. Cotton garments are fine, but if you can afford (and find) a synthetic T-shirt, you will be much more comfortable. You will perspire excessively, and a polypropylene shirt (with brand names such as Capilene and Thermax) wicks the moisture away from your skin.

SWIMWEAR

The only reasonable places to bathe on a trek are in hot springs. Skinny dipping is taboo if you are more than 10 years old. Bring along swimwear or use shorts or a skirt when you go into the hot spring.

High-Altitude Clothing

INSULATED PANTS

Insulated pants are a real asset on a trek that goes above 4000m. You can bring pile pants, ski warm-up pants or down pants and put them on over your hiking pants or under a skirt when you stop. You can also wear them to bed for extra warmth when the nights become particularly cold.

NYLON WINDBREAKER

Strong winds are rare in the places most treks visit, but a windbreaker is helpful in light wind, light rain and drizzle, when a poncho is not necessary. If you already have a waterproof jacket as your 'outer layer', you don't need another shell garment. Your windbreaker should breathe, otherwise perspiration cannot evaporate and you will become soaked. A windbreaker is more in the line of emergency gear. If there is a strong wind, you must have it, otherwise you will probably not use it. If you can afford it, or spend a lot of time in the outdoors, a Gore-Tex parka is a good investment.

NYLON WIND PANTS

If you prefer to hike in shorts wear a pair of wind pants over your shorts or under your skirt in the morning, then remove them to hike in lighter gear during the day. Most wind pants have special cuffs that allow you to remove them without taking off your shoes.

You can substitute ski warm-up pants, or even cotton jogging pants, for both wind pants and down-filled pants. The cost will be lower and there is hardly any sacrifice in versatility or comfort.

LONG UNDERWEAR

Long johns are useful. A complete set makes a good, warm pair of pyjamas and is also useful during late-night emergency trips outside your tent. You can bring only the bottoms and use a woollen shirt for a pyjama top. Cotton underwear is OK, although wool or polyester is warmer.

WOOLLEN HAT OR BALACLAVA

A balaclava is ideal because it can serve as a warm hat or you can roll it down to cover most of your face and neck. You may even need to wear it to bed on cold nights. Because much of your body heat is lost through your head, a warm hat helps keep your entire body warm.

GLOVES

Warm ski gloves are suitable for a trek. You might also consider taking along a pair of woollen mittens, in case your gloves get wet.

GAITERS

There is an enormous amount of mud on Bhutan's trails, and a pair of high gaiters is a must to help keep your boots and socks clean and dry.

Footwear

Proper footwear is the most important item. Your choice will depend on the length of the trek and the terrain.

TREKKING OR RUNNING SHOES

Tennis or running shoes are good, even for long treks, provided you won't be walking in snow. There are numerous brands of light-weight trekking shoes that have stiffer lug soles and are available in both low- and high-top models. High-top shoes provide ankle protection, but low-cut shoes are cooler to walk in. Most trekking shoes are made of a leather-and-

nylon combination and many have Gore-Tex waterproofing, but they are expensive.

MOUNTAIN TREKKING BOOTS

Wherever there is snow (likely anywhere above 4000m), proper waterproof boots can become an absolute necessity. Since animals are carrying all your gear, you have the luxury of carrying two sets of shoes and swapping them from time to time.

SOCKS

Nylon-wool blend socks are fine, but polypropylene hiking socks (which cost astronomical prices) are the best. Several manufacturers make special hiking socks designed to prevent blisters by wicking moisture away from your feet. Bring more socks than you think you will need because it's sometimes difficult to wash clothes on a trek.

DOWN BOOTIES

Many people consider these excess baggage, but they are great to have and weigh little. If they have a thick sole, preferably with Ensolite insulation, they can serve as camp shoes at high elevations. They're also good for mid-night trips outside in the cold.

Other Equipment

BACKPACK

A backpack should have a light internal frame to stiffen the bag and a padded waistband to keep it from bouncing around and to take some weight off your shoulders. Bring a small pack so you won't try to carry too much during the day and the pack will fit easily inside your tent at night.

SLEEPING BAG

Buy the best sleeping bag you can afford and be sure it is large enough. Nights are quite cold during trekking season, so a warm sleeping bag is a very worthwhile investment.

WATER BOTTLE

By day your bottle provides the only completely safe source of cold drinking water. If you use iodine, fill your water bottle from streams, add the iodine and have cold, safe water 30 minutes later.

TORCH (FLASHLIGHT)

Almost any torch will do, although many people prefer a headlamp – which is particularly

useful for reading or when using a toilet. Spare batteries are almost impossible to find during a trek, so bring a supply with you.

DUFFEL BAG

You will need a strong duffel bag in which to pack your gear. Get one with a zip along the side for easy entry. This is not an item to economise on; get a bag that is durable and has a strong zip. A duffel 35cm in diameter and about 75cm long is large enough to carry your gear and will usually meet the weight limit of pack animals – typically 15kg.

Your duffel bag will sit on the back of a horse or yak all day; when it rains, it will get wet. Pack it in such a way that important items stay dry during rainstorms. It is unlikely that you will be able to find a completely waterproof duffel bag or backpack, so you might want to pack your gear in a waterproof river bag. Use coated nylon stuff bags to separate your gear, or you can also use plastic garbage bags, but these are much more fragile.

Use a small padlock that will fit through the zip pull and fasten to a ring sewn to the bag. The lock will protect the contents from pilferage during the flight to and from Bhutan and will help protect the contents on your trek.

EXTRA DUFFEL BAG OR SUITCASE

When starting a trek, you will leave your city clothes and other items in the storeroom of your hotel or travel agent. Bring a small suitcase or extra duffel bag with a lock for this purpose.

SUNGLASSES OR GOGGLES

The sun reflects brilliantly off snow, making good goggles or sunglasses with side protection essential. At high altitude they are so essential you should have an extra pair in case of breakage or loss. A pair of regular sunglasses can serve as a spare if you rig a side shield to them. The lenses should be as dark as possible. At 5000m, the sun is intense and ultraviolet rays can severely damage unprotected eyes. Store your goggles in a metal case as, even in your backpack, it is easy to crush them.

SUNSCREEN

During April and May and at high altitude throughout the year, sunburn can be severe. Use a protective sunscreen; those with sensitive skin will need a total sunscreen such as zinc oxide cream. Snow glare at high altitude

is a real hazard; you'll need a good sunscreen, not just suntan lotion.

To protect your lips at high altitude you need a total sunscreen such as Dermatone or Labiosan.

CAMERA

A trek is long and your gear will be subjected to heat, dust, blowing sand, and moisture. Carry lens caps, lens tissue and a brush to clean the camera and lenses as frequently as possible.

A telephoto (or zoom) lens is more useful than a wide angle, because it will allow close-up pictures of wildlife, mountains and portraits of shy people. A polarising filter is a useful accessory. Insure your camera equipment.

ADDITIONAL ITEMS

If there are two people travelling, divide a lot of this material to save weight and bulk.

Bars of Indian laundry soap are available in Bhutan. This avoids an explosion of liquid or powdered soap in your luggage.

Premoistened towelettes are great for a last-minute hand wash before dinner. Frequent washing helps avoid many stomach problems. If you bring these, check the way they are packaged. Buy them in a plastic container and avoid leaving a trail of foil packets in your wake.

A pair of scissors on your pocketknife is useful. Also bring a sewing kit and some safety pins.

Put all your medicines and toiletries in plastic bottles with screw-on lids.

Bring a cigarette lighter or matches to burn your used toilet paper. You might also bring a small trowel to dig a toilet hole when you get caught on the trail with no toilet nearby.

Always carry items to deal with blisters. It's important to treat blisters as soon as you discover them.

If you own a satellite phone, bring it. These are legal in Bhutan and are useful in emergencies.

MAPS

The entire country has been mapped by the Survey of India at 1:50,000. These maps are restricted and difficult to obtain. There is a related series of topo maps produced by the Survey of Bhutan, but these are also restricted. The US Army Map Service produced a set of now-outdated maps in the 1950s (Series U502 at 1:250,000, sheets NG45-4 and NH46-1), based on the Survey of India maps. The to-

pography is extremely inaccurate and they, too, are difficult to obtain. Another series is the 1:200,000 Russian Military Topographic set which takes 10 sheets to cover Bhutan, but its text is in Russian.

In cooperation with an Austrian project, DOT produced large-scale contour maps of the Jhomolhari and Dagalga Thousand Lakes treks based on the Survey of Bhutan series. These are the best (although not entirely accurate) trekking references available and can be purchased from the DOT office in Thimphu for Nu 300 each.

TREKS IN THIS BOOK

In this chapter, 12 of the 13 officially permitted trekking routes in Bhutan are described. The other trek, in Cheli La, is described briefly in the Paro section of the Western Bhutan chapter (p131). Other trekking routes may be possible with prior negotiation between tour operators and DOT, but the major treks offer everything that a trekker could want, including what is described as the world's most difficult trek. Numerous variations are possible, even within the prescribed itineraries. Most of the routes can be trekked in the reverse direction, although this sometimes causes logistical problems because horses are not always available at the standard trek end points.

Several other treks are possible, including the Nabji Trail (p180) and several routes in the Haa district. Treks to Gangkhar Puensum base camp may become officially permitted, which would allow the reopening of the extension of the Snowman trek from Thanza to Gangkhar Puensum base camp and on to join the Duer Hot Spring trek.

Route Descriptions

The trek descriptions in this book provide a general explanation of the lie of the land and cultural background, but are not self-guiding trail descriptions. Although some treks follow old trade routes, people don't use many of them today. Because there is usually no-one around to ask for directions, you need to stay reasonably close to the guide or horsemen to ensure you are on the correct path.

DAILY STAGES

The route descriptions are separated into daily stages. This helps to make them readable and gives a quick estimate of the number of days

PERSONAL EQUIPMENT CHECK LIST FOR ALL TREKS

Clothing

down- or fibre-filled jacket
jumper or pile jacket
hiking shorts (for men) or skirt
waterproof jacket, poncho or umbrella
hiking pants
T-shirts or blouses
long-sleeved shirt
underwear
sun hat
swimwear (optional)

Footwear

trekking or running shoes
camp shoes, thongs or sandals
socks (polypropylene)

Other Equipment

backpack
sleeping bag
water bottle
torch (flashlight), batteries & bulbs

Miscellaneous Items

toiletries
toilet paper & cigarette lighter
small knife
sunscreen (SPF 15+ or 30+)
towel
laundry soap

medical & first-aid kit
premoistened towelettes
sewing kit
bandanna
goggles or sunglasses
sunscreen for lips
binoculars
books
duffel bag with a padlock, a few stuff sacks and lots of plastic bags
another duffel bag or suitcase to leave your city clothes in

Photograph Equipment

camera & lenses
lens-cleaning equipment
film (about 20 rolls)

FOR TREKS ABOVE 4000M

Clothing

insulated pants
nylon windbreaker
nylon wind pants
long underwear
woollen hat or balaclava
gloves
gaiters

Footwear

mountain trekking boots
socks (wool)
socks (light cotton) to wear under wool socks
down booties (optional)

required for each trek. The stages are those defined by DOT as designated camp sites, and the rules state that you must camp at these places. This doesn't usually create any hardship because in most cases the designated sites are the only spots with water and a space flat enough for making a camp.

Be sure you have the itinerary, including rest days, worked out in advance. Messages are sent ahead to arrange pack animals. If you don't meet them on the specified day, they might not wait for you.

As you discuss the trek with your guide and horsemen, be particularly careful to ensure that everyone agrees on the place you will camp the following night. More than once the horsemen have set off for a camping place beyond the destination the trekkers expected.

Some Bhutanese trekking staff have a very relaxed approach to schedules and late morn-

ing starts are common. Because many daily stages are quite long, this can result in late arrivals to camp, sometimes after dark. Always carry a torch in your backpack.

TIMES & DISTANCES

The route descriptions list approximate walking times. These are estimates based on personal experience and information produced by DOT. The times and daily stages are 'tourist times' and offer a leisurely, comfortable trek with plenty of time for rest, sightseeing or just viewing the mountains. Bhutanese horsemen and over-enthusiastic trekkers can reduce these times to less than those shown here.

The distances shown are those published by DOT. They are estimates and have not been determined by any accurate method of measurement.

SCHEDULE CHANGES

Despite all the preplanning and the complicated advance arrangements, there are still numerous factors that can upset a trek schedule. Rain and mud can make the trail slippery and the camping miserable. Snow can block trails, horses can fail to appear on schedule or the horse drivers may consider the trail too dangerous for their animals. These things happen more frequently than you might imagine. There is little recourse when the trek cannot proceed and you should always be prepared for possible disappointment.

REST DAYS

The route descriptions are based on a reasonable number of days needed to complete the trek. You will enjoy the trek more if you add

the occasional day for rest, acclimatisation or exploration – even at the cost of an extra US\$200.

Maps in this Chapter

The maps included in this chapter are based on the best available maps of each region. To make them legible, only those villages and landmarks mentioned in the text are shown on the maps. The maps show elevations for peaks and passes only – other elevations, including each camp, are given in the descriptions. Trails and roads follow the general direction indicated on the maps, but maps this size cannot show small switchbacks and twists in the trail.

Instead of contour lines, the maps depict ridge lines. This is the line of the highest point on a ridge. If the trail crosses one of these lines, you will walk uphill. If the trail leads from a ridge line to a river, you walk downhill.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

Trekking places great pressure on wilderness areas and you should take special care when trekking to help preserve the ecology and beauty of Bhutan. The following tips are common sense, but they are also mandated by the government, and you, or your guide, could be fined for not observing them.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. If you've carried it in you can carry it out. Don't overlook those easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging weighs very little and should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Minimise the waste you must carry out by reducing packaging and taking no more than you will need. If you can't buy in bulk, unpack small packages and combine their contents in one container before your trek. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons and condoms should also be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of hepatitis, typhoid and intestinal parasites. It can cause severe health risks not only to members of your party, but also to local residents and wildlife. A toilet tent will be set up at each camp; please use it.
- Where there is no toilet tent, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm deep and at least 100m from any watercourse. Consider carrying a lightweight trowel for this purpose. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. Use toilet paper sparingly and burn it or bury it with the waste. In snow, dig down to the soil otherwise your waste will be exposed when the snow melts.

Altitude Measurements

The elevations given in the route descriptions are composites, based on measurements with an altimeter or GPS and checked against maps. There is no definitive list of the elevations or names of peaks and passes in Bhutan, and various maps and publications differ significantly. In most cases the peak elevations are those defined in the mountain database produced by the Alpine Club in Britain. All other elevations are rounded to the nearest 10m.

Place Names & Terminology

Bhutan is a maze of valleys and rivers that wind around in unexpected turns. It is, therefore, difficult to define in which compass direction a river is flowing at a particular spot. Instead of referring to the north or south bank of rivers, the slightly technical term of 'river right' or 'river left' has been used. This refers to the right or left side of the river as

you face downstream, which is not necessarily the direction you are walking. In the route descriptions, right and left in reference to a river always refers to river right or river left.

The route descriptions list many mountains and places that do not correlate with names in other descriptions of the same route or with names on maps. The variance occurs because most maps were made before the Dzongkha Development Commission produced its guidelines for Romanised Dzongkha. This book uses the Romanised Dzongkha standards for all place names throughout Bhutan.

Many streams and landmarks remain nameless in the trail descriptions. Most trekking routes go through sparsely populated country, where there is less formality about place names. Although some places have official, historically accurate names, many camping places are in meadows or yak pastures. Local herders, or perhaps trekking guides, made up

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste, even if they are biodegradable, in or near watercourses. For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a basin at least 50m away from any watercourse. Widely disperse the waste water to allow the soil to filter it fully before it finally makes it back to the watercourse.

Erosion

- Hillides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitude, are prone to erosion. It is important to stick to existing tracks and avoid short cuts that bypass a switchback. If you blaze a new trail straight down a slope it will turn into a watercourse with the next heavy rainfall and eventually cause soil loss and deep scarring.
- If a well-used track passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud: walking around the edge of the patch will increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plants that keep the topsoil in place.

Wildlife Conservation

- Don't assume animals found in huts to be nonindigenous vermin and attempt to exterminate them. In wild places they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife at the camp by not leaving food scraps behind.
- Do not disturb or feed wildlife or do anything to destroy their natural habitat.

Cultural Conservation

- Respect the culture and traditions of local people, whether they are villagers, your camp staff or your horse drivers.
- Do not give sweets, money, medicines or gifts to local people, particularly children, as this encourages begging.
- Do not buy local household items or religious artefacts from villagers.

names for some of these places and these now appear on maps. Numerous small streams, valleys and other landmarks do not have any names at all or, if they do have local names, there is usually nobody living nearby to ask.

In some places there is a facility that the Bhutanese call a 'community hall'. This is a stone building that the staff can use for cooking and shelter and may be available for trekkers to use as a dining room or emergency shelter.

Route Finding

It isn't easy to get totally lost in the hills, but it has happened to some trekkers, and there are few people around who can help you find the correct trail. If you are on a major trekking route, the trail is usually well defined and there is only one route, although there may be a few confusing short cuts. Watch for the lug-sole footprints of other trekkers or for arrows carved into the trail or marked on rocks by guides with trekking parties. You can also use the hoofprints and dung of your pack animals to confirm that you are on the correct trail. If you find yourself descending a long way when the trail should be going up, if the trail vanishes, or if you suddenly find yourself alone ahead of the rest of your party, *stop and wait for the other trekkers and guides to catch up*. If you noticed a trail junction some distance back, retrace your steps to try to find where you went wrong.

RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

Bhutan's trekking rules require that your staff carry a supply of fuel for cooking. Until 1996, the use of wood was allowed. The horsemen and yak drivers sometimes violate the code and cook their own meals over wood. Although theoretically prohibited, it's a hard rule to enforce.

Fires

Campfires are prohibited and you should decline the offer if your staff suggest one. Bring enough warm clothing and you won't need to stand around a fire. It's a dilemma if the packers build a fire, or if one appears as part of a 'cultural show' in a village. Don't get too upset, however; as long as they burn dead wood the impact is minimal.

GARBAGE FIRES

Burning garbage is offensive to deities, especially within sight of a sacred mountain such as Jhomolhari. Be aware of this cultural issue and try to arrange for rubbish to be packed

out with you, burned or disposed of in a way that does not cause offence.

What You Can Do to Help

Try to follow the guidelines in the boxed text, pp208-9. If your trek staff are not digging the toilet pits deep enough, or not filling them in properly, the time to solve that problem is on the spot. It does no good to go home and write a letter complaining about something that could have been easily solved by some simple assistance and guidance from you.

HEALTH & SAFETY

For general advice on medical issues see p267. For information on high altitudes and acclimatisation, see p272.

Trekking in Bhutan involves multiple long ascents and descents. This can prove physically tiring, especially as the altitude increases. The best training is to walk up and, in particular, down hills as much as possible. If you have a busy life, with little access to hiking on weekends, you should train with exercise machines (such as 'Stairmasters'), ride a bicycle or jog. If you have no hills to train on, try putting a pack on your back to increase the strength training associated with walking or jogging. Take stairs whenever possible in preference to a lift (elevator).

People over 45 often worry about altitude and potential heart problems. There is no evidence that altitude is likely to bring on previously undiagnosed heart disease. If you are able to exercise to your maximum at sea level, you should not have an increased risk of heart attack while trekking at altitude. However, if you have known heart disease and your exercise is already limited by symptoms at low altitude, you may have trouble at altitude. If you have a history of heart disease, you should consult a doctor who has some knowledge of high altitude before committing yourself to a trek.

Common Ailments

TREKKERS' KNEE

If your legs have not been gradually accustomed to walking uphill and downhill through training, there is a chance that you will develop some knee soreness after a long descent. The pain generally comes from mild trauma repeated thousands of times on the descent. The two areas most affected are the outer side of the knee and the area under the kneecap.

You may experience difficulty walking and have to rest for a few days before continuing. Anti-inflammatory pills are helpful, as are ski poles or a walking stick. The pain can take several weeks to go away completely, but there are no long-term consequences.

BLISTERS

The repeated rubbing of the skin against the inside of your shoe or boot can cause blisters. The superficial surface of the skin eventually gets lifted off its base and fluid collects in the resulting bubble. Blisters can usually be avoided by conscientious attention to your feet as you hike. You should immediately investigate any sore spot on your foot and put some form of protection over the area that is being rubbed. There are many commercial products that protect your feet from blisters. Moleskin is the most popular item, but adhesive tape also works. Newer products, utilising soft gels, have recently been added to the mix. Using a thin inner sock inside a thicker sock can provide a sliding layer that reduces the friction on the foot. Try not to begin a trek in brand-new shoes or boots.

Blisters are not infected when they first form, but after the bubble breaks infection can develop. Wash the area and keep it clean. If swelling and redness develop, you should take oral antibiotics.

SNOW BLINDNESS

This is a temporary, painful condition resulting from sunburn of the clear surface of the eye

(the cornea). It comes from heavy exposure to ultraviolet radiation, almost exclusively when walking on snow without sunglasses. If you are in a party of trekkers attempting to cross a high pass covered with snow, try to make sure everyone has something to protect their eyes, even if it means using pieces of cardboard with narrow slits cut in them.

The treatment is simply to relieve the pain. Cold cloths held against the outside of the eyelids can bring relief. Antibiotic eye drops are not necessary and anaesthetic drops should be avoided as they slow the healing and make the eyes vulnerable to other injuries. The cornea will be completely repaired within a few days and there are no long-term consequences.

Rescue

If you find yourself ill or injured in the mountains, don't panic. If someone falls, take some time to assess the situation: suspected broken bones may only be bruises, and a dazed person may wake up and be quite all right in an hour or two. In most areas of Bhutan, some kind of animal, either horses or yaks, will be available to help transport a sick or injured trekker.

Sometimes either the seriousness of the injuries or the urgency of getting care will make land evacuation impractical. If this is the case, the only alternative is to request a helicopter rescue flight. Fortunately, this is a reasonably straightforward process, but once

OVERVIEW OF TREKS

Trek	Start	Finish	Number of days	Maximum elevation (m)	Standard
Druk Path	Paro Ta Dzong	Motithang	6	4210	medium
Dagala Thousand Lakes	Geynikha Primary School	Chamgang	6	4720	medium
Jhomolhari	Drukgyel Dzong	Dodina	9	4930	medium-hard
Jhomolhari 2	Drukgyel Dzong	Drukgyel Dzong	8	4520	medium
Laya-Gasa	Drukgyel Dzong	Tashithang	14	5005	medium-hard
Gasa Hot Spring	Tashithang	Tashithang	5	2430	easy
Gangte	Phobjikha	Tikke Zampa	3	3480	easy
Bumthang Cultural	Thangbi Goemba	Kizum	3	3360	easy-medium
Duer Hot Spring	Duer	Duer	8	4700	medium-hard
Rodang La	Thangbi Goemba	Trashi Yangtse	10	4160	medium-hard
Snowman	Drukgyel Dzong	Sephu	25	5320	hard
Samtengang Winter	Punakha	Chhuzomsa	4	1500	easy

you ask for a helicopter, you will be charged for the service. Prices start at US\$1500 and can go much higher, especially if weather conditions are bad and the chopper has to make several attempts to rescue you.

Rescue helicopters in Bhutan come from the Indian air-force base in Hasimara or the Indian army facility at Bagdogra airport. If there is a need for an evacuation during a trek, the guide will send a message to the appropriate tour operator. The tour operator contacts DOT to request a helicopter, DOT forwards the request to the Royal Bhutan Army and it, in turn, requests the Indian Army to send a chopper. It's a well-organised and efficient chain of communication and a helicopter is usually dispatched within a day.

DRUK PATH TREK

The Druk Path trek has two possible starting points. Yours will depend on what arrangements have been made with the horse owners. The traditional start is in Dambji, near a gravel pit on the eastern side of the Do Chhu at 2300m. Most groups opt to save 140m of climbing, starting at a trailhead outside the gate of the National Museum at 2470m.

The trek is usually possible from late February to June and from September to December, although snow sometimes closes the route in late autumn and early spring. Days are normally warm, but nights can be very cold and you should always be prepared for snow. Avoid the monsoon season of July and August.

It is possible to shorten the trek to four days, but to do this you must walk more than eight hours a day. With the shorter schedule you would camp at Jili La, Jimilang Tsho

and Phajoding, arriving in Motithang on the morning of the fourth day. Some agents modify the Druk Path trek into a four-day trek in the reverse direction, starting at the youth centre in Motithang and finishing by hiking down from Jimilang Tsho to the roadhead at Tsaluna in the Bemang Rong Chhu valley. If you're a masochist you can even race through the trek in a single day. An old punishment for Bhutanese soldiers was a forced one-day march along this route from Thimphu to Paro.

Day 1: National Museum to Jili Dzong

10km / 4-5 hours / 1090m ascent

The first day is a long climb as you gain more than 1000m of elevation. The trek follows a gravel road past a few farms for about 30 minutes and then climbs steeply up a ridge on the first of many short cuts that avoid road switchbacks, passing Kuenga Lhakhang at 2640m. A further climb past cultivated fields leads back to the road and another 30 minutes of walking through blue-pine forest takes you to a big stone house at **Damchena** (2880m), where the road ends.

The wide trail climbs through blue-pine and fir forest to a *mani* (carved stone) wall in a clearing known as **Damche Gom**, at 3020m. It's then a long, but not steep, climb through forests to a meadow at 3260m where it's possible to camp. It is better to keep climbing for another hour to a camping place in a large pasture just before Jili La, marked by a cairn at 3560m.

If you are in a small group you can cross the pass and drop to an excellent camping place in a meadow below **Jili Dzong** at 3480m.

Day 2: Jili Dzong to Jangchhu Lakha

10km / 3-4 hours / 310m ascent, 50m descent

This is a short day, which allows time to visit Jili Dzong, atop a promontory at 3570m. If the weather is clear, there is an excellent view of Paro town and the upper Paro valley far below, with Jhomolhari and other snowcapped peaks in the distance.

Jili Dzong was the residence of Ngawang Chhogyel (1465–1540), the cousin of Lama Drukpa Kunley. The large *lhakhang* (temple) contains an impressive statue of Sakyamuni almost 4m high. Once in a state of disrepair, the walls of the lhakhang have been replastered and painted. One wonders what kinds of mischief the young monks must have per-

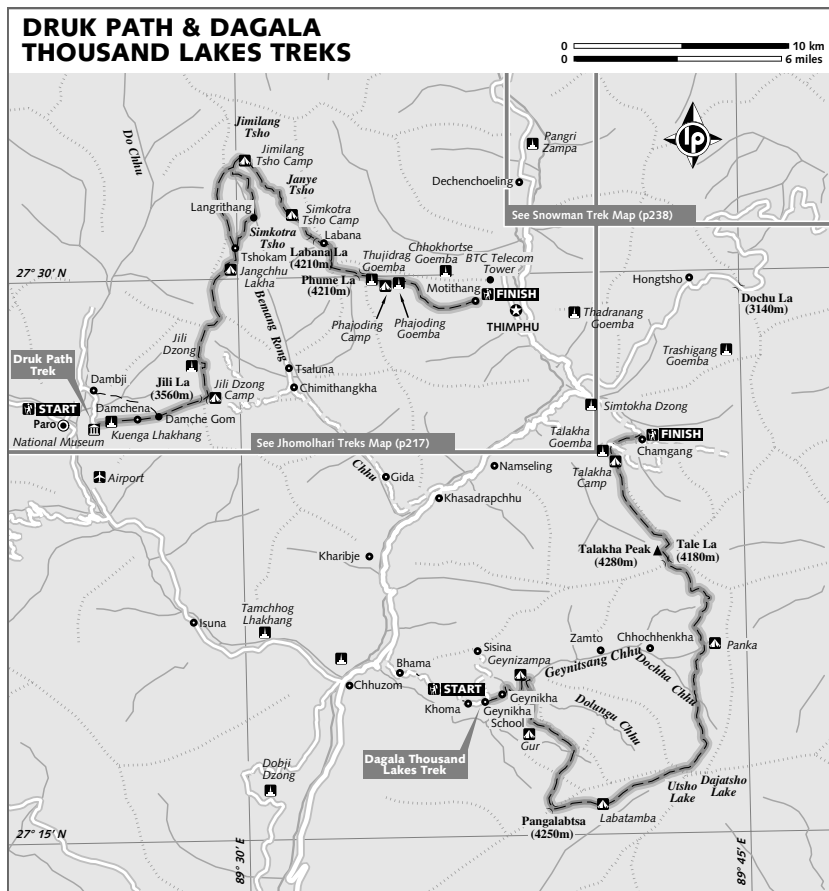
petrated to warrant banishment to such a high and isolated monastery.

From the dzong the route begins a long ridge walk, first climbing on the west side of the ridge in a rhododendron forest to a saddle at 3550m, then descending through a forest of trees ravaged by bark beetles. Climb again and traverse around the west side of a cone-shaped hill to a meadow. There are views of Jhomolhari and other snow peaks, and you are likely to see or hear some monal pheasants during the day. Cross to the east side of the ridge and make a long traverse through rhododendrons and cedars to Jangchhu Lakha, a pasture at 3760m. There is another good camping spot 10 minutes beyond at **Tshokam**, a yak-herder camp at 3770m.

Day 3: Jangchhu Lakha to Jimilang Tsho

11km / 4 hours / 230m descent, 330m ascent
Beyond Tshokam there is a choice of trails. The high trail follows the ridge, making many ups and downs, and is said to be difficult and about two hours longer than the normal route. From the ridge there are good views of Jhomolhari and 6989m Jichu Drakye, the peak representing the protective deity of Paro.

The normal route descends from Tshokam through forests to the foot of a valley and crosses the upper part of the Bemang Rong Chhu, here only a stream, at 3540m. Trek upstream past a yak pasture called Langrithang. The trail is difficult to see as it traverses muddy bogs, but eventually becomes more distinct as it follows the east side of the stream (river left) to a small



THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 6 days

Max Elevation 4210m

Standard Medium

Season February to June, September to December

Start Paro Ta Dzong

Finish Motithang

Access Towns Paro, Thimphu

Summary One of the most scenic and popular treks in Bhutan, following a wilderness trail past several remote lakes. Although it is a short trek, it still goes to a high altitude, making it moderately strenuous.

bridge at 3670m. A short distance above the bridge the high route rejoins after a descent from the ridge. The trail then climbs through forest and finally makes a steep ascent through large rocks and dwarf rhododendrons to a crest, then traverses a short distance to Jimilang Tsho, an isolated lake at 3870m. There is a pleasant camping place at the far end of the lake.

Jimilang Tsho means 'Sand Ox Lake', and was named for a bull that emerged from the lake and joined the cattle of a family that uses the area as a summer grazing ground. The lake is also known for its giant trout, which were introduced in the 1970s.

It is possible to cut the trek short by descending towards the southeast through a forest of blue pine to the road at Tsaluna, but the route is not obvious and crosses the river several times. This route passes Tsalu Ney, a 14th-century lhakhang at a cave where Guru Rinpoche meditated.

Day 4: Jimilang Tsho to Simkotra Tsho

11km / 4 hours / 820m ascent, 400m descent

The trail climbs from the lower end of the lake to a ridge at 4010m, makes a traverse along the side of the ridge, then descends to a single stone shelter. Climb to another ridge, then make several ups and downs to a crest at 4050m overlooking Janye Tsho. Descend to a yak herders' camp near the lake and walk along the shore at 3950m before climbing to a ridge at 4150m and descending to some stone ruins and a camp spot at 4110m, overlooking **Simkotra Tsho**.

Be sure you have agreement on where to camp on this day. The horse drivers often push to continue over the next pass to a better camp and grazing land at **Labana**.

Day 5: Simkotra Tsho to Phajoding

10km / 3-4 hours / 130m ascent, 680m descent

It's another long climb past several false summits, then a long rocky traverse to a group of cairns atop Labana La at 4210m. The trail descends gently and traverses above a broad valley to another crest at 4210m. There are views of Dochu La and Jhomolhari along this stretch of trail.

Below Labana La, a side trail descends through rocks to a camping place at 4110m, near a stone hut beside an almost-dry lake at Labana.

Pass a rough stone wall and soon come to some prayer flags on a hill above the trail that mark a seldom-used sky burial site. Another

long traverse leads to a crest at 4120m, then drop and cross a final ridge at Phume La (4080m). Weather permitting, there are views of Gangkhar Puensum and other Himalayan peaks. Below sprawls the entire Thimphu valley. A trail leads northeast and descends steeply towards Phajoding. An alternative trail leads southeast and descends to Thujidrag Goemba, a meditation centre that hangs on the side of a precipitous rock face at 3950m.

Another steep descent on a maze of eroded trails through juniper and rhododendron leads to a camp site above Phajoding at 3750m. Meditation centres and lhakhangs are scattered across the hillside. The large buildings of Phajoding Goemba are a short distance below the camp. See p117 for details of Phajoding Goemba.

Day 6: Phajoding to Motithang

4-5km / 2½ hours / 1130m descent

This day's trek is all downhill through forest. Descend to the main monastery building at 3640m and start down on a wide trail, passing a Bhutanese *chorten* (stone Buddhist monument) at 3440m. Just below the chorten there is a trail junction. The trail leading straight goes to Chhokhortse Goemba and the BTC telecom tower, offering an alternative way to end this trek.

The normal route turns right and descends towards Motithang. There are numerous short cuts, but they all eventually lead to the same place. Pass another chorten at 3070m and descend steeply to a stream, crossing it at 2820m. Climb to a rough road and follow it down, skirting around the wooden buildings of the royal bodyguard camp and on to the Motithang youth centre at 2520m.

DAGALA THOUSAND LAKES TREK

This trek is not difficult and most trekking days are short but there are some long, steep climbs. It is not a popular route, and you will probably encounter no other trekkers.

It's a 29km drive from Thimphu to the junction of an unpaved road leading to the starting point. It's best to arrange a 4WD vehicle to drive 8km up the steep, rocky road to a Basic Health Unit (BHU) at Khoma, high above the Geynitsang Chhu at 2850m. It's another 1km to the small Geynikha primary school where the horses usually wait to meet groups.

The best way to arrange this trek is to drive to the starting point after lunch and then

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 6 days

Max Elevation 4720m

Standard Medium

Season April, September to October

Start Geynikha Primary School

Finish Chamgang

Access Town Thimphu

Summary A short trek, near Thimphu, to a large number of lovely, high-altitude lakes (far fewer, however, than the name suggests).

make the short descent to the first camp in the late afternoon.

The recommended times for this trek are April and late September through October. Snow in the high country often blocks the route and makes it necessary to retrace your steps to the starting point.

Day 1: Geynikha to Geynizampa

2km / 1 hour / 150m descent

Start walking along the road, which soon turns uphill towards a Geologic Survey of India mining site in Sisina, high on the hillside above. Leave the road and follow the trail that leads straight and level for about 500m to a chorten overlooking the fields of Geynikha (2950m). Make your way through the picturesque village and head for the ruins of a house on the ridge to the northeast. The route descends to a small stream, the Chhokosen Chhu, and follows it down to a chorten and an excellent camping place in a forest of blue pines alongside the Geynitsang Chhu at 2800m. There are two villages, Zamto and Chhochhenkha, further up the valley, which are the destination for a day hike described in the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature *Mild and Mad Hikes* book.

Day 2: Geynizampa to Gur

5km / 4 hours / 550m ascent, 60m descent

Crossing a suspension bridge, the trail turns south along the east side of the Geynitsang Chhu (river left) to a side stream, the Dolungu Chhu. Cross the stream on a log bridge and start uphill on an eroded trail through an oak forest. The trail is used only by yak herders, woodcutters and a handful of trekkers, but it was once a major trading route between Thimphu and **Dagana**, headquarters of Dagana Dzongkhag. This accounts for the walls, well-

crafted stone staircases and other developments along portions of the route.

A long climb leads to an outstanding lookout point at 3220m. The climb becomes gentler as it ascends towards the top of the ridge where it makes a hairpin turn at 3350m. Be careful here; the trail to the camp site is an inconspicuous path that leads south through the forest to **Gur**, some yak pastures in the trees at 3290m.

Day 3: Gur to Labatamba

12km / 5 hours / 1040m ascent, 110m descent

After climbing back from the camp to the main trail the route continues gently up the ridge on a wide track. A long, stiff climb through blue pines leads to a rocky outcrop where the vegetation changes to spruces, dead firs and larches. The trail traverses into a side valley, crosses a stream at 3870m and begins a long, gentle climb through scattered birches and rhododendrons towards the pass, weaving in and out of side valleys and crossing several tiny streams. At **Pangalabtsa**, a pass marked by cairns at 4250m, there is a spectacular view of the whole Dagala range. This is now yak country and there are numerous herders' camps scattered across the broad Labatamba valley. Descend from the pass to the first herders' hut at 4170m and traverse around the head of a small valley to the main valley floor. Climb beside a stream to **Labatamba**, a camp at 4300m near Utsho Tsho, where there are said to be plenty of golden trout. The high-altitude area near the lakes is a mass of alpine wildflowers in September.

You should schedule an extra day here to walk to the numerous lakes in the vicinity and perhaps do some trout fishing.

Day 4: Labatamba to Panka

8km / 6-7 hours / 260m ascent, 520m descent

There are two possible routes and the pack animals will take the lower one. The trekking route is not well marked and is more of a cross-country traverse. It climbs along the western side of the lake Dajatscho to a saddle at 4520m, where there are good mountain views. If you want a better view, you could scramble to the top of a 4720m peak to the east. From the pass the trail descends past several herders' camps, then drops to the Dochha Chhu, rejoining the trail at about 4200m. Follow the trail as it climbs over three ridges and descends to **Panka** at 4000m. Because there is a water problem here during spring, it may be necessary to descend to an alternative camp 20 minutes below.

Day 5: Panka to Talakha

8km / 6-7 hours / 180m ascent, 1100m descent

The route leads north to a crest at 4100m where several trails lead off in different directions. The trail to Talakha climbs steeply up a slate slope to the ruins of a house. It's then a long traverse to **Tale La** at 4180m. From here, there is a view of the Dagal range and of Thimphu, far to the north. It is then a long descent through bamboo forests to the *goemba* (Buddhist monastery) at **Talakha** (3080m).

Day 6: Talakha to Chamgang

6km / 3 hours / 440m descent

There is a steep, eroded trail that leads to Simtokha, but there are numerous fences surrounding apple orchards along the way and there is no longer a direct route.

You can arrange to have vehicles pick you up at Talakha, but it's a long, rough, muddy road suitable only for 4WDs. It's best to walk three hours down the road, with a few short cuts where trails avoid switchbacks, to **Chamgang** at 2640m and meet your vehicle there.

JHOMOLHARI TREK

The first three days of this trek follow the Paro Chhu valley to Jangothang, climbing gently, but continually, with a few short, steep climbs over side ridges. It crosses a high pass and visits the remote village of Lingzhi, then crosses another pass before making its way towards Thimphu. The last four days of the trek cover a lot of distance and require many hours of walking. The trek also affords an excellent opportunity to see yaks.

There are two versions of this trek and DOT counts them as two separate treks. About 40% of Bhutan's trekkers follow one of the

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 9 days

Max Elevation 4930m

Standard Medium–hard

Season April to June, September to November

Start Drukgyel Dzong

Finish Dodina

Access Towns Paro, Thimphu

Summary Bhutan's most popular trek offers spectacular views of the 7314m-high Jhomolhari from a high camp at Jangothang.

Jhomolhari trek routes, but this represents fewer than 25 groups a year.

The trek is possible from April to early June and September to November, but the best chance of favourable conditions is April or October. Days are normally warm, but nights can be very cold, especially above Jangothang. There is a lot of mud on this trek and it can be miserable in the rain. Snow usually closes the high passes in mid- to late November and they don't reopen until April.

Day 1: Drukgyel Dzong to Sharna Zampa

17km / 4-6 hours / 360m ascent, 80m descent

The trek starts from Drukgyel Dzong at 2580m. On a clear day you can see the snow-covered peak of Jhomolhari in the distance. There is a rough unpaved road that travels a few kilometres up the valley. If you are travelling in a 4WD vehicle, you can drive to Mitshi Zampa and start the trek there.

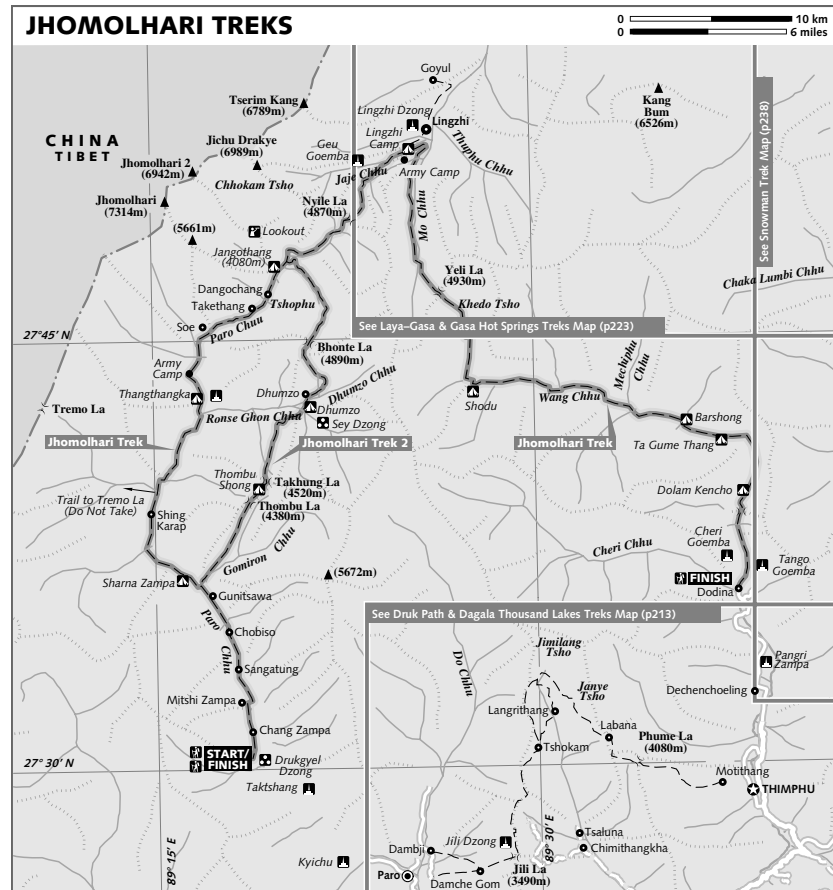
If you're walking from Drukgyel Dzong, the trek starts with a short downhill walk on the road. After descending about 80m, you reach the river. Look back and see how well positioned the dzong was to keep watch over this valley.

A short distance upriver is the small settlement of Chang Zampa, where there's an outreach clinic and a little shop. A *zam* (bridge) crosses to river left here. Don't cross it. The trek stays on the south bank (river right). The fields on this side of the river are planted with potatoes and wheat; on the opposite side of the river, it's red rice.

Thirty minutes of walking takes you to the settlement of Mitshi Zampa. Here the route leaves the road and crosses to the left bank of the clear, fast-flowing Paro Chhu via a Swiss-built suspension bridge at 2540m.

The trail climbs very gently, traversing through well-maintained rice terraces and fields of millet. It's a well-worn trail with lots of round stones and irrigation water running down it. A short walk through a forest of blue pine leads to a small stream and a white chorten. Beyond is Sangatung, a pleasant farmhouse surrounded by fields.

The route now enters an area of apple orchards and blue-pine and fir forests, and the trail is littered with rocks sticking out of the mud. On some parts of the trail, logs have been placed in washboard fashion. In other places it's necessary to leap from rock to rock to keep your feet dry. If you are lucky, your guide will lead you along a less-muddy, alter-



native route that cuts across fields, following a telephone line. Don't cross the cantilever bridge that leads to the south; stay on river left, climbing gently to Chobiso, a single house at 2800m.

Soon the valley widens and you reach the army post of Gunitsawa at 2810m. There is also a primary school and a shop here. This is the last stop before Tibet; all army personnel and civilians are required to report to the checkpoint. The trek permit that your tour operator arranged will be checked and endorsed here; wait for your guide so the registration formalities can be completed. The large dormitory-style buildings across the river are quarters for enlisted men and their families.

Below the shop at Gunitsawa the trail crosses the Paro Chhu to river right on a wooden cantilever bridge that leads to the south; stay on river left, climbing gently to Chobiso, a single house at 2800m. It then climbs to **Sharna Zampa**, a camping place in meadows surrounded by trees at 2850m. On the opposite side of the river you can see a helicopter pad and archery field.

Day 2: Sharna Zampa to Thangthangka

22km / 7-8 hours / 770m ascent, 10m descent

This is a long, hard day with lots of short ups and downs of 10m to 20m. It's made more strenuous because of all the rock-hopping necessary to avoid mud holes.

The trail continues its gradual climb alongside the Paro Chhu through conifers and rhododendrons. In places it is quite close to

the river; if the water is high you might have to scramble over a few small hills to get around it. About 15 minutes beyond Sharna Zampa are the remnants of an old bridge with a house and a chorten on the other side. At this point the route enters Jigme Dorji National Park.

The trail makes a continuous, but gentle, climb on a rocky trail through oaks, rhododendrons and ferns, crossing several small streams. About two hours from camp is Shing Karap, a stone house and a clearing at 3110m. This is where most guides choose to serve lunch. Some distance beyond is the route to Tremo La, which is the stone-paved trail leading off to the left. This is the old invasion and trade route from Phari Dzong in Tibet. Don't take this inviting-looking trail; several trekkers have done so in the past and made a long, exhausting side trip to nowhere. Immediately after the trail junction is a wooden bridge over a substantial side stream.

Climb a short set of switchbacks over a little ridge, then descend and cross the Paro Chhu to river left on a wooden cantilever bridge at 3230m. The route up this side of the river goes up and down on a rocky trail through forests of birch and fir. There are numerous short climbs and descents, and in one place the trail crosses an old landslide. There is only a 300m elevation gain, but the continual little ups and downs add up to a fair amount of uphill walking. Among the tree species along this part of the trail are blue pine, maple and larch.

After about three hours of trekking there's a bridge back to river right of the Paro Chhu at 3560m. The trail climbs to a place where you can see a white chorten on the opposite side of the river. There is a bridge here that leads back across the river, but don't cross it. That trail leads up the Ronse Ghon Chhu towards **Chora**, the camp on Day 6 of the Jhomolhari trek 2.

Follow the trail on river right as it turns a corner where there is an outstanding view of Jhomolhari. Climb over a small ridge as the Paro Chhu makes a noticeable bend. Fifteen minutes from the bridge is a lovely meadow with Jhomolhari looming at the head of the valley. This is **Thangthangka** (3610m) where there is a small stone shelter and a Bhutanese-style house in a cedar grove at the edge of the meadow.

Day 3: Thangthangka to Jangothang

19km / 5-6 hours / 480m ascent

This is not a long day, but there is a significant elevation gain at high altitude, and you will be

worn out when you reach camp. Jhomolhari was probably covered with clouds when you arrived last night, but you'll get a good view if you get up early.

As you climb beyond the camp, Jhomolhari disappears behind a ridge. Less than an hour from camp, at 3730m, is an army post with rough stone barracks housing personnel from both the Bhutan army and the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT). It's depressing to see the number of trees that have been carelessly felled to keep the post going.

The trail crosses a wooden bridge over a fast-flowing stream a short distance beyond the army post. The hillside on the opposite side of the Paro Chhu is a near-vertical rock face with a few trees clinging to it. Along this stretch the trail can be extremely muddy; there are lots of big stones you can use to rock-hop around mud holes. At 3770m, about one hour from camp, the trail turns sharply right at a whitewashed *mani* wall.

A short climb leads to a small chorten on a ridge. You are now entering yak country and you will see these huge beasts lumbering across the hillsides and lazing in meadows alongside the trail. One of the products made from yak milk is dried cheese called *chugo*. The cheese is sold strung on a necklace of white blocks.

There are two trails, an upper and a lower route. Both contour up the valley from the chorten and end up near the river bank, following the bottom of the valley as it makes a sharp bend to the right. Parts of the hillside are covered with larches, which turn a light yellow in autumn. Above the trail is the village of **Soe**. You cannot see it until you are beyond and above it, but you may meet people herding yaks near the river.

One hour beyond Soe is the settlement of **Takethang**, a cluster of stone houses on a plateau at 3940m. The villagers grow barley and a large succulent plant called *kashaykoni* that is fed to the yaks during winter.

The trail follows straight across the plateau, high above the river. It then crosses a little stream on a bridge made of big stones laid on logs. On the opposite side are a white chorten, an outreach clinic and the few houses of **Dangochang**. The people of this village raise yaks and a few sheep, and some households grow potatoes, turnips and radishes. This area is snowbound from mid-November until the end of March; one resident said the snow can be so deep they have to pee out of the second-

floor windows, but this sounds like another Bhutanese myth.

It is slow going uphill beside a side stream to the camp at **Jangothang** (4080m) and a spectacular view of Jhomolhari. The ruins of a small fortress sit atop a rock in the middle of the side valley that leads northwest to Jhomolhari. A chain of snow peaks forms the eastern side of the Paro Chhu valley and it's often possible to spot blue sheep on the lower slopes.

There's a community hall with a kitchen and several large flat spots for camping. This is a popular trek route and Jangothang is one of the most spectacular camping places in the entire Himalaya. You are unlikely to have the camp to yourself.

The guidelines for pack animals require that you now exchange your horses for yaks from Soe or horses from Dangochang. Don't be alarmed when your loads get dumped at the camp and the animals disappear down the valley, leaving you alone with a mountain of baggage. If all goes well, the replacement pack animals will show up on schedule when you are ready to leave.

Day 4: Acclimatisation Day & Exploration of Jangothang

If going on to Lingzhi, you should spend a day here for acclimatisation. If you are returning to Drukgyel Dzong on the Jhomolhari trek 2, a day in Jangothang is the highlight of the trek; the views don't get any better than here. There are lots of day hikes you can make and a day here is very well spent.

There are four major possibilities for day hikes. The first, and best, is a three- to four-hour excursion up the ridge to the north of the camp. There's no trail, but it's a broad open slope and you can just scramble up it. The ridge is endless, but after an hour or so of climbing there is a good view of **Jichu Drakye**, although the upper part of the ridge blocks the view of Jhomolhari unless you continue to the highest ridge at 4750m. You are likely to encounter grazing yaks, and occasionally blue sheep, on the upper slopes.

A second alternative, which can be combined with the walk up the ridge, is to trek up the main valley towards the last house, then continue up the valley towards Jichu Drakye. You will see much of this country if you trek over Nyile La to **Lingzhi**.

A third hike is to go up towards the head of the valley in the direction of **Jhomolhari**.

There is a very rough overgrown trail that cuts across moraines and through brush that leads to the foot of the mountain. You can't get very far, but there are good views in the upper part of the valley.

The last alternative is an expedition to **Tshophu**, a high-altitude lake. High on the opposite side of the river to the east is a bowl with a lake that has a good supply of spotted trout. To get to the lake, follow the trail north to the last settlement in the valley (as described in Day 5 of the Jhomolhari trek 2). It takes about one hour to get to the top of the ridge and then another 30 minutes following a stream to the lake.

Day 5: Jangothang to Lingzhi

18km / 6-7 hours / 840m ascent, 870m descent

If you are having problems with the altitude at Jangothang, don't go on to Lingzhi.

Ten minutes beyond the camp are three stone houses inhabited by park rangers and a few elderly people. This is the last settlement in the valley and it's an extremely isolated place. Near the houses the trail turns a corner and there's a spectacular view of Jichu Drakye.

Descend and cross a log bridge at 4160m to the left bank of the Paro Chhu, then start up a steep traverse that heads back downstream. The trail crests at the foot of a large side valley and follows the valley eastwards. Jichu Drakye towers above the Paro Chhu valley and soon the top of Jhomolhari appears over the ridge above the camp at Jangothang. The snow peak in the middle is a secondary summit of Jhomolhari.

At 4470m the trail traverses under the big rocks that were visible from the camp, leads to the left and enters a large east-west glacial valley with numerous moraines. The trees have been left far below; there are a few small gentians, but otherwise it's just grass, tundra and small juniper bushes. You may spot blue sheep on the hillside above and see fat marmots darting into their burrows.

There is a false summit with a cairn at 4680m. As the trail approaches the ridge you can see Jichu Drakye to the northwest. After a very short downhill stretch the trail climbs further up a moraine and offers spectacular views of the sharp ridge that juts out from Jichu Drakye. You can see the prayer flags on the pass far above.

The final pull is up a scree slope to **Nyile La** (4870m), about four hours from the camp.

If you're ambitious you can climb the ridge to the northwest and go even higher. On one side of the ridge you can see the peaks of Jhomolhari 2 and Jichu Drakye; on the other side is Tserim Kang (6789m).

As Nyile La is frequently very windy, you probably won't stay long on the pass. The descent is through more scree along the side of the hill. This makes it awkward and uncomfortable to walk because the trail slopes outward as it traverses the side of the hill.

It's a long descent to a stream on the valley floor at 4450m. There is some vegetation here, mostly grass, juniper and cotoneaster. This is an excellent place to stop for lunch.

The trail now travels north, contouring along the side of the hill high above the valley. The opposite hillside is completely covered with rhododendrons. It is a long traverse on a good trail with a couple of little ups, but mostly down and level. Eventually you can see an army camp near the river below; the white tower of Lingzhi Dzong is visible on the top of a ridge in the distance.

It is a long walk in and out of side valleys to a lookout at 4360m, then the trail descends steeply into the large Jaje Chhu valley. There are many switchbacks on the rocky trail as it makes its way down through the heavy stands of rhododendron and birch to a yak pasture on the valley floor. Jichu Drakye and Tserim Kang tower over the head of the valley and you can see some remarkable examples of moraines on their lower slopes. Much of the rest of the trek gives you an outstanding lesson in geography, with several good examples of both terminal and lateral moraines.

The camp is at **Chha Shi Thang** near a large stone community hall (4010m) used by both Bhutanese travellers and trekking groups. Perched on a cliff on the north side of the valley is the small Geu Goemba, but it's not visible from the trail. Lingzhi is up the obvious trail on the opposite side of the Jaje Chhu.

If you take a spare day here, you can make an excursion to Chhokam Tsho at 4340m near the base camp of Jichu Drakye. During the hike you may encounter blue sheep and musk deer. If you are continuing to Thimphu, schedule a rest day here. The village and dzong at Lingzhi are worth visiting, and it's useful to rest up for the following strenuous trek day.

Day 6: Lingzhi to Shodu

22km / 8-9 hours / 940m ascent, 920m descent

Start early because this day is long and tiring. Climb towards a white chorten on a ridge above the camp, then turn south up the deep Mo Chhu valley. The trail stays on the west side of the largely treeless valley, climbing steadily and crossing numerous side streams, most without bridges. About three hours from camp the trail crosses the Mo Chhu. There is no bridge and the river has broken into many small channels, presenting a tedious route-finding exercise, jumping among hummocks of grass and slippery rocks.

The trail climbs steeply up the side of the main valley and crosses into a large side valley, climbing above a stream. It then makes an impressive climb up the headwall, switchbacking through rocks to a large cairn atop Yeli La at 4930m. Try to avoid walking with the pack animals because the trail is carved into a rock cliff near the pass and is quite narrow. From the pass, on a clear day, you can see Jhomolhari, Gangchhenta and Tserim Kang.

It's a steep descent into a hanging valley, passing a small lake at 4830m. The trail follows the outflow from the lake, descending into another huge valley and another, larger lake, Khedo Tsho, at 4720m. Watch for blue sheep grazing alongside the lake. The trail then crosses the upper reaches of the Jarad-inthang Chhu and descends along the valley, following the river southwards for a very long distance, crossing several side streams. After crossing back to the east bank on a log bridge at 4340m, the trail reaches a chorten at 4150m where it turns eastwards into the upper Wang Chhu valley. Descending and crossing to the south bank (river right) of the Wang Chhu on a log bridge, the trail traverses a narrow, sandy slope to a camping place at **Shodu** (4080m), just at the tree line.

Day 7: Shodu to Barshong

16km / 5-6 hours / 250m ascent, 670m descent

Upon leaving Shodu the trail crosses to river left and passes an abandoned army camp and a small alternative camp site. The trail traverses under steep yellow cliffs with a few meditation caves carved into them. It is believed that the Zhabdrung spent some time in these caves. Descending on a steep stone staircase, the trail reaches the river, crossing it on a log bridge at 3870m. For the next three hours the trail crosses the river five more

times, sloping through muddy cypress forests on the south slope and hugging the steep canyon walls and crossing large side streams on the north slope, eventually ending up on the north bank (river left) at 3580m.

The route climbs gradually for one hour to **Barshong**, where there is a dilapidated community hall and the ruins of a small dzong. The designated camp is below the ruins at 3710m, but it is in a swampy meadow and most groups elect to continue to a better camp by the river, about 1½ hours beyond (see below).

Day 8: Barshong to Dolam Kencho

15km / 4-6 hours / 290m ascent, 640m descent

The trail descends gently through a dense forest of rhododendron, birch and conifers, then drops steeply on a rocky trail to meet the Wang Chhu. Thirty minutes of walking through a larch forest leads to a clearing known as **Ta Gume Thang** (Waiting for Horses) at 3370m. Most groups camp here or 15 minutes further on at **Dom Shisa** (Where the Bear Died) instead of Barshong.

Stay on river left, climbing over ridges and descending to side streams. The route then makes a steep climb to 3340m. After traversing for about 30 minutes in rhododendron forests, a trail leads off to the right. This descends to **Dolam Kencho**, a pleasant camp in a large meadow at 3320m. If your group has elected to shorten the trek and continue on to Dodina, stay on the left-hand trail, bypassing Dolam Kencho, and climb to a crest at 3430m.

Day 9: Dolam Kencho to Dodina

8km / 3-4 hours / 500m ascent, 930m descent

From the camp the trail climbs back to the trail, reaching a crest with a cairn at 3430m. The trail descends to a stream at 3060m, then climbs again to a pass at 3120m. Another short descent and climb through bamboo forest leads to a rocky stream bed, which the trail follows down to the remains of a logging road along the Wang Chhu at 2720m. It is then a 15-minute walk south along a rocky route to the roadhead at **Dodina** (2640m), opposite the bridge that leads to Cheri Goemba.

JHOMOLHARI TREK 2

If you want to avoid high altitude it's best to return from Jangothang to Drukgyel Dzong

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 8 days

Max Elevation 4520m

Standard Medium

Season April to June, September to November

Start/Finish Drukgyel Dzong

Access Town Paro

Summary The shorter and easier version of the main Jhomolhari trek goes to the Jhomolhari base camp at Jangothang, returning either via the same route or by an alternative trail.

by the same route. The trek described here is an alternative route that is less strenuous than the classic Jhomolhari trek, but still reaches an elevation that could cause altitude problems.

Days 1-4: Drukgyel Dzong to Jangothang

Follow days 1 to 4 of the main Jhomolhari trek (see p216).

Day 5: Jangothang to Chora

16km / 6-7 hours / 810m ascent, 1090m descent

The trail leads north to the last settlement in the valley and drops to the Paro Chhu, crossing it on a wooden bridge. Switchback up the side of the hill to a large cirque and the lake of Tshopu (4380m), which is inhabited by a flock of ruddy shelducks. Climb high above the eastern side of the lake, passing a second lake as the trail climbs across a scree slope to a crest. Descend into a hidden valley and climb steeply to **Bhonte La** at 4890m.

From the pass the route descends a scree slope, then winds down a ridge with a lot of crisscrossing yak trails. It finally switchbacks down to the Dhumzo Chhu. Trek downstream below the few houses of Dhumzo to a bridge, cross to the south side of the river and make a short climb to a camp in a meadow at **Chora**, 3800m.

Day 6: Chora to Thombu Shong

11km / 4-5 hours / 720m ascent, 340m descent

The trail climbs 100m over a ridge, then drops to another stream. Crossing that stream, the trail heads up the hillside, dropping into a small side valley before emerging onto a ridge. Here the route turns south, ascending past a few huts to **Takhung La** (4520m). A short descent leads to **Thombu Shong** (4180m), with three yak herders' huts.

Day 7: Thombu Shong to Sharna Zampa

13km / 4-5 hours / 200m ascent, 1650m descent
Climb out of the valley to Thombu La at 4380m, then drop gradually to about 4000m. The trail then makes a steep descent, switch-backing down the ridge, finally reaching the helipad at **Gunitsawa** (2730m). Camp here or cross the river and go upstream to camp at **Sharna Zampa**, the same place as Day 1.

Day 8: Sharna Zampa to Drukgyel Dzong

17km / 4-6 hours / 80m ascent, 360m descent
Follow Day 1 of the Jhomolhari trek in reverse to **Drukgyel Dzong**.

LAYA-GASA TREK

This trek begins in the Paro valley and follows the same route as the Jhomolhari trek as far as Lingzhi, then heads north into the high country. Snow can close the high passes, but they are generally open from April to June and mid-September to mid-November. The best trekking month in the Laya region is April.

The trek will introduce you to the unusual culture of the Layap people and offers a stop at a natural hot spring in Gasa. If you are lucky, you may also see takins and Bhutan's national flower, the blue poppy.

Days 1-5: Drukgyel Dzong to Lingzhi

Follow Days 1 to 5 of the Jhomolhari trek (see p216).

Day 6: Lingzhi to Chebisa

10km / 5-6 hours / 280m ascent, 410m descent
Cross the stream below the Chha Shi Thang camp on a wooden bridge and climb up the opposite side to a chorten below Lingzhi Dzong. In the valley to the east is a cluster of wood-shingled houses that is one part of

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 14 days
Max Elevation 5005m
Standard Medium-hard
Season April to June, September to November
Start Drukgyel Dzong
Finish Tashithang

Access Towns Paro, Punakha

Summary This trek is an extension of the Jhomolhari trek. It offers diverse flora and fauna, as well as a good opportunity to spot blue sheep.

YUGYEL DZONG

The third *druk desi*, Mingyur Tenpa, who ruled from 1667 to 1680, built the dzong in Lingzhi. It is on a hill about 200m above Lingzhi village and is quite close to the Tibetan border. The dzong was destroyed in the 1897 earthquake, but was rebuilt in the 1950s to serve as an administrative headquarters.

It's quite small, with a few offices along the outside wall and a two-storey *utse* (central tower) in the centre. Some years ago the basement was used as a jail to house murderers and temple robbers, but the facilities were quite primitive and the dzong is no longer used for this purpose. There are only a few monks staying in the dzong.

Lingzhi village. There is a medicinal-plant collection centre there. If you look back at Tserim Kang you can see a very distinct rock pinnacle sticking up at the end of the east ridge.

There is a direct route that stays level along the side of the hill, but you can take a short diversion and climb to Lingzhi Dzong, which sits at 4220m atop a ridge that separates the main valley from a side valley.

Walk down the ridge from the dzong and rejoin the lower trail. The Lingzhi La at the head of the valley was a trade route between Punakha and the Tibetan town of Gyantse and was also used by Tibetan armies during various attacks on Bhutan. The name of Lingzhi's dzong is **Yugyel Dzong**; it was built to control travel over the Lingzhi La.

The largest part of Lingzhi village is hidden in a valley formed by the ridge upon which the dzong was built. There are fields of wheat and barley in the upper part of the side valley. The trail crosses the lower part, where there are a few houses, a school and post office (with a telephone) at 4080m. The Lingzhi region has a wide variety of herbs, many of which have medicinal value. The National Institute of Traditional Medicine in Thimphu has a large herb collecting and drying project here. Because of the high elevation, the only other major crop that grows well is barley.

After a look around the village, walk out of town on a level trail. It's a pleasant hike on a good trail along a hillside covered in wildflowers and junipers. Far to the north you can see

Jhari La and some of the sharp hills you must cross to get to Laya.

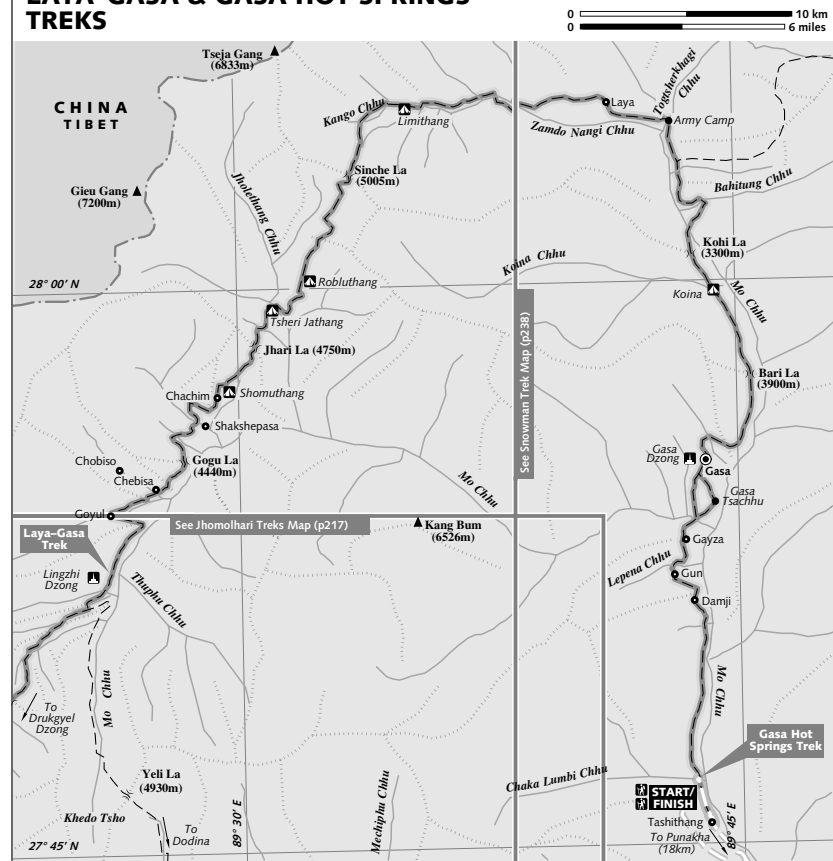
The trail traverses high above the river, which flows in a valley so steep that there are very few houses. The path descends to cross a small stream, then continues along the side of the valley, climbing gently. This area is the source for many plants of medicinal value and the entire hillside looks like a colourful herb garden.

About one hour from Lingzhi the trail reaches a cairn and prayer flags on a ridge at 4140m. The route turns into another side valley and makes a long gradual descent to the pleasant settlement of **Goyul** (3870m). In this compact village the stone houses are clustered together, unusual in Bhutan. Surrounding the village are large fields of barley.

Goyul is at the side of a stream with dramatic rock walls towering above. Leaving Goyul, the trail climbs then traverses for an hour to a chorten that overlooks another side valley. A short descent leads into the spectacular Chebisa valley, with a frozen waterfall at its head. The camp site is on a meadow opposite **Chebisa** (3880m). Upstream of the camp is the twin village of **Chobiso**.

Day 7: Chebisa to Shomuthang

17km / 6-7 hours / 890m ascent, 540m descent
The route climbs the ridge behind Chebisa, passing a few houses above the main part of the village, then makes a long, steep climb up a featureless slope. There are large herds of blue sheep living in the rocks above, which

LAYA-GASA & GASA HOT SPRINGS TREKS

you are sure to spot. Watch for bearded vultures and Himalayan griffons flying overhead. At about 4410m the trail levels out and traverses to **Gogu La** (4440m). It's not really a pass; it just crosses a ridge that leads off the top of the hill. From the ridge the trail descends into a side valley through a deep forest of rhododendrons.

It's a long descent to a stream at 4170m, then the trail climbs again over a small ridge through a cedar forest, passing several places where the hillside has been burned. The trail crosses the ridge at 4210m and descends on a muddy path into the main Jholethang Chhu valley in a deep forest of fir and birch. There's a little climb past some yak herders' huts and then over the side of the valley and down to **Shakshepasa** (3980m) and a helipad, marked by a big H.

At the bottom there's a marsh and a fairly messy stream crossing with many little channels to jump across on hummocks of moss, muddy earth and rocks. On the opposite side is a good spot for lunch.

There are yak herders' huts downstream, but otherwise the valley is uninhabited. The trail now goes quite steeply up the northern side of the valley. At about 4200m it levels and heads into a side valley, passing a couple of yak herders' huts and traversing high above the valley floor on river right to Chachim, a yak pasture at 4260m.

The camp is in a cluster of brush beside a stream at the bottom of the valley. There is a path that leads directly to the camp from Chachim, but it's a steep, rough trail with a lot of bushwhacking. A longer, but better, route follows a larger trail that contours up the side of the valley past the camp. You can then drop down a side trail to **Shomuthang** (4220m).

This deserted spot is not a particularly good camp site but by camping here you get a head start on tomorrow's pass. If you're travelling in the opposite direction, you should camp down by the river at Shakshepasa.

Day 8: Shomuthang to Robluthang

18km / 6-7 hours / 700m ascent, 760m descent

The trail climbs from the camp up the valley, starting on river right, crossing to river left and then crossing back again at 4360m. The white flowers are edelweiss and the snow peak visible to the southeast is Kang Bum (6526m).

The trail climbs out of the valley through pretty desolate country to Jhari La (4750m),

about two hours from camp. There are four cairns and some prayer flags here. In the distance to the northeast you can see Sinche La, the next obstacle on the route to Laya. The big snow peak to the north is 6840m Gangchhenta (Great Tiger Mountain; ta means tiger). Tserim Kang and the top of Jhomolhari are visible if the weather is clear.

On the north side of the pass the trail switchbacks down to a little stream at 4490m, then becomes a rough, rocky route through rhododendrons on the stream's left. Soon the vegetation changes to big rhododendrons, birches and firs and there are lots of slippery loose rocks on the trail. There is a pleasant lunch spot at the bottom beside a log bridge and stream at 4050m.

Follow the stream gently downhill through bushes on river left as it makes its way to the main valley. It's a gradual descent to a meadow by the Jholethang Chhu at 3990m, which you cross on a log bridge that is about 1km upstream. A yak trail leads west up the valley towards Tibet.

There is a camp called **Tsheri Jathang** by the river. Herds of takin migrate to this valley in summer and remain for about four months. Takins are very disturbed by the presence of other animals. The valley has been declared a special takin sanctuary and yak herders have agreed not to graze their animals in the valley when the takins are here.

The trail climbs steeply on the northern side to a crest at about 4150m. It then traverses into a side valley past a tiny lake. There are good camping places in a rocky meadow named **Robluthang** at 4160m.

Day 9: Robluthang to Limithang

19km / 6-7 hours / 850m ascent, 870m descent

This is a long, hard day, crossing Sinche La, the last and highest pass on the trek.

Over the hill above the camp is a little stone house where a Laya woman lives. She'll be happy to sell you trinkets if you are in the mood for shopping; she is also the person responsible for the local *arra* (spirit) your guide was drinking last night. The trail climbs through the remnants of a burned forest and up the hillside through some boggy patches. It follows a set of steep switchbacks to a shelf at 4390m, then turns into another large glacial side valley. From here the pass looks a long way away – and it is.

Follow a stream for a while, crossing to river right on an icy log bridge at 4470m, then climb onto a moraine and traverse past lots of marmot holes. You may be able to spot blue sheep high on the slopes to the north before the trail crosses back to stream left. Another climb through rocks leads to the foot of the pass at 4720m.

It's a tough climb from here to the pass because the high altitude will slow you considerably. Passing a false summit with a cairn, the trail levels out a little before reaching some rock cairns and prayer flags on Sinche La (5005m), about five hours from camp. The snow-covered peak of Gangchhenta fills the horizon to the north.

The descent is on a rough, rocky trail that follows a moraine into another glacial valley. Small rocks on the path keep sliding out and threatening to twist your ankle. Eventually you arrive at the Kango Chhu, a stream below a terminal moraine that forms the end of another valley to the west.

Cross the Kango Chhu to river left on a small log bridge at 4470m. A short distance beyond the stream crossing is a yak pasture and camping spot next to a huge rock. It's best to continue to Limithang to camp; follow the valley northwards, staying high as the stream falls away below you.

The valley from Gangchhenta enters from the northwest and provides more lessons in glaciology. There is a huge terminal moraine and a glacial lake at the foot of the valley. You can see classic examples of lateral moraines where the glacier has pushed rocks up on both sides of the valley.

Beyond an uninhabited stone house the trail starts a steep descent to the valley floor. It switchbacks down with the terminal moraine looming above, crossing the Kango Chhu on a bridge at 4260m. After a short climb through rhododendrons the trail levels out on a plateau above the Zamdo Nangi Chhu. It's then a short walk on a good trail through a cedar forest interspersed with small meadows to **Limithang** (4140m), a lovely camp site in a big meadow by the river. The peak of Gangchhenta towers over the camp site, even though it's quite a distance away.

Day 10: Limithang to Laya

10km / 4-5 hours / 60m ascent, 340m descent

After 20 minutes of walking, the trail crosses to river left and enters a deep cedar forest, crossing many little, muddy side streams.

After a while there is a stone herders' hut with a sod roof; here the vegetation changes to fir trees draped with lichen.

Cross a large stream that flows in from the north and make a steep rocky descent down the side of the valley to the river at 3800m, then cross to river right on a wooden cantilever bridge. A short distance later, cross back and make a stiff climb.

It's a long walk through the heavily wooded, uninhabited valley. Descend, then cross a waterfall that flows across the trail, then traverse with many small ups and downs. Near a point where you can see a single house on a ridge-top to the east, there is an inconspicuous trail junction. It's not important which trail you choose: the upper trail leads to the top of Laya, and the other leads to the lower part of the village.

If you take the upper trail you will cross a ridge and see the stone houses and wheat fields of **Laya** laid out below you with some abandoned houses and a goemba above.

Gangchhenta dominates the skyline to the west of the village and from some places you can get a glimpse of Masang Gang (7165m). In the village centre is a community school, hospital, archery field and the first shop since the Paro valley. You can camp in the fields below the school at 3840m.

Day 11: Laya to Koina

19km / 6-7 hours / 260m ascent, 1070m descent

Layaps are not noted for their reliability and punctuality, and the horses may arrive late. Below the village, the trail drops back to the river. The trail exits the village through a *khonying* (arch chorten), then passes another chorten at Taje-kha as it descends on a muddy trail to a stream. There are a few houses near the trail, but it's mostly deep forest all the way to the river.

There is an alternative camping place on a plateau at 3590m, next to the large Togtsherkhagi Chhu, which flows in from the northeast. Cross the river on a wooden bridge and climb to the stone buildings of the army camp on the opposite side. At the army post is a wireless station and a checkpoint where the guide registers the trekkers' names; you'll have to wait here until the formalities are completed. The peak of Masang Gang is barely visible at the head of the side valley.

The route now follows the Mo Chhu downstream all the way to Tashithang. Beyond the army camp the trail goes uphill, crossing a few streams and making little ups and downs.

LAYA

The people of Laya have their own language, customs and distinct dress. Laya language is similar to Dzongkha, but if people speak fast, Dzongkha speakers cannot understand them. The Layap language is said to use very respectful form of speech.

The women keep their hair long and wear peculiar conical bamboo hats with a bamboo spike at the top, held on by a beaded band that reaches to the back of the head. They dress in a black woollen jacket with silver trim and a long woollen skirt with a few stripes in natural earth colours like orange and brown. They wear lots of silver jewellery on their backs; on many women this display includes an array of silver teaspoons.

Spread out over a hillside near the Tibetan border, Laya is one of the highest villages in the country, at 3700m. The peak of the daunting Tsenda Gang (7100m) towers over the village. Villagers raise turnips and mustard and produce one wheat or barley crop a year before the region is snowed in for the winter.

This is Bhutan's primary yak-breeding area; during the summer, people move to the high pastures and live in black tents woven from yak hair.

The village women are easily encouraged to stage an evening 'cultural show', which consists of Bhutanese circle dancing accompanied by traditional Bhutanese and Layap songs.

Women often offer to sell their bamboo hats for Nu 150 or so. It's fine to buy these because they are made locally from native materials, but don't buy ones with beads as these are often family heirlooms and, once sold, cannot be replaced except with cheap plastic beads. Layap women also sometimes come around to trekking camps selling jewellery; most of this is made in Nepal. Unless you particularly want to contribute to the Laya economy you'll probably get less value than what you pay for.

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal passed through Laya and in a small meadow below the village is a chorten with the footprints of the Zhabdrung and his horse.

The region is believed to be a *bey-yul* (hidden land) protected by an ancient gate that leads to Laya village. The Layaps perform a ceremony each year in honour of the protective forces that turned all the stones and trees around the gate into soldiers to repel Tibetan invaders.

About 30 minutes from the army post is an inconspicuous trail junction at 3340m. The route for the Snowman trek leads uphill from here on a tiny path. The route to Gasa keeps going downstream on a muddy trail. After a while it turns a corner into a side valley, goes a short distance up the valley and crosses the Bahitung Chhu at 3290m. This is the traditional lunch spot for this day.

The trail travels alongside the Mo Chhu to an overhanging rock that forms a cave, then crosses to river right at 3240m on a cantilever bridge. The canyon closes in and the trail makes several major climbs over side ridges as it makes its way downstream. Beyond another cave formed by a large overhanging rock the first long, steep climb starts, cresting at the top of a ridge at 3390m. It's a 150m descent to a clear side stream, then the trail wanders up and down near the river as it runs fast through some big cascades in a gorge. After some more ups and downs through bamboo about 100m above the river there is another serious climb to the Kohi Lapcha at 3300m.

The muddy trail stays high for about 30 minutes until it reaches a stone staircase, where it turns into a side valley, traversing for a bit, then dropping to the large Koina Chhu. Welcome to **Koina** (3050m), a muddy bog in the forest by the bridge. There is a single stone house with some muddy camping places scattered around. Because of the deep black mud you must wade through and the damp, soft ground upon which you must pitch your tent, this is the worst camp on the whole trek and perhaps the most unpleasant camp in the Himalaya. There is talk of developing an alternative camping place nearby.

Day 12: Koina to Gasa

14km / 6-7 hours / 900m ascent, 1710m descent

You may think that because you are headed downstream the climbs on this trek are finished, but there's another major ascent ahead – Bari La.

Cross the bridge at Koina and start up the hill. Parts of the trail are so muddy that logs have been placed to form little bridges.

There are also places where the trail follows the side of a ridge and you walk gingerly across logs that dangle out into space. The muddy trail keeps going through a deep forest of fir, in and out of side valleys, for almost three hours to a small rock cairn and a few prayer flags atop Bari La (3900m). Then it's a reasonably level walk to another chorten. There are few good places to stop along this part of the trail, so lunch will probably be an impromptu event.

The route starts down again, sometimes steeply, through a bamboo forest to a stream. At 3080m it rounds a corner where you can finally see Gasa Dzong on the opposite side of a large wooded side valley. The trail descends past an old chorten, then crosses a ridge into a big side valley. It drops and crosses a large stream at 2780m, then traverses along the side of the valley to four chortens on the ridge at 2810m.

The chortens mark the southern boundary of **Gasa town** (2770m). The trail traverses above the soccer and archery ground, past several small teashops, then intersects Gasa's main street, a stone-paved path that leads uphill to the dzong, school and a BHU. Trek downhill to the bazaar, which consists of about nine shops and a police checkpoint. The police post checks permits, providing a perfect excuse to stop for a soft drink or beer at one of the shops.

You can camp in a field near the town, or continue downhill for 1½ hours to the *tsachhu* (hot spring). Many trek itineraries schedule an extra day to laze around in the hot springs – a useful activity after the last two days of strenuous mud walking. See Day 2 of the Gasa Hot Spring trek (p228) for details of the springs. If it is raining, the

remainder of this trek is perfect country in which to meet leeches.

Day 13: Gasa to Damji

18km / 5-6 hours / 470m ascent, 280m descent

Follow the trail generally south, passing a few houses and *mani* walls, as it descends to the primary branch of the Mo Chhu, which has flowed through the mountains from Lingzhi to join the other branch of the Mo Chhu that flows from Gasa. Look back for a good view of the dzong, sitting on top of the hill. Be careful as you follow this trail; near a chorten there is a fork where a second trail leads steeply downhill to the hot spring. The trail towards Damji goes straight here.

After a long descent, cross the river at 2360m on a cable suspension bridge high above the water. The trail starts climbing on the opposite side. At 2510m there's a picnic table at a lookout, from where you can see down to the hot spring and back to a large part of yesterday's trail, although it's all in the forest. Gasa Dzong with its distinctive rounded front wall is visible, glued to the valley wall and seeming to float in space.

There's a crest at 2330m where the trail turns south along the Mo Chhu (from here downstream there is only one river known as the Mo Chhu) and then goes up and down on the side of the valley, high above the river. It descends through bamboo to a stream, then starts climbing back again to a meadow at 2530m. Gasa Dzong and the snow peaks towards Laya are still visible.

The trail stays high, crossing a meadow and descending to the small village of **Gayza** at 2500m. The trail then drops into a deep subtropical ravine filled with trees and ferns, crossing the Lepena Chhu on a spectacular suspension bridge high above a narrow wooded gorge at 2300m.

The trail climbs to another crest and traverses around the top of a side valley to the four houses of Gun at 2400m, then drops again and climbs back up to a chorten. Then it's a short walk to the large village of Damji (2430m), in a huge side valley with an amphitheatre of rice terraces. Pass the school and traverse to the southern end of the village where there is a large cluster of houses and a little chorten at 2380m. A road from Tashithang is slowly being built towards Damji and is planned to continue on to Gasa, the only *dzongkhag* headquarters that is not reached by a road.

TRASHI THONGMOEN DZONG

This dzong in Gasa lies on the old trade route to Tibet. The Zhabdrung built it in 1646 after his victories over the Tibetans. Originally called Drukgyel (Victorious) Dzong, it saw a lot of activity when defending the country against Tibetan invasions in the 17th and 18th centuries. It lay in ruins after being destroyed by fire, but has been renovated and now serves as the *dzongkhag* administrative headquarters.

Day 14: Damji to Tashithang

16km / 5 hours / 250m ascent, 870m descent

Until the road from Tashithang to Damji is complete you'll have to walk, meeting the road at whatever point the construction has been completed.

Trek past a few more houses and fields as the trail climbs to a chorten at the southern end of Damji. The trail begins a long descent to the river, first winding down gently in the jungle past a few streams, then switchbacking steeply down on a rocky trail in the shadow of a huge rock. After a long descent you will cross a wooden bridge over a side stream at 1960m. There is an alternative camp site here near the banks of the river, about one hour below Damji.

The trail follows the Mo Chhu downstream through forests where you may encounter rhesus monkeys and takins alongside the river. You'll have to stick close to your guide as he inquires where the route joins the road. At some point you'll climb from the river to the unfinished road. If you're lucky, vehicles will be waiting there to take you to Punakha, otherwise you will walk down to **Tashithang** at 1840m. It's then an 18km (one-hour) drive to Punakha; it's a good road, but the first 5km is unpaved.

GASA HOT SPRING TREK

Being at a reasonably low elevation, this trek is possible from February to March and October to December. There are leeches in the lower part of the trek, which make it particularly unpleasant during the rainy season.

Day 1: Tashithang to Damji

16km / 5-6 hours / 870m ascent, 250m descent

Follow Day 14 of the Laya-Gasa trek in reverse, driving as far as possible from Tashithang, dropping to the trail and climbing

THE TREK AT A GLANCE**Duration** 5 days**Max Elevation** 2430m**Standard** Easy**Season** February to March, October to December**Start/Finish** Tashithang**Access Town** Punakha

Summary This trek is the last part of the Laya-Gasa trek in reverse. The hot springs are fun, but there is a lot of climbing to get there.

steeply to the terraced rice fields of **Damji** (2430m).

Day 2: Damji to Gasa Tsachhu

16km / 4-5 hours / 470m descent

Follow Day 13 of the Laya-Gasa trek in reverse along the side of the valley, then drop to the large stream below Gasa. A trail leads north from here, following the stream directly to the hot spring at 2240m. The Jigme Dorji National Park administers the hot-spring complex and offers various kinds of accommodation in a grove of large birch trees. There are some houses that can be rented, a few buildings that can be used as kitchens, a dormitory and numerous good camping places. It is a pleasant place to spend a day.

The hot springs are by the bank of the stream, below the hotel complex. There are five concrete pools and a shower room. The water temperature is 40°C, which is comfortably warm, but not scalding.

You may encounter women selling souvenirs; it's mostly Tibetan-style jewellery made in Nepal.

Day 3: A Day at Gasa Tsachhu

You can laze around in the hot springs or take a packed lunch and climb about two hours to Gasa village and the dzong.

Days 4-5: Gasa Tsachhu to Tashithang

Follow Days 13 to 14 of the Laya-Gasa trek and drive back to Punakha or Thimphu.

GANGTE TREK

This trek is recommended from March to May and September to November, although it's usually possible to trek here throughout winter. It is especially beautiful in April, when rhododendrons are in bloom.

Day 1: Phobjikha to Zasa

15km / 6-7 hours / 610m ascent, 410m descent

The trek starts near the village of Tabiting, a short distance up the road from the Dewachen Hotel, just before the Black Mountain National Park warden's office at 2890m. Follow a wide trail uphill beside a stream that climbs above a fenced-in potato field. Climb through a sparse forest of blue pine to **Kelwag**, a large meadow of scrub bamboo at 3120m. The climb becomes steeper as it switchbacks up a ridge to a few prayer flags at 3370m.

It's then a gentle ascent through pines and rhododendrons to **Tsele La** at 3430m.

From the pass the trail descends through scrub bamboo into the huge Kangkha Chhu valley and traverses above a single wooden house at **Tsele Pang** (3280m). Descend further into a forest of cypress, juniper, rhododendron and daphne to the small village of **Tserina** at 3120m. There is a trail junction here; if you are in a large group, follow the lower trail to the camping place at Dzomdu Gyakha. The upper route to Gogona crosses two small streams and, after a few minutes, reaches the extensive sheep pastures and potato fields of Gankakha at 3030m. It's then a long traverse through forests to a few houses at Gogona (3090m).

Gogona Lhakhang is dominated by statues of Chenresig, Atisha and several manifestations of Guru Rinpoche. The walls are covered with elaborate paintings and on the *gorikha*

(porch) is a painting of Lama Drukpa Kunley. Most of the *gomchens* (lay monks) from Gogona travel to Thimphu for winter.

Camping is not allowed at the monastery, therefore it's necessary to trek around the ridge to a large side valley and the pretty village of **Dangchu** (3040m). The women here wear blankets and speak a different dialect called Bjop-kha (language of the nomads). The usual camping place is near the head of the grassy valley beside a small stream in a yak pasture known as **Zasa** (3130m). This is a small camping place; larger groups usually camp below in the valley at Dzomdu Gyakha or near the cheese factory at Sha Gogona, a community-based dairy farm that produces Gouda-style cheese.

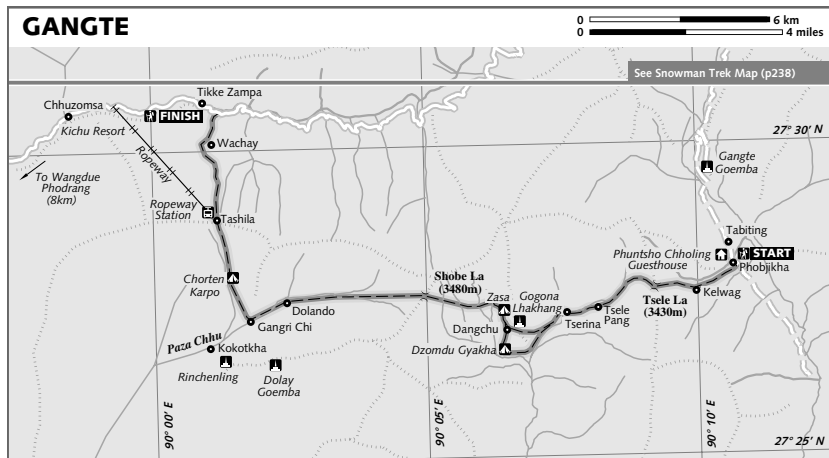
Day 2: Zasa to Chorten Karpo

16km / 5-7 hours / 450m ascent, 860m descent

An inconspicuous trail leads up the large meadow above Zasa, eventually entering forests on the northwest corner. Climb into a forest of fir, oak, spruce, dwarf rhododendron, miniature azaleas, cypress and juniper. A large area of this forest was burned by a fire that was probably caused by lightning. Much of the undergrowth consists of daphne (the plant used for handmade paper), which may be identified by its sweet-smelling, whitish-cream-coloured flowers. Climb for about two hours to a crest at 3360m high, then again for another 30 minutes to **Shobe La**, a forested ridge marked by a rock cairn at 3480m. A rocky trail

THE TREK AT A GLANCE**Duration** 3 days**Max Elevation** 3480m**Standard** Easy**Season** March to May, September to November**Start** Phobjikha**Finish** Tikke Zampa**Access Towns** Phobjikha, Wangdue Phodrang

Summary A short trek at relatively low elevations, visiting several remote villages and monasteries.



leads down through a forest of cypress, juniper and rhododendron to a clearing at 3270m that offers a good lunch spot.

Descend further on a rocky trail to join a rough forest road at 2970m. The trek from here to the Tashila ropeway strays on and off this road, which is used by tractors to transport the timber harvested in this region. Follow the road across a stream, then through an oak forest, following a few trails that provide short cuts to avoid long loops in the road, eventually arriving at **Dolando**, an isolated sawmill and several wooden houses at 2790m. The road makes a small detour around a rock that is said to be the remains of a demon. If you look closely you may be able to see the marks left when Guru Rinpoche beat the demon with his stick.

Follow the road alongside a stream, crossing to river right at 2730m, and continue to another sawmill at the edge of the broad Karte Thang valley near Gangri Chi village at 2670m. Below is the village of Kokotkha, with about 60 rustic houses. The large Kokotkha valley to the southwest was once considered as a site for a domestic airport to serve Wangdue Phodrang and Punakha, but this plan never materialised.

Atop a ridge to the southwest is the large Rinchhenling monastery. It's about a 15-minute walk. High above to the south is Dolay Goemba. The trek route turns north here and follows the small Paza Chhu, then climbs over a ridge on a narrow trail, re-crosses the road and climbs gently to Chorten Karpo, four chortens in a forest of blue pines at 2680m. The Nepali chorten is in honour of a Je Khenpo. The next one commemorates a rich merchant from Kokotkha; next is a *kani* (archlike chorten) with its middle filled in; and the southernmost chorten was built by a Kokotkha flour merchant.

Day 3: Chorten Karpo to Tikke Zampa

12km / 4-5 hours / 120m ascent, 1340m descent
The trail climbs from the camp to join the forest road at 2720m. It's then an easy walk to the top of the ridge at 2800m. You can take a trail that cuts across the top of the ridge, but it's more interesting to continue a few minutes to the top of the **Tashila ropeway** and watch rice and building supplies coming up and logs going down. It's not officially allowed, but you may be able to get a ride down the 6km-long cableway and save yourself a knee-cracking

descent, but note the warning: 'The passenger who travels by Tashila ropeway will be at their own risk'. For more about the ropeway see the Wangdue Phodrang to Pele La section (p151).

The walk down is through a beautiful forest, with the undergrowth changing from rhododendrons and magnolias to ferns and dwarf bamboo. Experts claim that this stretch of trail is one of the finest bird-watching areas in Bhutan. Among the birds found here are laughing thrushes, shrikes, magpies and woodpeckers.

There's a trail junction at 2250m. Take the right-hand fork and keep descending until you reach the houses and fields of Wachay at about 1880m. You may need to rely on a guide to traverse through fields and farmyards as the trail plunges down past steep terraced wheat fields to two shops at 1460m on the road about 300m east of the bridge at **Tikke Zampa**.

BUMTHANG CULTURAL TREK

Although it is a short trek, the Bumthang trek is strenuous, featuring a 500m climb to Phephe La. This trek is usually possible from March to May and again from September to November. The start of the trek is a 3km drive up the unpaved road from Kurjey Lhakhang to Toktu Zampa at 2540m, then a short drive to Thangbi Goemba. With luck, the packhorses will be waiting and you can start walking with a minimum of delay.

Day 1: Thangbi Goemba to Sambitang

10km / 2-3 hours / 170m ascent
The road continues up the valley, but you will probably stop at Thangbi Goemba, with its distinctive yellow roof, near the small village of Thangbi. See p174 for a brief description of this goemba.

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 3 days
Max Elevation 3360m
Standard Easy-medium
Season March to May, September to November
Start Thangbi Goemba
Finish Kizum
Access Town Jakar
Summary This trek is so named because the opportunities to visit villages and lhakhangs are greater than on most other treks in Bhutan.

The trail follows a broad ledge above the river past a 70m-long painted *mani* wall and a *khonying* with a mandala painted on the roof inside. Just beyond the arched chorten is a trail junction. Take the trail that leads to a suspension bridge across the Bumthang Chhu (known locally as the Choskhor Chhu). On the opposite side the route traverses.

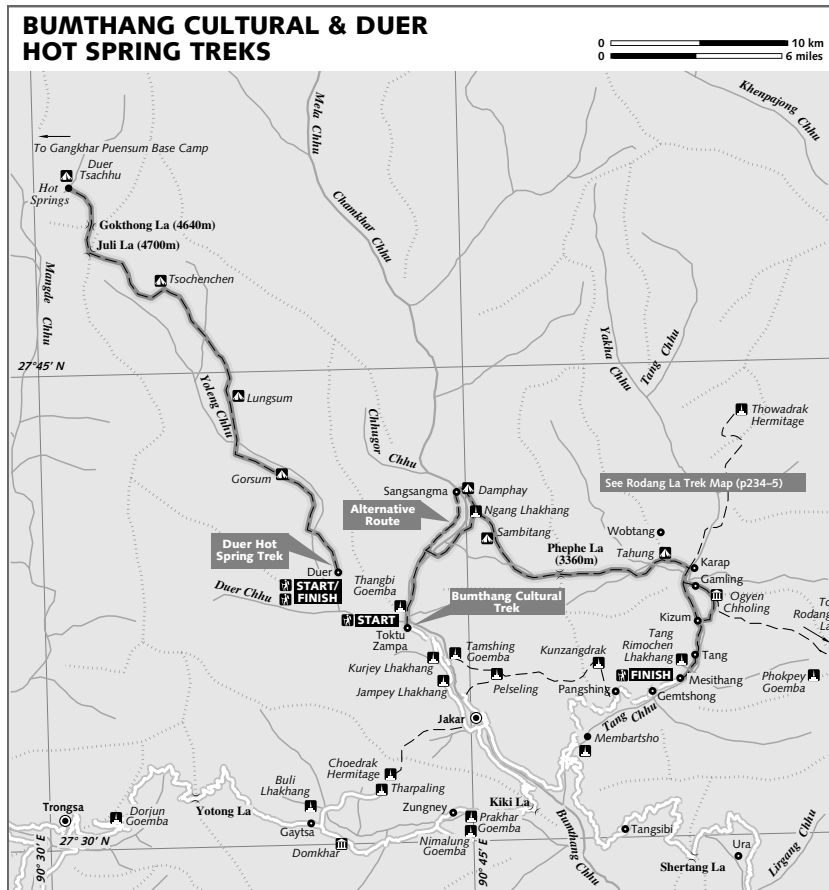
Follow the left bank of the Bumthang Chhu through pleasant meadows and forests of blue pine and scrub. After about an hour of walking you pass the Zangling Lhakhang on the hill to the right. From here it's 15 minutes to a trail junction next to a chorten and prayer wheels. The left branch leads to Ngang Lhakhang; if you follow the right branch it's about 15 minutes to the camp site at Sambitang.

To visit Ngang Lhakhang, make a short, steep climb to a settlement of old-looking houses at 2800m. There are two water-driven prayer wheels; the water comes down an interesting sluiceway of carved wooden pipes. This is Ngang Lhakhang, the Swan Temple. See the description of this interesting temple on p174.

From Ngang Lhakhang it's a 30-minute walk to the camp at **Sambitang**.

Day 2: Sambitang to Ogyen Chholing

18km / 6-7 hours / 750m ascent, 670m descent
The day's walk starts out across meadows, with a lot of dwarf bamboo and several little streams to cross. The trail cuts across the top of some fields, goes over a small hill and down to a stream. Soon you will be convinced that



this cannot be the correct trail and you are hopelessly lost. Don't worry; stick with your guide or the horsemen because it is a narrow, indistinct trail through forests.

After crossing a stream the trail starts climbing, crossing back and forth across the stream on a series of slippery logs and stones. Birches, sycamores, dwarf bamboo and lots of tall bamboo form a cold, sunless forest. Spanish moss drapes from the ancient trees, giving an eerie feel to the steep climb.

Finally, the stream disappears and the climb continues through a rhododendron forest in a dry gully to a rock cairn and a little stone shrine stuffed with offerings of branches and a few ngultrum notes. Tattered prayer flags stretch across the path atop Phephe La (3360m). There is no view from the pass; it is a forested ridge with big birch and fir trees.

There is more deep forest on the opposite side; the trail leads down to a stream at 3200m, then into a side valley covered in dwarf bamboo, passing a small *mani* wall and a *khonying* chorten. Much of the walk is delightful, breaking out of the forest into broad meadows full of grazing yaks and cows.

It continues through ploughed fields and wide meadows and then into a broad valley, surrounded by rounded, treeless hills. Near a herders' hut the trail becomes indistinct as it crosses a meadow. To stay on track, just aim for the trees on the right side of the meadow.

The route keeps going downhill. As it approaches the bottom of the valley, there are several side trails that lead to pastures and buckwheat fields. Take the most prominent trail, which leads downhill to a large stream and a substantial wooden bridge at 2790m near the village of **Tahung**. Behind Tahung is the Australian-assisted Wobtang sheep development project. A rough road suitable only for tractors follows the right bank of the Tang Chhu from the project all the way down the valley to Tang village. The trekking route leads downstream in meadows next to the river, sometimes on the road and sometimes on a footpath. It crosses the stream you have been following on a road bridge and turns a corner into the main valley of the Tang Chhu at 2640m.

Cross the Tang Chhu near Gamling, a large, wealthy village noted for its *yathra* weaving, about 45 minutes downstream.

Walk downstream from Gamling, crossing a stream and following the trail around a farmyard. Soon it starts climbing onto a ridge, reaching four chortens and several large houses at 2760m. **Ogyen Chholing** is on the top of the hill to the right. You can camp near the palace or splurge on a room in the guest house. For more information about Ogyen Chholing Palace and its fascinating museum, see p178.

Day 3: Ogyen Chholing to Kizum

16km / 1 hour / 130m descent

It's a short walk downhill to **Kizum** where the vehicles should be waiting. It's then a 25km drive to the junction of the paved road near Membartsho.

DUER HOT SPRING TREK

With special permission, it might be possible to extend this trek to the base camp of Gangkhar Puensum itself, although this is a rough, difficult route. It is also possible to vary either the upward or return route to travel via the Mande Chhu valley to meet a gravel road that leads west from Trongsa.

Snow covers the route during winter so the trek is considered open from March to April and from September to early November. Its starting point, Duer village, is one hour (5km) of rough driving from Toktu Zampa. This trek includes a visit to a *tsachhu*.

Day 1: Duer to Gorsum

18km / 6-7 hours / 380m ascent

The route follows the valley of the Yoleng Chhu, which is famous for trout, up to **Gorsum** at 3120m.

Day 2: Gorsum to Lungsum

12km / 5 hours / 40m ascent

The route travels through a forest of cypress, juniper, spruce, hemlock and maple. The trail

is muddy and climbs gradually to the camp at **Lungsum** (3160m).

Day 3: Lungsum to Tsochenchen

15km / 6-7 hours / 620m ascent

Trek through more forest to a camp at Tsochenchen, above the tree line at 3780m.

Day 4: Tsochenchen to Duer Tsachhu

18km / 8-9 hours / 1340m ascent, 1530m descent

The day starts with a long climb to a small lake and on to Juli La (4700m), a rocky saddle with a few prayer flags and a good view of the surrounding mountains. After crossing the pass the trail descends to a lake at 4220m, climbs again to Gokthong La (4640m), then switchbacks steeply down through jungle to a camp near the **Duer hot springs** at 3590m. It may be possible to see musk deer, Himalayan bears and blue sheep.

Day 5: A Day at Duer Tsachhu

Take a rest day to relax in the *tsachhu*. There are several wooden tubs set into the ground inside a rough wooden shelter.

Day 6: Duer Tsachhu to Tsochenchen

18km / 6 hours / 1530m ascent, 1340m descent

Return via the same route to Tsochenchen.

Day 7: Tsochenchen to Gorsum

27km / 9 hours / 660m descent

Follow the route back down the valley.

Day 8: Gorsum to Duer

18km / 6 hours / 380m descent

Return to the road.

RODANG LA TREK

Although it was an important trade route before the National Hwy was built, few people travel this path any more. Most trekkers combine this route with the Bumthang cultural trek, starting at Thangbi Goemba. Alternatively, you can start the trek by driving up the Tang valley to Kizum, saving two days of walking.

Rodang La is subject to closure because of snow; this trek is best planned in October and early November as well as late spring.

The trek crosses the road near Lhuentse, which breaks up the continuity of the trekking experience, but offers a chance to visit the remote dzong.

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 10 days

Max Elevation 4160m

Standard Medium-hard

Season October to November

Start Thangbi Goemba

Finish Trashi Yangtse

Access Town Jakar

Summary This trek across eastern Bhutan is tough and involves a tremendously long, steep descent. The logistics are complicated and horses are often difficult to obtain for the final four days of the trek.

Days 1-2: Toktu Zampa to Ogyen Chholing

Follow Days 1 to 2 of the Bumthang cultural trek to **Ogyen Chholing**, at an elevation of 2760m (see p178).

Day 3: Ogyen Chholing to Phokpey

17km / 5-6 hours / 920m ascent

The long climb to Rodang La takes two days. Above Ogyen Chholing the trail is rutted with the hoof prints of cattle. If it's wet, this is a very muddy, miserable, slippery climb. The trail levels out at about 2900m and meets a stream. At about 3000m the cow trails end and it becomes a small footpath through muddy fields and dwarf bamboo.

At 3400m the trail crosses a meadow with more dwarf bamboo. High on the opposite hill you can see the recently built Phokpey Goemba. Climb through the meadow and traverse through forest to another steep, high meadow, finally turning a corner into a side valley. The opposite side is all big firs.

The trail leads up a draw towards the head of the valley and **Phokpey**, a camp in a meadow at 3680m. This is a summer pasture and there is the frame for a house that herders cover with a plastic sheet to use as a shelter. The meadow is surrounded by forest and the ground is dotted with tiny blue alpine flowers. Once the sun goes down, the temperature plummets.

Day 4: Phokpey to Pemi

20km / 6-7 hours / 480m ascent, 1160m descent

The trail goes through a small notch and onto another ridge at 3700m. It traverses the east side of the ridge, passing big rhododendrons with large leaves that curl up in the cold. Soon you will see the pass up ahead. After a long

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 8 days

Max Elevation 4700m

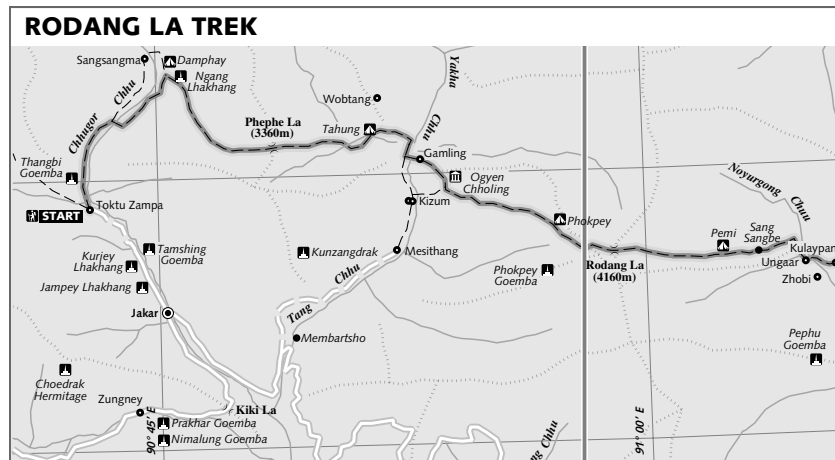
Standard Medium-hard

Season March to April, September to November

Start/Finish Duer

Access Town Jakar

Summary This trek is the old expedition route to Gangkhar Puensum.



traverse at 3770m, the trail begins the final climb to the pass up big stone slabs and a steep stone staircase. **Rodang La** (4160m) is about a two-hour climb from camp. There's a small stone chorten here.

Once across the pass it's a steep descent of nearly 2500m to the valley floor. The descent starts on some rough rocks and an unbelievably long and steep stone staircase that was built when this was the only route between eastern and western Bhutan. This is the same near-vertical slope that the road descends on the eastern side of Thrumshing La, which is only 20km to the south.

You can see the trail far below, snaking down the ridge to the east. This is a tough route for horses, and it is said that even the king walked downhill here.

Part of the route is along a vertical face and the trail is on wooden galleries fastened into the side of the cliff. There are a few small meadows as the trail winds its way down on a complex route through a region where sightings of ghosts and yetis have been reported. Leaving the rhododendrons and conifers, it makes a gentle descent through a forest of broad-leafed species along a ridge to the east to a big meadow called **Pemi** at about 3000m. After a short walk through some dwarf bamboo you reach the ruins of a house and a camp site at 2950m. This is not an ideal camping place because the water is 15 minutes down the side of a hill; go easy on the washing here. The ruined stone building was the grain storehouse during the time of the first and second

kings, when royal parties travelled regularly between Bumthang and Kurtoe.

Day 5: Pemi to Khaine Lhakhang

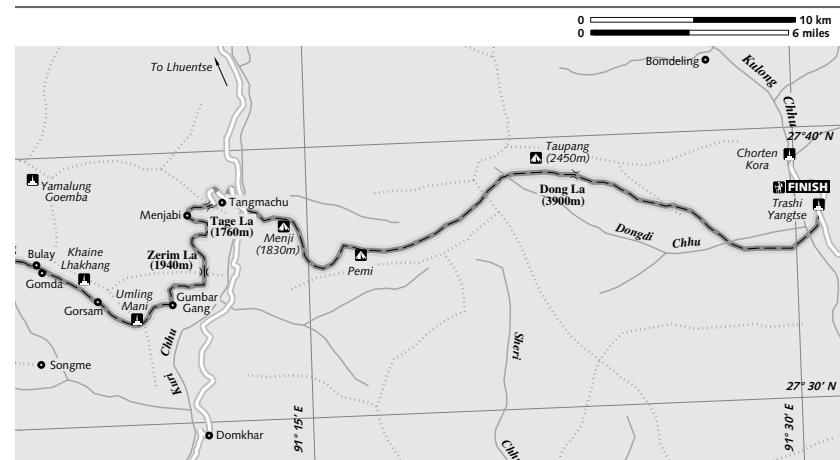
21km / 7-8 hours / 350m ascent, 1340m descent

From Pemi the trail tumbles into the valley of the Noyurgang Chhu. The route leads from the camp through dwarf bamboo, then heads down a damp, rock-filled gully with lots of leaves, moss and wet rocks to pick your way through.

At about 2600m the vegetation changes to ferns and more tropical species and there is a long level stretch through the mud. It then goes down steeply again, working its way out towards the end of a side ridge and a meadow called Sang Sangbe (2300m), where a ghost is said to live. High on the hillslope on the opposite side of the valley is Yamalung Goemba, hidden behind a bunch of very tall trees planted in a circle. The trail drops off the side of the ridge to a bridge over a stream at 1700m. The village of Ungaar is on a ridge above the stream and downstream is another small village named Zhobi. It's then a short walk across rice fields in the bottom of the valley to a suspension bridge over the Noyurgang Chhu at 1660m.

Cross to river left and start climbing through ferns and tropical jungle to Bulay (1800m). The trail passes above the rice terraces of the village, turns a corner and climbs up a little draw. The valley below is covered with rice and temporary shelters used by planters.

The trail makes a long climb as it heads along the valley, traversing in and out of side



valleys and passing numerous villages. Kulaypang (1930m) is a few simple houses and some cornfields. There's an inviting-looking trail that goes down and cuts across the next ridge but the correct trail goes up.

The trail passes below the settlement of Gomda (2040m). The language spoken in these villages is Kurtopa, which Dzongkha speakers cannot understand. After passing a chorten, the trail drops to cross a stream at 2000m, then climbs to a *mani* wall at 2020m. Then it's a level walk past cornfields to the few houses of Gongdra and a Tibetan-style chorten.

Beyond Chanteme, a spread-out village with extensive cornfields, the trail crosses a

stream and makes a climb to **Khaine Lhakhang**. Follow the cement irrigation canal for a while and then climb onto the ridge where the temple sits at 2010m. There are two tall cedars by the monastery and fields of soya beans surrounding it.

You can see a goemba and a village at the eastern end of the ridge on the opposite side of the river. Pephgo Goemba is high above and the town below is Songme.

Day 6: Khaine Lhakhang to Tangmachu

18km / 6-7 hours / 520m ascent, 810m descent

The trail goes down to a stream and up to a BHU and community school in **Gorsam**. It then goes in and out of more side valleys and climbs to 2130m. It's level for about 15 minutes, then starts climbing gently through trees. You can see a glimpse of the road at the bottom of the Kuri Chhu valley.

The Tibetan-style Umling Mani at 2180m is at the corner between the Noyurgang Chhu and the Kuri Chhu valleys. It was built by a lama from Tibet and marks the boundary between the two gewogs (administrative blocks). Here the route turns north up the Kuri Chhu.

The next stretch of trail traverses through four large side valleys, descending to a stream and climbing to the next ridge. The trail emerges from the first valley at Gubar Gang (2120m). After a long, almost level, stretch the trail goes down and up to a chorten on Zerim La (1940m).

The route contours down to the head of a valley at 1840m, where there is a little chorten

KHAINE LHAKHANG

Some people believe that the remote Khaine Lhakhang is one of the 108 temples built by King Songtsen Gampo in AD 659. Three small statues from here are said to have flown of their own accord to Konchogsum Lhakhang in Bumthang, which is said to have been built at the same time.

The primary statue is a 2.5m-high Sakya-muni figure. A statue of Karmapa is on his right and Zhadrung Rinpoche is above him on the left. There are also smaller statues of Milarepa and Guru Rinpoche. The main protective deity is a ferocious god named Taxan, who is depicted riding on a horse. A two-day festival is celebrated here in mid-November.

and a prayer wheel, then immediately starts climbing back through chir pines to 1890m. It traverses grassy slopes in the main valley to another ridge and several herders' huts.

There's one more big side valley to traverse. Descend to a *mani* wall, and pass the fields and houses of Menjabi, a pretty village with large, white Bhutanese houses. Cross the stream at 1540m, then start a long, hot climb on a grassy slope dotted with chir pines to some chortens and a *mani* wall on Täge La (1760m). Southeast of the pass is the Tangmachu High School, where 400 students study on the top of this windswept ridge. It may be possible to camp near the school or, better yet, have vehicles waiting to drive you down to the valley.

It's 8km down the dirt road to the paved road, and 13km from the road junction to Lhuentse. The best way to handle the logistics is to arrange for a vehicle to meet you at **Tangmachu**, take you to Lhuentse to visit the impressive dzong and then drop you off at the bottom of the hill to finish the last of the trek. The vehicle can then drive on to Trashig Yangtse to pick you up four days later.

Day 7: Tangmachu to Menji

16km / 4-5 hours / 690m ascent, 620m descent
From the bridge (1140m) below Tangmachu, the trek starts gradually up through rice terraces and cornfields to Chusa. It then becomes a steep haul up a treeless slope, although the path is beautifully scented with wild mint, lemon grass and artemisia. Camp is at 1830m, above **Menji**, beside the Darchu Pang Lhakhang. The lhakhang's well-kept garden is full of flowers – marigolds, geraniums, dahlias and nasturtiums – and has a vegetable patch of tomatoes and huge cucumbers. There are banana trees, too, and dozens of long-tailed birds in the trees.

Day 8: Menji to Pemi

20km / 3-4 hours / 620m ascent
Continue uphill through the thick, humid forest packed with a dense foliage of ferns and creepers and a constant whistle of cicadas. The trail is narrow, steep and rutted. Climb steadily for two hours to a ridge-top meadow, then plunge back into the forest to reach some herders' huts at **Pemi** (2450m) on a narrow ridge-top clearing with a view to a forested gorge. There's not a village or house in view, although Menji villagers use this area as a summer pasture. Much of the trail for the next two days has fallen into disuse and is narrow and slippery.

Day 9: Pemi to Taupang

21km / 7-8 hours / 1450m ascent, 1450m descent
The trail stays in damp, cold forest, with occasional summer pastures with bamboo herders' shelters. The climb goes on and on, but the area is a botanist's delight, with shrubs of every kind, pungent with a sweet fermented smell, thick with humus. The next stretch of trail traverses nine passes, nicknamed the Nine Sisters, the highest of which is **Dong La** (3900m). Cross several ridges to Dong La, where there are good mountain views and a few prayer flags on a pile of rocks.

Cross the remaining ridges, each adorned with prayer flags, and descend steeply through thick evergreen forests on a trail strewn with rocks, logs and slippery leaves to a ridge-top meadow called Lisipang. The last part of the trek starts easily enough, turning right and down through a pasture at Yesupang, but then becomes increasingly rocky and muddy as it nears the Dongdi Chhu. There's no bridge, so you either rock-hop across or, if you're lucky, find a tree trunk balanced on rocks.

The path on the other side of the river is even muddier and rockier; parts of it are layered with a makeshift washboard-style log path. It's more like jungle than forest here, with ferns and creepers above and the river roaring nearby. The camp is at **Taupang** (2450m), a clearing in the forest with a wooden cowherds' shelter.

Day 10: Taupang to Trashig Yangtse

24km / 8-9 hours / 720m descent
The path through the forest beside the river is damp and muddy with huge ferns, red-berried palms and occasional leeches. The forest is alive with birds and monkeys. Two hours of sloshing through mud or springing from stone to log to stone brings you to **Shakshing**, a cluster of houses on the hillside, surrounded by corn and millet fields, banana trees and grazing cows.

The trail stays on the ridge on the northern side of the valley, passing above the village of Tongshing. It then descends past some swampy areas and crosses to the southern bank of the Dongdi Chhu on a large bridge. The small, old **Trashig Yangtse** dzong suddenly appears at the end of the valley on a hill top above the river. The trail crosses back to the north side of the river below the dzong on an old cantilever bridge. Finally cross the Kulong Chhu at 1730m where, with luck, your vehi-

cles will be waiting, or climb to the road and walk 3km into Chorten Kora.

SNOWMAN TREK

The combination of distance, altitude, remoteness and weather makes this a tough journey, and when trekking fees were set at US\$200 a night, it suffered a sharp decline in the number of trekkers who attempt it. Even though there are reduced rates for long treks, few people can afford a 25-day trek for US\$4280.

If you plan to trek this route, double-check your emergency evacuation insurance (see p248). If you get into Lunana and snow blocks the passes, the only way out is by helicopter, an expensive way to finish an already expensive trek. Another obstacle that often hampers this trek is bridges in remote regions that get washed away.

The Snowman trek is frequently closed because of snow, and is impossible to undertake during winter. The season for this trek is generally considered to be from late September to mid-October. Don't plan a summer trek; this is a miserable place to be during the monsoon.

This classic trek follows the Jhomolhari and Laya-Gasa treks to Laya. Many walking days can be saved by starting in Tashithang and trekking north up the Mo Chhu, following the Laya-Gasa trek in reverse.

Days 1 to 5: Drukgyel Dzong to Lingzhi

Follow Days 1 to 5 of the Jhomolhari trek (see p216).

Days 6 to 10: Lingzhi to Laya

Follow Days 6 to 10 of the Laya-Gasa trek (see p222).

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 25 days

Max Elevation 5320m

Standard Hard

Season September to October

Start Drukgyel Dzong

Finish Sephu

Access Town Paro

Summary The Snowman trek travels to the remote Lunana district and is said to be one of the most difficult treks in the world. Fewer than half the people who attempt this trek actually finish it, either because of problems with altitude or heavy snowfall on the high passes.

Day 11: Rest & Acclimatisation Day in Laya

If you have trekked from Drukgyel Dzong you should spend a day recuperating from the trek to Laya and preparing for the rest of this rigorous trek. If you've trekked from Tashithang, you should also walk up to Laya to acclimatise. The army post below Laya has a radio; you will need to send a runner here with a message in an emergency.

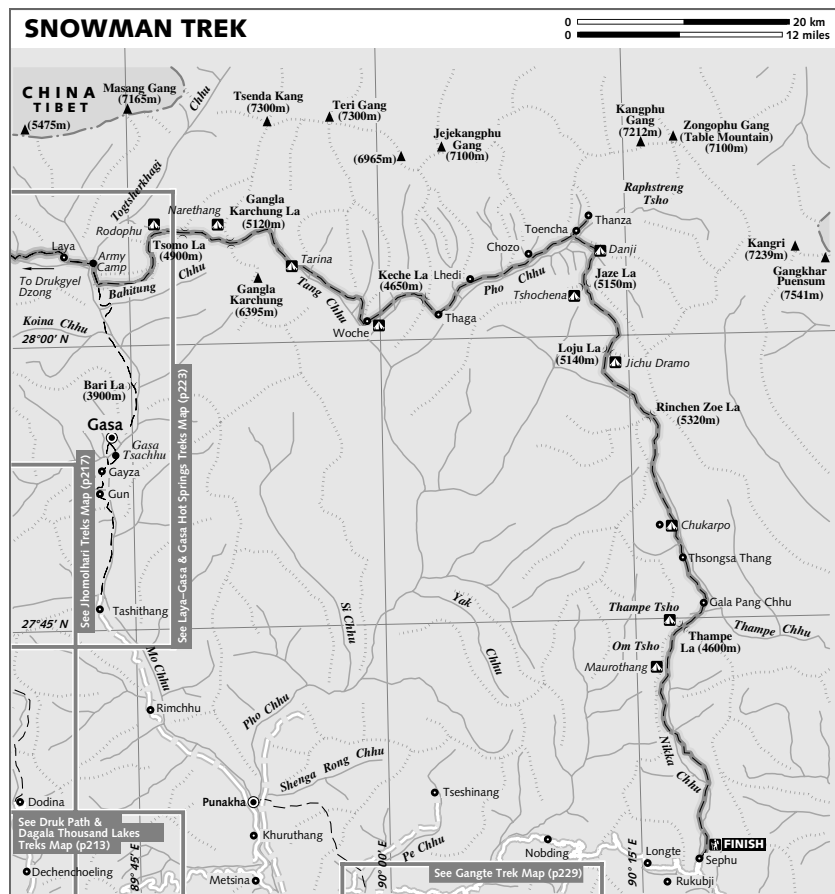
Day 12: Laya to Rodophu

19km / 6-8 hours / 1030m ascent, 70m descent
The trek leads gradually downhill to the Lunana trail junction, then climbs steeply for 30 to 40 minutes to a hilltop with good views over the Mo Chhu and the Rhodo Chhu. Much of the forest cover here was burned. The rough trail continues to climb gradually up the Rhodo Chhu valley, first through mixed conifers, then through rhododendron shrubs above the tree line. At the top of a large rock slide there is a view of the broad glacial valley and a massive glacier on Tsenda Kang (7100m), towering overhead. The **Rodophu** camp is just beyond a wooden bridge across the Rhodo Chhu at 4160m.

If you have time in the afternoon, or are taking an acclimatisation day here, you have a choice of several short hikes. A small trail leads up the valley for about 2km to a knoll with excellent views of the valley and surrounding mountains. You could continue further to the base of the glacier. Another option is to follow a small trail that starts about 500m upstream from the camp and switchbacks up the hill to the north, ending in a small yak pasture with a hut at 4500m.

Day 13: Rodophu to Narethang

17km / 5-6 hours / 720m ascent
The path crosses the wooden bridge and follows the river for about 20 minutes through rhododendron shrubs before turning right up the hill. Climb steadily to a high open valley at 4600m then more gradually through meadows to **Tsomo La** (4900m), which offers good views towards the Tibetan border and Jhomolhari. The route then crosses a generally flat, barren plateau at about 5000m with yak trails crisscrossing everywhere. Hopefully you'll have a knowledgeable guide and won't get lost. The camp is at **Narethang** (4900m), below the 6395m peak of Gangla Karchung.



Day 14: Narethang to Tarina

18km / 5-6 hours / 270m ascent, 1200m descent
From camp it takes about one hour to climb to 5120m **Gangla Karchung La**. Mountain views from the pass are excellent with distant Kang Bum (6526m) to the west and the rugged peaks of Tsenda Kang, Teri Gang (7300m) and Jejkangphu Gang (7100m) on the northern horizon.

The path descends along a large moraine to the edge of a near-vertical wall. Views from the edge of the wall are breathtaking – among the best along the entire trek. A massive glacier descends from Teri Kang to a deep turquoise lake at its foot, 1km below you. The glacial lake to the left burst through its dam in the early 60s, causing widespread damage downstream, and partially destroying Punakha Dzong.

Now the path becomes very steep (almost vertical in places) as it descends into the valley. In the lower half of the descent it passes through thick rhododendron shrubs and trees. When wet, this stretch can be rather nasty, with lots of roots and slippery mud.

At the bottom of the large, U-shaped valley the trail turns right, following the Tang Chhu downstream. There are several good camp sites along the river, both before and after the trail crosses the river at **Tarina**.

Day 15: Tarina to Woche

17km / 6-7 hours / 275m ascent, 330m descent
The walk leads through conifer forest down the Tang Chhu on river left, passing some impressive waterfalls cascading down both

sides of the valley. The trail climbs gently out of the valley past several huge landslides and eventually climbs steeply to the northeast into the high side valley of **Woche**. Woche is a small settlement of five houses at 3940m and is the first village in the Lunana region.

Looking up the valley you can see the following day's route to Lhedi. There have been reports of theft of hiking equipment or clothing here; keep all your gear safely inside your tent.

Day 16: Woche to Lhedi

17km / 6-7 hours / 980m ascent, 950m descent

The path to Lhedi begins below the camp and climbs the Woche valley, crossing a stream and climbing over a moraine before descending to a wooden bridge across the Woche Chhu. It then climbs on a wide trail past an extremely clear lake to **Keche La** (4650m). From the pass there are excellent views of the surrounding mountains, including Jejkangphu Gang's triple peak, the source of the Woche Chhu.

The route descends steeply into the Pho Chhu valley, the heart of the Lunana district. In the small village of Thaga (4050m) the farmers grow buckwheat, potatoes, turnips and radishes. From Thaga the path drops towards the Pho Chhu, then turns northeast towards Lhedi, which is visible in the distance above the river.

In 1994 a moraine holding back a large glacial lake north of Thanza burst, hurling millions of litres of water down the Pho Chhu. The resulting flash flood caused considerable damage, which is still visible along this stretch of trail.

Passing a few scattered settlements and crossing below a waterfall on a wooden bridge, the trail descends to the banks of the Pho Chhu. Continue along the river bed until you reach Lhedi at 3700m.

Lhedi is a district headquarters with a school, BHU and wireless station, but there is no shop here (or anywhere else in the Lunana district). Everything is carried in by yak trains across 5000m passes. Strong winds blow up the valley in the late afternoon, making it bitterly cold in autumn and winter.

Day 17: Lhedi to Thanza

17km / 7-8 hours / 400m ascent

The trail follows the north bank of the Pho Chhu past several small farms. In clear weather there are excellent views of Table Mountain (7100m) to the north and Tangse Gang across the river. Floods have destroyed parts of the trail so a temporary path winds its way among

massive boulders in the river bed, crossing small, rickety bridges across several channels of the river. Around lunch time the trail passes the small village of **Chozo** at 4090m. The village has a small dzong, which is still in use.

If you are pressed for time, you can gain a day or two by stopping here and taking a direct trail to Tshochena, but most trekkers continue to Thanza (4100m), a couple of hours further up the valley. The first part of the trail to Thanza leads through lush yak pastures on the wide river flats, but soon the grass gives way to a large expanse of fine glacial sand. Protect your camera; if it is windy the sand will enter any little opening.

Eventually the trail leaves the river bed and climbs a bluff overlooking the villages of **Thanza**, straight ahead, and **Toencha**, on the other bank of the river. Table Mountain forms an immense, 3000m-high wall of snow and ice only a few kilometres behind Thanza. Most groups camp in Toencha (4150m), but there are places to camp in Thanza as well.

Day 18: Rest Day in Thanza

Schedule a rest day here. This is as far as the yak drivers from Laya go. It takes time to round up enough yaks for the rest of the trek and you may get a rest day even if you have not scheduled one. This provides a good opportunity to explore the villages and glacial lakes up the valley. The closest lake, Raphstreng Tsho, is 100m deep and caused the 1994 flood. A large crew of Indian workers dug a channel through the moraine to prevent a recurrence, but there are several more glacial lakes in the area that could burst through their moraines at any time.

Day 19: Thanza to Danji

8km / 3-4 hours / 80m ascent

If your party is very fit, you can do the hike to Tshochena in one day, but it's a long, hard walk at high altitude and it's better to split it into two half-days.

The route climbs from Toencha to a large boulder on the hill south of the village. From the boulder there are excellent views of Thanza, Toencha, Chozo and the surrounding mountains. The path then turns east up a side valley. After a couple of hours of relatively flat and easy walking, the trail enters **Danji**, a yak meadow with some herders' huts. This is an excellent camping spot; there are often blue sheep on the hills above, and they have been known to walk into camp.

If you stop here, there is ample opportunity to explore the area. A few hundred metres up the valley, a small trail climbs the ridge to the left, leading to a higher valley. The top of the ridge offers excellent views of the surrounding mountains.

Day 20: Danji to Tshochena

12km / 5-6 hours / 490m ascent, 240m descent

There is a trail junction near the camp site at Danji. The trail up the valley leads to Gangkhar Puensum base camp and to Bumthang. The path to the end of the trek crosses the creek and leads up a rocky side valley. It is a long climb across several false summits to **Jaze La** at 5150m, which offers spectacular mountain views in all directions. From the pass, the path descends between snow-covered peaks past a string of small lakes. The camp is near the shore of **Tshochena** lake at 4970m. This is the first of two nights' camping above 4900m.

Day 21: Tshochena to Jichu Dramo

14km / 4-5 hours / 230m ascent, 140m descent

The trail follows the shore of the blue-green lake before climbing to a ridge at 5100m. On top you are surrounded by a 360-degree panorama of snowy peaks while, far below, the Pho Chhu descends towards Punakha. Below the ridge, the road and microwave tower at Dochu La are just visible in the distance.

The path makes several ups and downs over small rounded hills, but because of the altitude, walking can be slow. The trail descends past a glacial lake before climbing up to Loju La at 5140m. Many trails wander around high-altitude yak pastures in this region, and it's easy to go astray. The correct path will lead you across a small saddle at 5100m into a wide glacial valley. The trail descends gradually to the camp at **Jichu Dramo** (5050m), a small pasture on the east side of the valley.

Day 22: Jichu Dramo to Chukarpo

18km / 5-6 hours / 320m ascent, 730m descent

After leaving camp the trail climbs through a moraine to Rinchen Zoe La (5320m), which divides the Pho Chhu and Mangde Chhu drainages. The pass is surrounded by breathtaking mountain scenery. Rinchen Zoe peak (5650m) towers above the pass to the west and major Himalayan mountains

stretch along the northern horizon. To the east the western flank of Gangkhar Puensum is visible above the closer ranges, while the Thampe Chhu valley stretches below you to the south.

From the pass the trail descends into a broad, marshy valley with a string of lakes. The trail generally follows the left (east) side of the valley, which narrows the lower you go. Eventually the trail descends steeply down the face of a moraine to a yak pasture in the upper reaches of the Thampe Chhu. There are trails on both sides of the river, but you should cross to the west bank (river right) here, as there is no bridge further down. The vegetation gradually begins to thicken, first to rhododendron and juniper shrubs and eventually to trees of both species, the first real trees since Lhedi. After a couple of hours you reach the camp at **Chukarpo** (4600m), or you can continue to a better site at **Thsongsa Thang** (4400m), one hour down the trail.

Day 23: Chukarpo to Thampe Tsho

18km / 5-6 hours / 400m ascent, 640m descent

The trail continues to descend along the right bank of the river until it reaches a yak pasture at Gala Pang Chhu (4010m). You might be lucky enough to spot some takins on the hills across the river. From this point, the path begins to climb quite steeply through junipers and silver firs towards **Thampe Tsho**. The path generally follows a stream to the beautiful, clear, turquoise lake, set in a bowl and surrounded by steep mountain walls. The camp is at the far end of the lake at 4300m.

Day 24: Thampe Tsho to Maurothang

14km / 5 hours / 280m ascent, 1020m descent

The trail climbs steeply to **Thampe La** at 4600m. You may see blue sheep high on the slopes above the trail.

The path descends to Om Tsho, sacred because Pema Lingpa found a number of *terma* (sacred texts and artefacts) here. The path then skirts the northwestern shore of the lake before crossing its outlet, marked by a string of prayer flags. From here the path drops steeply past a waterfall to a smaller lake, about 100m lower.

From the second lake, the path descends steeply to the headwaters of the Nikka Chhu. It's so steep that even yaks are reluctant to come down this stretch. The drainage of the

second lake also forms a waterfall, which can only be seen once you have descended almost to the bottom. The path levels out, following the left bank of the Nikka Chhu. After approximately 2km, it reaches a large open glade near the confluence of a major tributary coming from the east. A wooden bridge crosses the Nikka Chhu to river right, then a broad path follows through mixed forest to **Maurothang** (3610m), a large clearing on the banks of the river beside a few yak herders' huts.

Day 25: Maurothang to Sephu

18km / 5-6 hours / 990m descent

If horses are not available at Maurothang, your guide will probably send someone ahead to arrange for them further down. Yaks cannot walk all the way to the road because of the low altitude and the many cows in the area.

A well-used trail continues down the west side of the Nikka Chhu for about 30 minutes before crossing to the east bank into a mixed deciduous and bamboo forest. It then descends gradually through forests interspersed with pastures. Eventually it emerges into a large grassy area, overlooking the road and the village of Sephu. The path becomes somewhat confusing at this point, as there are many trails. Look for a large trail about 20m to 30m above the river and you'll soon pass a large suspension bridge over the Nikka Chhu, which you shouldn't cross. Soon the trail turns into a narrow tractor road that emerges onto the main road at Sephu, next to the Nikka Chhu bridge at 2600m, where there are several stores as well as a small restaurant.

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration 4 days

Max Elevation 1500m

Standard Easy

Season April, September to October

Start Punakha

Finish Chhuzomsa

Access Town Punakha

Summary A low-altitude trek southeast of Punakha. Low elevation makes this trek possible throughout the winter, but miserable when it's hot. This route sees few trekkers.

SAMTENGANG WINTER TREK

Day 1: Punakha to Limukha

12km / 4 hours / 880m ascent

Cross the footbridge over the Pho Chhu from Punakha Dzong and walk to Shengana. The trek begins with a gradual climb through a forest of chir pine to **Limukha**.

Day 2: Limukha to Chhungsakha

14km / 5 hours / 430m descent

The trail descends through rhododendron and oak forests to **Chhungsakha**.

Day 3: Chhungsakha to Samtengang

13km / 5 hours / 650m ascent, 270m descent

Trek down to the Pe Chhu, crossing it at 1420m, then climb through the village of Sha to **Samtengang**.

Day 4: Samtengang to Chhuzomsa

15km / 5-6 hours / 730m descent

The trail leads steeply downhill on a treeless slope to the road at **Chhuzomsa**.

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