

Western Bhutan



Whether you arrive by air at Paro or by road at Phuentsholing, your first impression of Bhutan is one of stepping into a world that you thought existed only in storybooks or your imagination. Vertical prayer flags flutter in the breeze and men dressed in a traditional *gho* (tunic) and Argyle socks stroll past yellow-roofed shrines and wooden slate-roofed houses. It soon becomes clear that you are well off the beaten path of mass tourism.

As with the rest of country, western Bhutan is a collection of valleys. The remote Haa valley in the far west is separated from the Paro valley by the 3810m Cheli La. The relatively built-up Thimphu valley to the east is divided from the historical centres of Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang by the 3140m Dochu La. East of here the rugged Black Mountain range forms an even greater barrier that separates western Bhutan from the rest of the country. North of here, the upper valleys are trekking territory, leading to the sacred peak of Jhomolhari, the Tibetan border and the fascinating and remote regions of Laya and Gasa. To the south are the lush foothills and the all-important road to the Indian border at Phuentsholing.

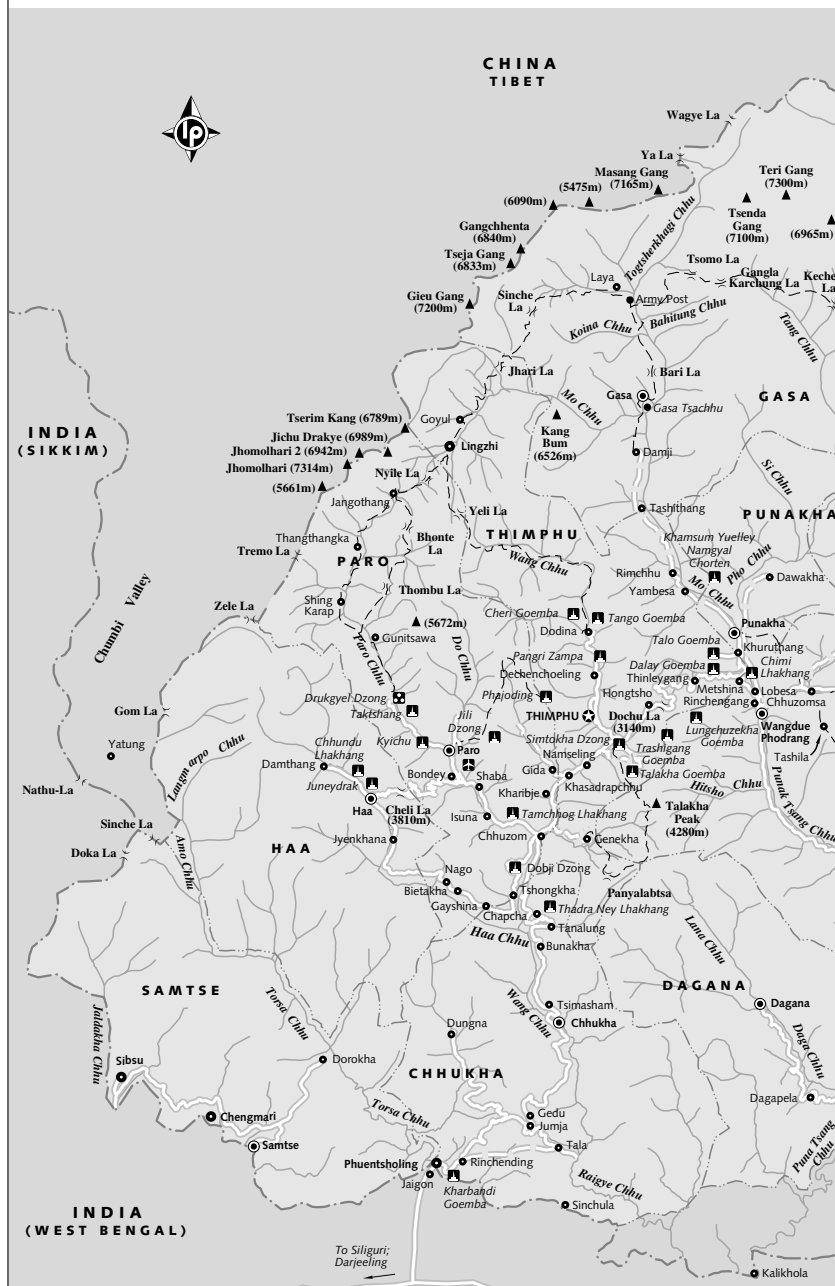
This is the region of Bhutan that most tourists see and for good reason. It's the heartland of the Drukpa people, home to the only airport, the capital and the largest, oldest and most spectacular dzongs in the kingdom. Whether it's the beginning of your trip or the all of your trip, it's a spectacular introduction to a magical land.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit the spectacular dzongs of **Paro** (p122), **Wangdue Phodrang** (p149) and **Punakha** (p145).
- Admire the rhododendrons and mountain views on an early-morning drive to the **Dochu La** (p134)
- Immerse yourself in Bhutanese culture and history at Paro's **National Museum** (p124)
- Spot black-necked cranes or just do some great hiking in the remote **Phobjikha valley** (p152)
- Hike uphill to the dramatic cliff-hanging **Tiger's Nest** (p128), Bhutan's most famous sight
- Make a pilgrimage to the **Kyichu Lhakhang** (p127), one of Bhutan's oldest and most beautiful temples
- Explore little-visited monasteries and hermitages in the **Haa valley** (p133)
- Be blessed with a 10-inch penis, if only for a day, at **Chimi Lhakhang** (p145), the monastery of the Divine Madman!



WESTERN BHUTAN



WESTERN BHUTAN

History

The history of western Bhutan is reflected in the history of Bhutan as a whole. Punakha was the capital of a unified Bhutan from the 17th to the 19th century. The seat of government was later moved to Paro, which then became the commercial, cultural and political centre of the country. Before the construction of roads, most of Bhutan's trade came through Paro, either from Tibet via the Trema La or from the south via Haa and the Cheli La.

PARO DZONGKHAG

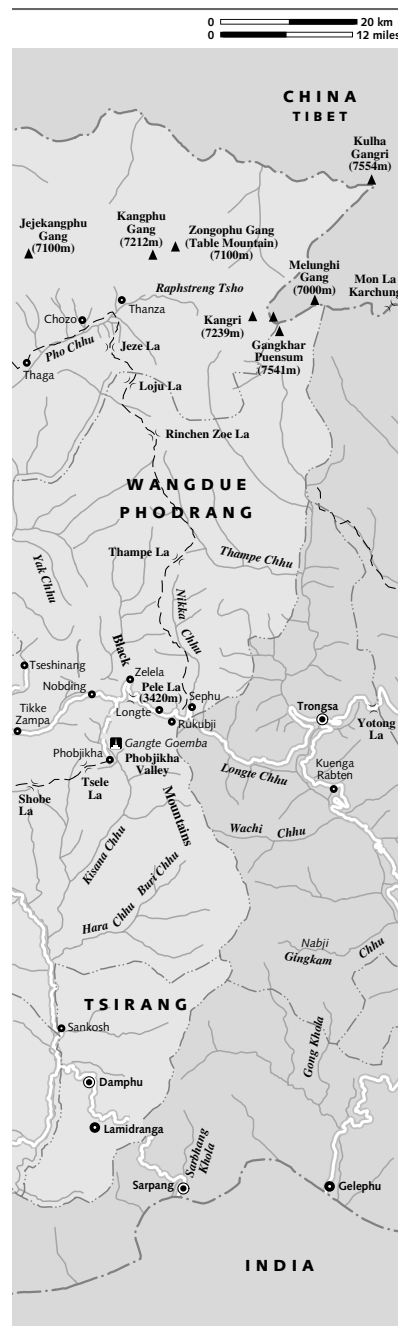
With our passage through the bridge, behold a curious transformation. For just as Alice, when she walked through the looking-glass, found herself in a new and whimsical world, so we, when we crossed the Pa-chhu, found ourselves, as though caught up on some magic time machine fitted fantastically with a reverse, flung back across the centuries into the feudalism of a mediaeval age.

Earl of Ronaldshay, *Lands of the Thunderbolt* (1923)

The Paro valley is without doubt one of the loveliest in Bhutan. Willow trees and apple orchards line many of the roads, whitewashed farmhouses and temples complement the green terraced fields and forested hills rise on either side to create a beautiful, organic and peaceful whole.

The broad valley is also excellent agricultural land and the people of Paro are better off than many elsewhere in Bhutan. One indication of their affluence is the preponderance of metal roofs throughout the valley, which have largely replaced the traditional wooden shingles. Red and white rice, apples, strawberries and asparagus (wonderful in April) all thrive in the fertile soil.

Several treks begin in or near Paro. The Druk Path trek climbs over the eastern valley wall, crossing a 4200m pass before descending to Thimphu. The Jhomolhari, Laya-Gasa and Snowman treks all lead west from Drukgyel Dzong on to Jhomolhari base camp and the spectacular alpine regions of Gasa and Laya beyond (for more on these regions, see p199).



WESTERN BHUTAN

PARO

☎ 08 / elev 2280m

The charming small town of Paro lies in the centre of the valley on the banks of the Paro (or Pa) Chhu, just a short distance northwest of the imposing Paro Dzong. The main street, built only in 1985, is lined with colourfully painted wooden shop fronts and restaurants, though a modern concrete extension is taking root to the side.

Some of the older shops in Paro have doors at the back; a strange ladder system provides access through the front window. An unusual local regulation has, for a while, prohibited bicycle riding within Paro town.

Orientation

The road from Thimphu and the airport enters the town from the south, near the archery ground. The town square is marked by the tower-like Chhoeten Lhakhang. North of the centre, by the Dumtse Lhakhang, a paved side road gives vehicle access to Paro Dzong and the National Museum.

If you follow the main street southeast, you'll pass five *chortens* (stone Buddhist monuments), the Ugyen Pelri Palace and the covered bridge that provides foot access to the massive Paro Dzong. Up on the forested hill above town is Zuri Dzong, home to the valley's local protector gods and therefore off-limits to tourists.

Most of the hotels are on the hillsides west and southeast of town, giving great views over valley.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

ITSS (Map p123; ☎ 9am-9pm; per min Nu 1.33) You can burn digital photos onto a CD here.

Papu's Internet Café (Map p123; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm; per min Nu 3) Also offers telephone calls.

Post Office (Map p123; per min Nu 1.25)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Kuen Phuen Medical Shop (Map p123) Stocks basic medical supplies, opposite Made in Bhutan.

Hospital (Map p123; ☎ 271571) On a hill to the west of town and accepts visitors in an emergency.

MONEY

Bank of Bhutan (Map p123; ☎ 271230; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

Bhutan National Bank (Map p123; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat)

POST

Post Office (Map p123; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1pm Sat)

Sights

PARO (RINPUNG) DZONG

The Paro Dzong is one of Bhutan's most impressive and well-known dzongs, and perhaps the finest example of Bhutanese architecture you'll see. The massive buttressed walls tower over the town and are visible throughout the valley.

The dzong's correct name, Rinchen Pung Dzong (usually shortened to Rinpung Dzong), means 'fortress on a heap of jewels'. In 1644 Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal ordered the construction of the dzong on the foundation of a monastery built by Guru Rinpoche. The fort was used on numerous occasions to defend the Paro valley from invasions by Tibet. The British political officer John Claude White reported that in 1905 there were old catapults for throwing great stones stored in the rafters of the dzong's veranda.

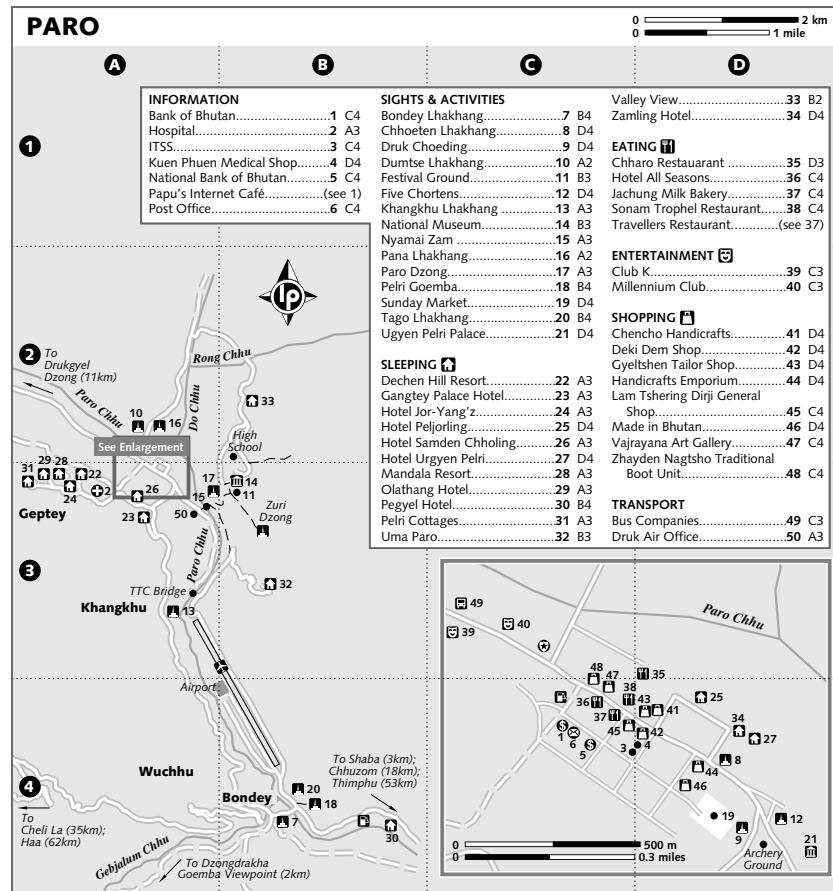
The dzong survived the 1897 earthquake but a fire severely damaged the dzong in 1907. It was formerly the meeting hall for the National Assembly and now, like most dzongs, houses both the monastic body and district government offices, including the local courts.

Scenes from Bernardo Bertolucci's 1995 film *Little Buddha* were filmed here.

Visiting the Dzong

The dzong is built on a steep hillside, and the front courtyard of the administrative section is 6m higher than the courtyard of the monastic portion. A road climbs the hill to the dzong's northern entrance, which leads into the *dochey* (courtyard) on the 3rd storey. The *utse* (central tower) inside the *dochey* is five storeys tall and was built in the time of the first *penlop* (governor) of Paro in 1649. To the east of the *utse* is another small lhakhang dedicated to Chuchizhey, an 11-headed manifestation of Chenresig. The richly carved wood, painted in gold, black and ochre, and the towering whitewashed walls serve to reinforce the sense of power and wealth.

A stairway leads down to the monastic quarter, which houses about 200 monks. In the southeast corner (to the left) is the *kunre*, which is where the monks eat their communal meals. Look out for the mural



of the 'mystic spiral', a uniquely Bhutanese variation on the mandala. The large *dukhang* (prayer hall) opposite has lovely exterior murals depicting the life of Tibet's poet-saint Milarepa. The first day of the spring Paro tsechu is held in this courtyard, which fills to bursting point.

Outside the dzong, to the northeast of the entrance, is a stone-paved area where masked dancers perform the main dances of the tsechu. A *thondrol* (huge *thangka*, painted or embroidered religious picture) of Guru Rinpoche, more than 18m square, is unfurled shortly after dawn on the final day of the tsechu – you can see the huge rail upon which it is hung. It was commissioned in the 18th century by the eighth *desi* (secular ruler of

Bhutan, also known as *druk desi*), Chhogyel Sherab Wangchuck.

Below the dzong, a traditional wooden covered bridge called Nyamai Zam spans the Paro Chhu. This is a reconstruction of the original bridge, which was washed away in a flood in 1969. Earlier versions of this bridge were removed in time of war to protect the dzong. You can walk from the parking area near the Ugyen Pelri Palace across the bridge up to the dzong. The most picturesque pictures of Paro Dzong are taken from the west bank of the river, just downstream from the bridge.

The dzong courtyard is open daily but on weekends the offices are deserted and most chapels are closed.

NATIONAL MUSEUM

At the top of the hill above Paro Dzong is an old watchtower that was renovated in 1968 to house the **National Museum** (Gyelyong Damtenkhang; ☎ 271257; nmb@druknet.bt; locals/SAARC nationals/adult Nu 10/50/100, monks free; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sat, closed Sun, Mon & national holidays). The unusual round building is said to be in the shape of a conch shell, with 2.5m thick walls; it was completed in 1656 and was originally the *ta dzong* (watchtower) of Paro Dzong. There is said to be an underground tunnel that leads from the watchtower to the water supply below.

There is a specific route to follow through the entire building that ensures that you walk clockwise around important images. Cameras are not allowed inside the museum but you can photograph the grounds. The museum is an attraction for locals as well as tourists and you may be accompanied by Bhutanese from remote villages or groups of school children on an outing.

You start off on the fourth floor with a description of early history that perfectly illustrates how magic and science are inseparable in Bhutan. Early stone implements are described as the weapons of the *naga* (snake) spirits; early rock carvings and inscriptions are labelled as 'self-created'.

The fifth floor has an impressive collection of *thangkas*, both ancient and modern, depicting all of Bhutan's important saints and teachers. The sixth floor reveals the eclecticism of Bhutan's philatelic collection, including some stamps that you can listen to on a record player.

At the end of the gallery a doorway leads to the Tshozhing Lhakhang, the Temple of the Tree of Wisdom, a complex four-sided carving depicting the history of Buddhism, with its schools and lineages. The four branches represent the Sakya (with images of Sakyamuni), Nyingma (Guru Rinpoche), Gelug (Atisha, Tsongkhapa and Nagarjuna) and Drukpa Kagyu (Channa Dorje, Marpa, Milarepa, Naropa and Tilopa) lineages. Clean your shoes on the yak-hair squares when entering the temple and walk clockwise around the room.

Back down on the fifth floor is the Namse Lhakhang, with a collection of religious statues and stone carvings. The lower-floor galleries highlight teapots, clothes, musical instruments, stuffed animals, religious ritual objects and a display of ancient weapons and shields, many captured during various Tibetan inva-

sions. Look out for the astrological water clock, rhino shield, frog-skin saddle and fish-scale hat! Displays even show you how to make a poisoned arrow from the *mangsut* flower. It's great stuff.

After visiting, you can walk down a path from the museum to the dzong and back to the town, enjoying good views of the valley and of Ugyen Pelri Palace.

UGYEN PELRI THANG

The Ugyen Pelri Palace is in a secluded wooded compound on the south side of the river just west of the dzong. This palace was built by the Paro *penlop*, Tshering Penjor, in the early 1900s and is now a residence of the queen mother, thus closed to the public. It is designed after Guru Rinpoche's celestial paradise, Zangto Pelri, and is one of the most beautiful examples of Bhutanese architecture. You can get views of the palace from above from the dzong.

On the road beside Ugyen Pelri Palace are five square **chortens** that were built in memory of the first king, Ugyen Wangchuck.

CHHOETEN LHA KHANG

The tower-like Chhoeten Lhakhang is south of the town square. The caretaker may allow you to visit the upstairs chapel, which features a central Jowo Sakyamuni, with Guru Rinpoche and Chenresig to the side.

DRUK CHOEDING

Also known as Tshongdoe Naktshang, the quiet and peaceful Druk Choeding is the town temple. It was built in 1525 by Ngawang Chhogyel (1465-1540), one of the prince-abbots of Ralung in Tibet and an ancestor of the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The main statue is of a seated Jampa (Future Buddha). Also present is the Bhutanese protector deity Gyenyen (see p115), surrounded by a fearsome collection of old Bhutanese shields and weapons.

DUMTSE LHA KHANG

To the west of the road is Dumtse Lhakhang, an unusual chorten-like temple that was built in 1433 by the iron-bridge builder Thangtong Gyalpo (see the boxed text, p131). Its three floors represent hell, earth and heaven, and the murals inside are said to be some of the finest in Bhutan. It's essential to bring a good torch. Your travel agency will need to get a special permit to visit the interior so mention this in advance.

Beyond Dumtse Lhakhang, to the east of the road, the tiny privately-maintained Puna Lhakhang is said to date from the seventh century.

SUNDAY MARKET

Paro's weekly vegetable market isn't all that expansive but it's a fine introduction to some of Bhutan's unique local products. You'll see strings of *chugo* (dried yak cheese), either white (boiled in milk and dried in the sun) or brown (smoked). The fruit that looks like an orange egg is actually fresh husky betel nut, imported from India. The jars of pink paste contain lime, which is ingested with the betel nut. There are also exotic-looking ferns, powdered juniper incense, squares of dried jellied cow skin known as *kho* (a local snack!) and slabs of *datse*, the cheese used in almost every Bhutanese dish. The market is busiest between 6.30am and 10am.

Sleeping

Most of Paro's accommodation options were built before the town was developed and are in resort-style hotels scattered around the valley, not in the town itself. Most hotels increase their rates significantly during the spring Paro Tsechu, when every hotel and even many local farmhouses are full to bursting point. Some hotels stage dance performances around a campfire when there are enough guests to warrant it.

BUDGET

Several small hotels near the town square cater to Bhutanese and Indian clientele, including the **Hotel Ugyen Pelri** (Map p123; s/d Nu 250/350) and the basic five-roomed **Zamling Hotel** (☎ 271302; s/d 400/600), which offers private bathrooms but no hot water.

Hotel Peljorling (Map p123; ☎ 271365; s/d Nu 750/850) Operated by the same group as the Peljorling in Phuentsholing, this four-room local-style hotel and restaurant is in the centre of town. The mattresses are thin.

Hotel All Seasons (Map p123; ☎ 271295; s/d with common bathroom Nu 350/450, with bathroom Nu 550/650) Gets a few late-booking tourists during tsechu time.

MIDRANGE

Dechen Hill Resort (Map p123; ☎ 271392; dhncot@druknet.bt; www.dechenhillresort.com; Geptey; old rooms s/d Nu 1300/1600, new rooms s/d Nu 1500/1800) This hotel, in a secluded area below the road and 2km from the centre, is a favourite with expats. It's not

flash but the Indian food is some of the best in Bhutan and the new block has good valley views. A pair of friendly dogs adds to the homey atmosphere.

Hotel Jor-Yang'z (Map p123; ☎ 271747; joryangz@druknet.bt; Geptey; standard s/d Nu 1400/1800, deluxe s/d 1600/2000, ste 3500; ☑) Next door and similar, this friendly modern place has good staff, excellent food and some nice balcony seating. It's named after the owners' two children.

Gangtey Palace Hotel (Map p123; ☎ 271301; hgpp@druknet.bt; s/d cottage Nu 1000/1200, standard s/d 1700/2200, deluxe s/d 2200/2500) This 19th-century, traditional Bhutanese courtyard-style building was once the residence of the *penlop* of Paro and it oozes musty historical charm. The spacious deluxe rooms in the main tower come with creaking wooden staircases and a few antique pieces. The comfortable modern main block rooms are not as exotic but you can get a more traditional flavour by spurning the shower and arranging for a hot-stone bath (Nu 650). The views from the restaurant balcony are great and there's a cosy bar. Outside the gate is the small Gangeten Lhakhang.

Hotel Samden Chholing (Map p123; ☎ 271449; samden_chholing@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1200/1400) Opened in 1999, the simple Samden Chholing has a family feel, with rooms in the main Bhutanese-style building or in the modern block below. You can follow your hot-stone bath (Nu 350) with drinks or dinner on the basic terrace overlooking Paro.

Kichu Resort (Map p128; ☎ 271468; intkichu@druknet.bt; www.intrekture.com; s/d Nu 1800/2400, deluxe s/d Nu 2250/3000) Just 700m past the Kyichu Lhakhang and 5.5km away from Paro, this collection of concrete cottages on the banks of the Paro Chhu is popular with trekking groups, Indian tourists and expats from Thimphu looking for a weekend getaway. There's a quiet rural air but the rooms and grounds could do with some freshening up. The deluxe rooms are worth the extra money.

Pelri Cottages (Map p123; ☎ 272473; s/d Nu 1800/2000, deluxe s/d 2000/2500) On a hill above the Olathang Hotel, the Pelri is a low-key collection of concrete cottages and rooms, with a private stupa on site. Rooms are decorated with carved wood and Tibetan carpets to give a cosy feel and the small wooden balconies are pleasant.

Mandala Resort (Map p123; ☎ 271997; mandala@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1200/1500) A steep paved road winds its way up to this small concrete block below the Olathang Hotel. Upper-storey rooms

come with a balcony, and the dining room offers great views of the valley. Run by the travel company Bhutan Mandala Tours, it's more home-style than glamour.

Valley View (Map p123; ☎ 272541; valleyview@druknet.bt; attic rooms s/d Nu 1200/1500, s/d Nu 2000/2500; 📺) Bizarrely, none of the rooms in this superbly located new hotel actually takes advantage of the touted views! Apart from this criminal lack of foresight, the pine-clad rooms are comfortable and there's a cosy bar and restaurant. The pokey third-floor attic rooms won't do for anyone over 6ft tall. It's on the road to Paro Dzong.

Tiger Nest Resort (Map p128; ☎ 271310; fax 271640; 9km from Paro; s/d Nu 1300/1500) Just past the turn-off to Taktshang in the upper valley, this small resort is the only one with a view of Taktshang Goemba (see p128) and, on clear days, the snow-capped peak of Jhomolhari. It has 15 cosy rooms in four cottages, with a restaurant accessed by a private bridge.

Other decent tourist hotels in the valley include **Rinchen Ling Lodge** (Map p128; ☎ 17111503; nawang@druknet.bt), **Namey Choling Resort** (Map p128; ☎ 272080; nameyresort@druknet.bt) and **Pegyl Hotel** (☎ 271472; fax 272769; s/d Nu 1200/1500), in a rural setting among rice fields in Shaba, 9km from Paro town.

TOP END

Olathang Hotel (Map p123; ☎ 271304; ohotel@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1625/2000, cottage s/d Nu 2125/2500, deluxe cottage s/d Nu 3000/3500; 📺) This grand dzong-like hotel was built in 1974 for guests invited to the coronation of the present king and, though getting on a bit, it still maintains a whiff of that grandeur. The main building rooms are set around a lovely interior courtyard and come with elaborate Victorian furniture. Look for the stuffed yak guarding the entrance to the conference hall. For comfortable facilities in a traditional setting, ask to stay in one of the tastefully decorated wooden cottages. Always bustling with groups, it's now managed by the Bhutan Tourism Corporation Limited (BTCL).

Uma Paro (Map p123; ☎ 271597; www.uma.como.bz; superior/deluxe r US\$280/450, ste US\$575-1200; 📺) Kudos goes to the Uma for tastefully combining traditional Bhutanese architecture with top-of-the-line facilities to create the best hotel in town. Nice touches include a CD/DVD player in all of the rooms, plus a gym, indoor pool and plenty of pampering at the spa and herbal hot-stone bath, with all bath

products supplied by Como. Try to request a deluxe room with a view and balcony. Activities include mountain biking, archery lessons, day hikes and a visit to a local farmhouse, at extra cost. While here, check out the world's biggest book, on display in the library! Low-season discounts are from 10% to 20%.

Zhiwa Ling (Map p128; ☎ 271277; www.zhiwaling.com; s/d from US\$180/200) This impressive new luxury place, 8km from Paro, consists of an echoing, central lodge surrounded by a collection of stern-looking stone towers. It's certainly grand but it's not yet all that cosy, despite some nice antique touches, underfloor heating, a spa (Thai, Shiatsu and Swedish massage) and even a temple on the 2nd floor, built with pillars from the Gangtey Palace. Bizarrely, they manufacture fishing flies here for export to the US. It's 3km past the Kichu Resort.

Amankora Paro Lodge (Map p128; ☎ 272333; www.amankoraresorts.com; s/d full board US\$925/1000; 📺) 'Designer dzong' is the architectural theme here, with the half-dozen sleek and severe rammed-earth buildings calling to mind the elite campus of the world's coolest university. The rooms benefit from calming natural woods and home-spun fabrics, an open-plan bathroom, *bukhari* (traditional Bhutanese stove) and divan. The spa has a wide range of treatments (book in advance) and there's an intimate restaurant and reading room. It's certainly sleek and stylish but you can't help but feel a bit disconnected from your surroundings out here. The resort is in pine forest near Balakha village, 14km from Paro and not far from Drukgyel Dzong. The tax alone is US\$289 a night!

Eating

Most tourists eat dinner in their hotels but you can ask to try the following for lunch.

Sonam Trophel Restaurant (Map p123; ☎ 271287) Upstairs, Sonam has excellent home-style Bhutanese cooking adapted to foreign tastes (ie without the chilli) and is popular with small groups. *Momos* (dumplings) are a speciality at Nu 25 to 40 and the *shamu datse* (mushroom, cheese and chilli) is excellent. No MSG is used here.

Chharo Restaurant (Map p123; ☎ 272642) This pleasant tourist restaurant (*chharo* means friendship) has a good range of Indian, Chinese and Bhutanese dishes and can prepare Bumthang-style buckwheat pancakes and noodles with some advance warning. The owner is very accommodating.

Two other good local restaurants that are above shops along the main street are **Travellers Restaurant** (Map p123; ☎ 271896) and **Hotel All Seasons** (Map p123; ☎ 271295), both with dishes from Nu 30 to Nu 70. The **Pejorling Hotel** (Map p123) also has a good wide-ranging menu, including fried fish and even baked beans!

You can load up on local bread and pastries at the **Jachung Milk Bakery** (Map p123). *Jachung* means 'garuda'.

Entertainment

Club K (Map p123; ☎ 271287; cover women/men Nu 100/200, beer Nu 80; 📺 from 9pm) Check out another of Bhutan's many faces at this swanky basement nightclub, which boasts a bouncer (normally it's the female owner, Sonam), a mirrorball and a fairly upper crust crowd. Ladies get in for free on Wednesdays. The Sonam Troepel Hotel is being built above the club.

Millennium Club (Map p123; ☎ 271934; cover Nu 200; 📺 from 10pm Sat) You're more likely to get chatting to locals at this older local disco, normally open Saturday nights only.

Shopping

There are numerous handicraft shops throughout the valley and most open daily and take credit cards. **Chencho Handicrafts** (Map p123; ☎ 271633), on the corner of the town square, has probably the most interesting selection. **Made in Bhutan** (Map p123; ☎ 272886) is a slick operation, with a wide selection of crafts.

The government-run **Handicrafts Emporium** (Map p123; ☎ 271211; ☎ 9am-1pm, 2-6pm), on the main street, has books and modern souvenirs at tourist prices.

There are several interesting local shops. **Deki Dem Shop** (Map p123) and **Lam Tshering Dirji General Shop** (Map p123), both marked by a row of colourful prayer wheels, sell prayer flags, incense and other religious items.

Gyeltsen Tailor Shop (Map p123) has a selection of mounted *thangkas*, Bhutanese flags and T-shirts and Buddhist accoutrements.

Zhayden Nagtsho Traditional Boot Unit (Map p123; ☎ 272345) is the place for a pair of traditional handmade Bhutanese boots, retailing around US\$60.

Vajrayana Art Gallery (Map p123; chhidorj@hotmail.com) features art by self-taught Bhutanese artist Chimmi Dorje, who incorporates Buddhist themes such as prayer flags and mandala motifs into his abstract art. There's also some

fine photography by his brother. The gallery is often closed out of high season.

Getting There & Away

Paro airport is 7km from Paro town and 53km from Thimphu. If you have not arranged for a vehicle to meet your flight, you can book a taxi at the tea stall outside the airport. The cost is Nu 300 to Paro or Nu 800 to Thimphu.

Daily buses to Thimphu and Phuentsholing leave from a temporary stand by Dawa Transport at the northwest end of town.

AROUND PARO Upper Paro Valley

Though the Paro valley extends west all the way to the peaks on the Tibetan border, the road only goes as far as Drukgyel Dzong, 11km beyond Paro. En route it passes half a dozen resorts, some lovely rural scenery and some of Bhutan's most famous sights. Beyond the dzong a side valley leads to the Tremo La, the 5000m pass that was once an important trade route to Tibet and also the route of several Tibetan invasions.

There are several options if you are interested in a day hiking in the Paro valley. Southeast of Kyichu Lhakhang in the direction of Paro is Kenchu Goemba and Drongja Goemba, both of which can provide an excuse for a short hike. From here you could continue back to Paro via Loma Lhakhang, just above Paro town, which is visited by Bhutanese whose children are ill. More ambitious is the cardio day hike up to Dorena Goemba, high on the ridge behind the Olathang Hotel.

KYICHU LHA KHANG

A short drive from Paro is Kyichu Lhakhang, one of Bhutan's oldest and most beautiful temples. This temple is popularly believed to have been built in 659 by King Songtsen Gampo of Tibet, to pin down the left foot of an giant ogress who was thwarting the establishment of Buddhism into Tibet (see the boxed text, p129). Additional buildings and a golden roof were constructed in 1839 by the *penlop* of Paro and the 25th Je Khenpo.

As you enter the intimate inner courtyard you'll see a mural of King Gesar of Ling, the popular Tibetan warrior-king, whose epic poem is said to be the world's longest. Pride of place in the courtyard is a pile of iron links forged by the famous bridge builder Thangtong Gyalpo (see p131). Outside the courtyard,

a band of pilgrims almost as old as the temple itself haul away on ropes and pulleys that are rigged up to turn prayer wheels.

The queen mother, Ashi Kesang Wangchuck, sponsored the construction of the **Guru Lhakhang** in 1968. It contains a 5m-high statue of Guru Rinpoche and another of Kurukulla (Red Tara), holding a bow and arrow made of flowers. Also here is a chorten containing the ashes of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a revered Nyingma Buddhist master and spiritual teacher of the queen mother who passed away in 1992 and was cremated nearby. There is a statue of him here, as well as some old photos of the queen grandmother and the first king of Bhutan.

The inner hall of the main **Jowo Lhakhang** conceals the valley's greatest treasure, an original 7th-century statue of Jowo Sakyamuni, said to have been cast at the same time as the famous statue in Lhasa. In front of the statue you can feel the grooves that generations of prostrators have worn into the wooden floor. King Songtsen Gampo himself lurks up in the upper niche. Lovely metal plaques line the floor and the main door is superbly gilded. The former quarters of Dilgo Khyentse to the left are closed to visitors.

The outer hall has a large statue of Chenresig with 11 heads and 1000 hands.

Further north, outside the temple and up a side road by the huge Zhiwa Ling hotel, is the site where Dilgo Khyentse was cremated. It's closed to visitors but is still used for high-profile cremations. The small and inconspicuous **Satsam Chorten** by the turn-off once marked the border between Bhutan and Tibet.

Across a bridge on the far side of the valley is the Kunga Choeling Goemba, below the hilltop *shedra* (Buddhist college) of Tsacho Chukor. The dirt road that leads from Satsam Chorten back to Paro is an option for mountain bikers.

TAKTSHANG GOEMBA

Taktshang is the most famous of Bhutan's monasteries, miraculously perched on the side of a sheer cliff 900m above the floor of Paro valley, where the only sounds are the murmurs of wind and water and the chanting of monks. The name means 'tiger's nest'; it is said that Guru Rinpoche flew to the site of the monastery on the back of a tigress, a manifestation of his consort Yeshe Tsogyal, to subdue the local

SUBDUING THE DEMONESS

When the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo married the Chinese princess Wencheng in 641, her dowry included the Jowo Sakyamuni, a priceless Indian statue of the Buddha as a small boy. As the statue was transported through Lhasa, it became stuck in the mud and no-one could move it. The princess divined that the obstruction was being caused by a huge supine demoness, lying on her back with her navel over a lake where Lhasa's main temple, the Jokhang, now stands.

In 659 the king decided to build 108 temples in a single day to pin the ogress to the earth forever and, at the same time, convert the Tibetan people to Buddhism. Temples were constructed at her shoulders and hips, which corresponded to the four districts of central Tibet, and her knees and elbows, which were in the provinces. The hands and feet lay in the borderlands of Tibet, and several temples were built in Bhutan to pin down the troublesome left leg.

The best known of these temples are Kyichu Lhakhang in Paro, which holds the left foot, and Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang, which pins the left knee. Other lesser-known temples have been destroyed, but it is believed that, among others, Konchogsum Lhakhang in Bumthang, Khaine Lhakhang south of Lhuentse, and two temples in Haa may have been part of this ambitious project.

demon, Singey Samdrup. He then meditated in a cave here for three months.

The site has long been recognised as a *ney*, or holy place. It was visited by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1646 and pilgrims from all over Bhutan come here. Milarepa is also said to have meditated here, while Thangtong Gyalpo revealed a *terma* (treasure text) at Taktshang. The primary lhakhang was built in 1692 around the Dubkhang (also called the Pelphu), the holy cave in which Guru Rinpoche meditated, by the *penlop* of Paro, Gylse Tenzin Rabgye.

On 19 April 1998 a fire (which some say was arson) destroyed the main structure of Taktshang and all its contents. It had suffered a previous fire and was repaired in 1951. Reconstruction started on an auspicious day in April 2000 at a cost of 130 million ngultrum and the rebuilt site was reconsecrated in the presence of the king in 2005. Tradition says that the original building was anchored to the cliff-face by the hairs of *khandroma* (*dakinis*, or female celestial beings), who transported the building materials up onto the cliff on their backs. The renovation team had only a cable lift for assistance.

The Hike

The only way up to the Tiger's Nest is to walk, ride a horse or fly on the back of a magic tiger (the latter generally reserved for Tantric magicians). The 1¼ hour hike is a major part of any tourist itinerary and is unmissable for the spectacular views. It's also a good warm-up hike if you are going trekking. If the full hike sounds a bit tough you can walk (or ride horses) to the 'caféteria', a wooden teahouse-restaurant, which offers a good view of the

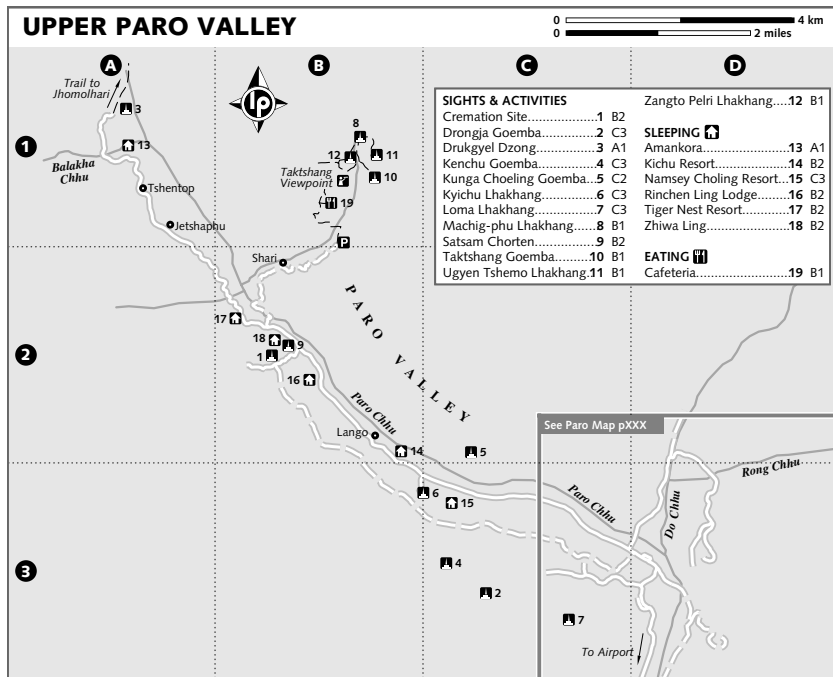
monastery. If you require horses, be sure to mention this to your guide a day or two in advance. Wear a hat and bring water.

A new road, built to facilitate the reconstruction of the monastery, branches off 8km north of Paro and climbs 3km to the trailhead at 2600m.

The trail climbs through blue pines, then switchbacks steeply up the ridge, where a sign exhorts you to 'Walk to Guru's glory! For here in this kingdom rules an unparalleled benevolent king! If you have just flown into Paro, walk slowly because you are likely to be affected by the altitude.

Once you reach the ridge there are excellent views across the valley. To the southwest is the area around Drukgyel; you can see the large school below the village and the army camp above it. After a climb of about one hour and a gain of 300m from the parking lot you will reach a small chorten and some prayer flags on the ridge. Be watchful here as the trail crosses an archery ground. It's then a short walk to the caféteria (2940m), where you can savour the impressive view of the monastery over a well-deserved cup of tea. The caféteria also serves full meals; if you arrange your schedule accordingly, you can have breakfast or lunch here.

The trail continues up for another 30 minutes to a spring and basic monastery guest-house, used by some Buddhist groups. A cave and plaque marks the birthplace of the previous Je Khenpo; his former residence is just up the hill. A short walk further along the main trail brings you to a spectacular lookout at 3140m that puts you eyeball to eyeball with



the monastery, which looks like it is growing out of the rocks.

From this vantage point Taktshang seems almost close enough to touch, but it's on the far side of a deep chasm, about 150m away. The trail descends to a waterfall and the Singye Phu Lhakhang (Snow Lion Cave), a meditation retreat jammed dramatically into a rock crevice, before climbing back up to the monastery entrance.

The Monastery

Since 2005 it has been possible for tourists to enter the monastery, but only if your guide has arranged a permit in advance. Bags and cameras generally have to be deposited at the entrance and you must register with the army.

As you enter the complex you pass underneath images of the Rigsum Goempo (Jampelyang, Chenresig and Channa Dorje). The first chapel on the left has connections to Dorje Phagmo, with a rock image of the goddess hidden in a recessed hole in the floor. The inner chorten belongs to Langchen Pelgyi Tsengay, a 9th-century disciple of Guru Rinpoche, who meditated in the cave. Behind the chorten is a holy spring.

The **Guru Lhakhang** has a central image of Pema Jungme, one of the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche. This statue replaced a famous 'talking' image that was lost in the 1998 fire. Various demonic animal-headed deities, several manifestations of the deity Phurba, and the protector Tseringma (riding a snowlion) decorate the walls.

From here you descend to the **Dubkhang**, the cave where Guru Rinpoche meditated for three months. Outside the cave is a statue of Dorje Drolu, the manifestation the Guru assumed to fly to Taktshang. Inside the cave, behind a spectacularly gilded door, is a chorten stuffed with lots of miniature *phurba* (thunderbolt symbols) with carved heads. Thangtong Gyalpo sits above the door holding his iron chains. Murals of the Guru Tsengye, the eight manifestations of the Guru, decorate the walls.

Further on inside the complex is the **Guru Tsengye Lhakhang**, which features an image of the monastery's 17th-century founder, Gyelse Tenzin Rabgay. Ask a monk to show you the trap door!

Above the Monastery

After visiting the Tiger's Nest it is possible to take a side trail uphill to the **Machig-phu**

Lhakhang, where Bhutanese pilgrims come to pray for children. Head to the cave behind the chapel and select the image of the Tibetan saint Machig Labdron on the right (for a baby girl), or the penis print on the cave wall to the left (for a boy). The main statues inside the chapel are of Machig (see also p134) and her husband Padampa Sangye.

Just above here the trail branches right to the **Ugyen Tshemo Lhakhang**, while the left branch climbs up to the **Zangto Pelri Lhakhang**, named after Guru Rinpoche's heavenly paradise and perched on a crag with great views down to the Tiger's Nest. Roll the dice inside the chapel to double your chances of conceiving more kids. From here the trail descends past a charming holy spring (behind a wooden door) and down to the monastery guesthouse mentioned earlier.

DRUKGYEL DZONG

At the end of the road, 14km from Paro, stand the ruins of Drukgyel Dzong. This dzong was built in 1649 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in a location chosen for its control of the route to Tibet. The dzong was named 'Druk' (Bhutan) 'gyel' (victory) to commemorate the victory of Bhutan over Tibetan invaders in 1644. One of the features of the dzong was a false entrance that was designed to lure invaders into an enclosed courtyard. This is said to have worked successfully during the second attack by Tibetan invaders in 1648.

The dzong sits at the point where the trail from Tibet via the Tremo La enters the Paro valley. Once the Tibetan invasions ceased, this became a major trade route between Bhutan and the Tibetan town of Phari. A small amount of informal trade continues to the present day. On a clear day (most likely in October or November) there is a spectacular view of Jhomolhari from the area near the dzong.

Drukgyel Dzong was featured on the cover of the US *National Geographic* magazine when an article was published about Bhutan by John Claude White in 1914. The building was used as an administrative centre until 1951, when a fire caused by a butter lamp destroyed it. You can still see the charred beams lodged in the ruined walls.

Now the dzong is in ruins. There have been a few attempts at renovation, but all that has been accomplished is the installation of some props to keep the roof of the five-storey main

structure from collapsing. You can walk up a short path into the front courtyard of the dzong, past the remains of the large towers and the tunnel that was used to obtain water from the stream below during a long siege. At the back are two *ta dzongs*.

On the way to the dzong you pass Jetshaphu village, with its important school, several army training camps and the Amankora resort.

Southeast of Paro

Twin roads leads south from Paro to Bondey, where roads head west to Haa and southeast to the confluence at Chhuzom, 24km from Paro and 18km from Bondey.

PARO TO BONDEY (6KM)

The west-bank road south of Paro passes above the airport and Khangku Lhakhang to Bondey, which straddles the Paro Chhu to the southeast of the airport.

Beyond the turn-off to the Cheli La is the 400-year-old **Bondey Lhakhang**, on the west bank of the river. On the east side of the Paro Chhu, near the Bondey Zam, is the charming and unusually-shaped **Tago (Walnut) Lhakhang**, founded by Thangtong Gyalpo. A short but steep climb above Bondey is the small **Pelri Goemba**. From here roads lead north to the airport and south to Chhuzom.

An unpaved road leads west from Bondey through fields to the small, recently constructed Changchi Lhakhang. A short walk, bumpy drive or, better, a mountain-bike ride further up this road affords a view of **Dzongdra-**

kha Goemba, four chapels and a large white chorten hanging on the side of a cliff. You also get views of the goemba from along the road to the Cheli La.

CHELI LA

If you don't have time to visit the Haa valley, the 35km drive up to the 3810m Cheli La makes an interesting day excursion from Paro and is an excellent jumping-off point for day walks. On a clear day from the pass there are views of Jhomolhari as well as down to the Haa valley.

For details of the drive over the pass to the Haa valley see p133.

PARO TO THIMPHU (53KM)

Figure on two hours driving from Paro to Thimphu, longer if you stop en route.

Bondey to Chhuzom

18km / 30 mins

If you're coming from the airport you'll first reach the settlement of Bondey, where there are some lovely old traditional Bhutanese houses and chapels (see left).

About 3km from Bondey is Shaba, a small settlement with an army and road camp. At Isuna, 12km from Bondey, the road crosses a bridge to the south bank of the Paro Chhu. Drak Kharp, a mountain cave (*drak*) where Guru Rinpoche meditated, clings to the rocks high above, a tough three-hour hike from the road.

About 5km before Chhuzom, the road passes **Tamchhog Lhakhang**, a private temple

THE IRON-BRIDGE BUILDER

Thangtong Gyalpo (1385–1464) was a wonder-working Tibetan saint who is believed to have originated the use of heavy iron chains in the construction of suspension bridges. He built 108 bridges throughout Tibet and Bhutan and became known as *Lama Chazampa* (the Iron Bridge Lama).

In 1433 he came to Bhutan in search of iron ore and built eight bridges in places as far removed as Paro and Trashigang. You can see some of the original iron links at the Paro Museum and at Kyichu Lhakhang in the Paro valley. Sadly, the only surviving Thangtong Gyalpo bridge, at Duksum on the road to Trashi Yangtse in eastern Bhutan, was washed away in 2004.

This medieval Renaissance man didn't stop at engineering. Among his other achievements was the composition of many folk songs, still sung today by people as they thresh wheat or pound the mud for house construction, and also the invention of Tibetan *Ihamo* opera. He was an important *terton* (discoverer of *terma*) of the Nyingma lineage and attained the title Drubthob (Great Magician). In Paro he built the marvellous chorten-shaped Dumtse Lhakhang. His descendants still maintain the nearby Tamchhog Goemba Lhakhang.

Statues of Thangtong Gyalpo depict him as a stocky shirtless figure with a beard, curly hair and topknot, holding a link of chains.

owned by the descendants of the famous Tibetan bridge-builder Thangtong Gyalpo (see p131). The traditional iron bridge here was reconstructed in 2005 using some of Thangtong's original chain links from Duksum (see p194) in eastern Bhutan. The red soil around the temple contains low-grade ore that once supplied the raw material for iron works.

You can almost feel the clocks slowing down as you step into the 600-year-old temple. A 100-year old mandarin tree dominates the courtyard. The lovely murals have been darkened by centuries of yak-butter lamps. A *kora* (circumambulation) path in the main chapel leads around central murals of Thangtong Gyalpo and his son Dewa Tsangpo. The doorway of the upper floor *goenkhang* (protector chapel) is framed by rows of skulls and a hornbill beak and is dedicated to the local protector Maza Damsun.

Chhuzom, better known as 'the Confluence' is at the juncture of the Paro Chhu and the Wang Chhu (*chhu* means 'river', *zom* means 'to join'). Sometimes this confluence is considered a union of a mother and father river, similar to that of the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu at Punakha. The Paro Chhu represents the father, and is sometimes called the 'Pho Chhu', and the Wang Chhu is the 'Mo Chhu', or mother river.

Because Bhutanese tradition regards such a joining of rivers as inauspicious, there are three **chortens** here to ward away the evil spells of the area. Each chorten is in a different style – Bhutanese, Tibetan and Nepali.

Chhuzom is also a major road junction, with roads leading southwest to Haa (79km), south to the border town of Phuentsholing (141km) and northeast to Thimphu (31km).

A checkpoint here keeps track of vehicle movements. Dantak, the Indian road-construction organisation, operates a simple coffee shop next to the checkpoint. People from nearby villages often sit by the side of the road south of the checkpoint selling vegetables, apples and dried cheese.

Chhuzom to Thimphu

31km / 1 hour

As the road ascends the Wang Chhu valley, this hillside becomes unusually barren. At 1km past Chhuzom there is a rough, unpaved side road that leads to Geynikha and

NOT AS OLD AS YOU THINK

At several places along the road to Thimphu you will see what look like ancient ruins. These are the remains of houses that either burned down or were abandoned. It is considered unlucky to move into the house of a family whose members have died out or a house that has been abandoned, therefore there are numerous derelict houses scattered around the country. The rammed mud walls are so tough that they survive for years after the rest of the structure has disappeared.

the start of the Dagala Thousand Lakes trek (see p214).

The road passes **Kharibje**, a village in a valley on the opposite side of the river. This village is inhabited by *bja-wap* (goldsmiths) who make jewellery and brass trumpets, as well as butter lamps and other items used in goembas. A small bridge across the Wang Chhu provides road access to the village.

Soon comes the small settlement of Khasadrapchhu. On the opposite side of the river is the hydro plant that served Thimphu before the large Chhukha hydroelectric project came on line in 1988.

The valley widens near the small village of Namseling. Below the road are extensive rice paddies. Rice is planted in mid-June and harvested in October. Terraces are barren during the winter. Above the road are numerous apple orchards. Much of the fruit is exported, particularly to Bangladesh. In the autumn people sell apples and mushrooms from makeshift stalls at the side of the road.

The new 'expressway' to Thimphu drops off the road towards the valley floor and travels along the east side of the river. The large ponds by the riverside are part of Thimphu's sewage treatment plant, which uses a microbiological system to treat urban waste from Thimphu so that no polluted water flows to communities downstream.

After passing below the army helipad at Lungtenphu the road crosses the river and enters Thimphu from the south. A second, older road travels via Babesa and Simtokha, enabling you to visit the Simtokha Dzong or bypass Thimphu completely on the way to Punakha.

HAA DZONGKHAG

The isolated Haa valley lies south of the Paro valley. The Haa Chhu flows from the head of the valley to join the Wang Chhu, by the road to Phuentsholing. Though there is easy access to Tibet from Haa, the remote valley has always been off the major trade routes. It is the ancestral home of the Dorji family, to which the queen mother, Ashi Kesang Wangchuck, belongs.

Not many tourists get to Haa, only opened to tourists in 2001, but it's a picturesque valley that is ideal for mountain biking and hiking, and there is plenty of scope for getting off the beaten track here. We saw at least a dozen monasteries in the valley and doubtless there are many more. The best way to visit is to overnight here and spend a day biking to the sights.

It is a large fertile valley and the staple crops are wheat, potatoes, barley and millet. People also raise yaks and Haa yak meat is regarded as some of the best in the country. Many people from Haa move to Samtse in winter.

There are two roads into Haa. One climbs from Paro, crossing the Cheli La. The other diverges from the Phuentsholing–Thimphu road at Chhuzom and travels south, high above the Wang Chhu, before swinging into the Haa valley.

PARO TO HAA VIA THE CHELI LA (68KM)

From the turn-off at Bondey, south of Paro, it's 62km to Haa over the high Cheli La, claimed to be the highest motorable road in Bhutan. As you start to climb you can see Dzongdrakha Goemba (see p131) to the left.

About 32km from the turn-off is a herders' camp marked by prayer flags. From here hiking trails lead up for 45 minutes to **Kila Nunnery**, established as a meditation site in the 9th century and reputedly the oldest nunnery in Bhutan. There are 32 nuns resident here.

From here, it's 4km to the pass. At the Cheli La a sign says the elevation is 3988m, but it's really 3810m. If it's raining in Paro it's likely snowing here, even as late as the end of April. Join the Bhutanese in a hearty cry of '*lha-gey lu!*' (May the gods be victorious!) as you cross the pass. During the clear skies of October and November it's worth taking the hiking trails that lead up the mountain ridge for 1½ hours to spectacular mountain views.

It's a 26km descent from the pass to Haa, passing through areas of burnt forest. Many fir trees here were killed by bark beetles, and the only way to prevent the spread of these pests was to burn the trees.

HAA

📍 08 / elev 2670m

The town of Haa sprawls along the Haa Chhu and forms two distinct areas. Much of the southern town is occupied by the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) camp (complete with a golf course that has sand 'greens') and a Bhutanese army training camp. Near here is the dzong and monastery. In the central bazaar to the north are the main shops and eating places.

The three hills to the south of town are named after the Rigsum Goembo, the trinity of Chenresig, Channa Dorje and Jampelyang, and also represent the valley's three protector deities.

The scenic road to the north passes the Talung valley and Chhundu Lhakhang, and ends at Damthang, 15km from Haa town. But it would be prudent to turn around before you reach the gates of the large Bhutanese army installation.

Sights

Haa's **Wangchulo Dzong** is one of Bhutan's newest, built in 1915 to replace a smaller structure. It is inside the Indian army compound but there's not much to see.

The 60-strong monk body is housed not in the dzong but in the **Haa Dratshang**, also known as the Lhakhang Kharpo (White Chapel), at the southern entrance to town. An annual tsechu is held in the large courtyard. A ten-minute walk behind the *dratshang* is the grey Lhakhang Nagpo (Black Chapel).

Sleeping & Eating

Risum Resort (📞 375350, fax 375405; s/d Nu 1000/1500) Good accommodation is available here in cosy, pine-clad rooms with clean hot-water bathrooms, heaters and, on the upper floors, balconies. The excellent information book in the restaurant has lots of information on trips to outlying monasteries, including Wantsa Goemba, a short walk behind the resort. The hotel is located on the east side of the road, between the two sections of town.

Hotel Lhayul (📞 375251; tgytaugay@yahoo.com; s/d Nu 550/850) This is a good place for lunch,

with comfy sofas and a bar. There are also eight basic rooms, with four deluxe rooms planned. It's in the central bazaar area of town.

AROUND THE HAA VALLEY

Juneydrak

About 1km north of Haa, by the Two Sisters Hotel and hospital and just before the main bridge, a 4WD track branches east to Katsho village, from where you can make a lovely three-hour return hike to **Juneydrak hermitage** (also known as Juneydrag). The cliffside retreat contains a footprint of Machig Labdrom (1055–1132), the female Tibetan Tantric practitioner who perfected the *chöd* ritual, whereby one visualises one's own dismemberment in an act of 'ego annihilation'.

A trail follows the stream past a *mani* wall to a two-legged archway chorten (known as a *khonying*). Cross the bridge and ascend through a charming rhododendron forest. At a red sign in Dzongkha, take the trail to the left and climb up to a chorten that marks the entry to the hermitage. A sign here asks visitors not to disturb the hermits so don't try to enter the lhakhang.

From here a set of exposed log ladders ascend the cliff and the trail curves round the exposed bluff. Don't attempt this if you are afraid of heights or if it's raining. The trail curves round to Katsho Goemba, which is normally closed, but there are fine views down to Katsho village. Follow the switchbacked path back down to the village.

Chhundu Lhakhang

North of Katsho the main road crosses to the river's south bank and passes several traditional settlements as it heads up the lovely upper Haa valley, past the village of Ingo (Yungo). The large village in the side valley to the north is Talung; Yangthang Goemba is high on the eastern ridge of this side valley and Jangkha village is in the valley floor, between Yangthang and Talung villages. Further up the valley is Tsenkha Goemba. You'll need a 4WD to visit Yangthang Goemba.

Three kilometres further along the main road (11km from Haa) is the delightful **Chhundu Lhakhang**, one of several shrines dedicated to the valley's protective deity. The timeless chapel is a five-minute walk down a concrete path below Gyechukha village, which is itself just past the Yakchu Zam bridge at

Haley. The blue-faced Chhundu and his red-faced cousin Jowya glower in glass cabinets on either side of the main altar.

Troublesome Chhundu was banished to Haa by the Zhabdrung after an altercation with Gyenyen, Thimphu's protector. He also had a quarrel with Jichu Drakye of Paro, with the result that the Paro guardian stole all of Haa's water – and that's why there is no rice grown in Haa. Annual sacrifices to Chhundu are still carried out in nearby Jangkha village, highlighting how deeply Bhutan's roots run to its pre-Buddhist animist past.

HAA TO CHHUZOM (79KM)

From Haa village it's 6km to Karnag (also called Karna), and then Jyenkana. After a long stretch of forest the road reaches Nago, with its picturesque water prayer wheels. It's 4km to Bietakha, past a small landslide area and then another 5km to the two small restaurants at Rangshingang and then the large village of Gayshina.

Now high above the river, the road swings into a huge side valley, passing below the village of Susana en route to Mendegang. Near the houses and basic restaurants of Tshongkha is a road leading to a radio tower and a trail leading uphill to Phundup Pedma Yowzing Goemba. The road traverses in and out of side valleys, passing above Dobji Dzong, and then descends into Wang Chuu valley to join the main road at Chhuzom. From Chhuzom it's 24km (45 minutes) to Paro or 31km (one hour) to Thimphu.

PUNAKHA DZONGKHAG

THIMPHU TO PUNAKHA (76KM)

The 2¾-hour drive from Thimphu to Punakha, along the National Hwy and over the Dochu La, leads from the cool heights of Thimphu to the balmy, lush landscapes of the Punakha valley.

Thimphu to Dochu La

23km / 45 mins

From Thimphu the road goes south to Simtokha (2250m). The route to the east leaves the road to Paro and Phuentsholing and loops back over itself to become the east–west National Hwy. About a kilometre past the turn-off there is a good view of Simtokha Dzong (see p116). The route climbs past the forestry

research station at Yusupang, then through apple orchards and forests of blue pine to the village of **Hongtsho** (2890m). Ngawang Chhogyel founded a goemba and meditation centre here in the 15th century; he was a cousin of Lama Drukpa Kunley and also founded Druk Choeding in Paro. At the village of Hongtsho there is an immigration checkpoint that controls all access to eastern Bhutan. You must have a restricted-area travel permit to proceed; this is arranged as a matter of course by all tour operators.

High on a ridge across the valley to the south is **Trashigang Goemba** (see p117); you can make a nice half-day hike from the Dochu La to the goemba, ending at Hongtsho (see p117).

The road climbs to **Dochu La** (3140m), marked by a large array of prayer flags and an impressive new collection of 108 chortens. On a rare clear day (only really likely between October and February) the pass offers a panoramic view of the Bhutan Himalaya and some groups make special pre-dawn trips up here to catch the views. The collection of chortens were built in 2005 as atonement for the loss of life caused by the flushing out of Assamese militants in southern Bhutan. A new Zangto Pelri Lhakhang is under construction at the pass.

The hill above the chortens is covered in lovely rhododendron forest, part of the royal botanical park. If you are here between mid-March and the end of April it's well worth taking some time to wander in the forest and take in the wonderful blooms. The forest is also a good area for bird-spotting. If you have more time, you can make an excellent half-day hike to Hongtsho via Lungchuzekha and Trashigang goembas – see p117 for details.

On the hill just below the pass is the **Dochu La Hotel** (☎ 02-390404; breakfast/lunch Nu 130/260), actually a restaurant, where many people break for tea. The proprietor also has a business making embroidered *thankas*, including some large *thondrols* for tsechus, and there's a small gift shop here.

There is a powerful binocular telescope here, a gift from the Kyoto University Alpine Club after members made the first ascent of Masang Gang (7165m) in 1985. A photograph on the wall above the telescope labels the peaks on the horizon (with different spellings and elevations from those used in this book). Gangkhar Puensum (7541m) is the

highest peak that is completely inside Bhutan; Kulha Gangri (7554m) is higher, but it is on the border with Tibet. Using the telescope, it's also possible to see the distinctive shape of **Gasa Dzong** (see p226), a small white speck almost 50km to the north.

The area near the pass is believed to be inhabited by numerous spirits, including a cannibal demones. Lama Drukpa Kunley, the 'Divine Madman', built **Chimi Lhakhang** (see p145) in the Punakha valley to subdue these spirits and demons.

Dochu La to Metshina

42km / 1½ hours

The vegetation changes dramatically at the pass from oak, maple and blue pine to a moist mountain forest of rhododendron, alder, cypress, hemlock and fir. There is also a large growth of daphne, a bush that is harvested for making traditional paper. The large white chorten a few kilometres below the pass was built because of the high incidence of accidents on this stretch of road. It's a long, winding descent past Lumitsawa to **Thinleygang**, during which the air gets warmer and the vegetation becomes increasingly tropical with the appearance of cactus, oranges and bamboo. About 11km below the pass is a government botanical garden.

As you descend from the pass monasteries start to appear on the surrounding hills. First is the striking hilltop Jakar Goemba, near Baekub village. Further along and high on

ROYAL PROCESSIONS

Thinleygang (1860m) is an interesting village. Every November (on the first day of the 10th month) the Je Khenpo and *dratshang* (central monk body) pack up their robes and move from their summer residence in Thimphu to their winter residence in Punakha, taking their holiest relics with them. The procession takes two days and thousands of locals line the road to catch a glimpse of the Je Khenpo. The entourage overnights here en route, on what is the biggest day of the sleepy Thinleygang calendar. The Je Khenpo lodges in the lhakhang just below the village. The monk body returns to Thimphu in May (the 1st day of the 4th month), but this time overnights in Hongtsho.

THE DIVINE MADMAN

Lama Drukpa Kunley (1455–1529) is one of Bhutan's favourite saints and a fine example of the Tibetan tradition of 'crazy wisdom'. He was born in Tibet, trained at Ralung Monastery and was a contemporary and disciple of Pema Lingpa. He travelled throughout Bhutan and Tibet as a *neljorpa* (yogi) using songs, humour and outrageous behaviour to dramatise his teachings to the common man. He felt that the stiffness of the clergy and social conventions were keeping people from learning the true teachings of Buddha.

His outrageous, often obscene, actions and sexual antics were a deliberate method of provoking people to discard their preconceptions. Tango Goemba is apparently the proud owner of a *thangka* that Kunley urinated on! He is also credited with having created Bhutan's strange animal, the takin, by sticking the head of a goat onto the body of a cow.

His sexual exploits are legendary, and the flying phalluses that you see painted on houses and hanging from rooftops are his. Kunley's numerous sexual conquests often included even the wives of his hosts and sponsors. On one occasion when he received a blessing thread to hang around his neck, he wound it around his penis instead, saying he hoped it would bring him luck with the ladies.

He spoke the following verse on one occasion when he met Pema Lingpa:

I, the madman from Kyishodruk,
Wander around from place to place;
I believe in lamas when it suits me,
I practise the Dharma in my own way.
I choose any qualities, they are all illusions,
Any gods, they are all the Emptiness of the Mind.
I use fair and foul words for Mantras; it's all the same,
My meditation practice is girls and wine;
I do whatever I feel like, strolling around in the Void,
Last time, I saw you with the Bumthang trulku;
With my great karmic background, I could approach.
Indeed it was auspicious, to meet you on my pilgrim's round!

For a biography and collection of songs and bar-room anecdotes concerning Drukpa Kunley, try Keith Dowman's *The Divine Madman*.

the hill across the valley is Dalay Goemba, with Talo Goemba just above and to the west. The road passes a chorten that flows with holy water, said to have its source in a lake far above.

Three kilometres from Thinleygang, below Mendigang village, is the small **Dechen Hill Resort** (☎ 02-322204; s/d Nu 1050/1400), which was closed during our visit. It's a short but steep drive up an unpaved road up to the secluded collection of cottages, which are used mostly by birding enthusiasts. Advance reservations for the resort are a must, as is a 4WD vehicle.

The road continues its descent, looping in and out of a side valley, to the road junction at Metshina, where the road to Punakha branches off from the National Hwy. The Zam Restaurant offers snacks and drinks and

a petrol station allows your driver to fill up. If you are continuing to Wangdue Phodrang, stay on the main road.

Metshina to Punakha

11km / 30 mins

The road to Punakha makes a switchback down past a collection of shops and houses at Sopsokha, from where you can visit the Chimi Lhakhang. Beyond here, the road crosses the small Tabe Rong Chhu and swings round a ridge into the valley of the Punak Tsang Chhu. Watch for black great cormorants sitting on rocks beside the river looking for fish. The dirt road on the other side of the valley offers several mountain-biking options (see p148).

(Continued on page 145)

(Continued from page 136)

After another 2km or so, by the village of Wolakha, a road peels off to the left and climbs to the Meri Phensom and Zangto Pelri hotels (see p148). High upon the hillside this side road continues a relentless uphill for 15km to **Talo Goemba**. You need a permit specifying Talo in order to visit the monastery. Up on the nearby ridge, the village of Norbugang reportedly has several fine lhakhangs but is closed to visitors since it is home to the family of the king's four wives. A 1km side road branches off 5km before Talo to **Dalay Goemba**, a *lobdra* (monastic school) which is home to 30 students and a young *trulku* (reincarnated lama). The monastery was founded by the seventh Je Khenpo and is also known as Nalanda, after the famous Indian Buddhist university.

Back on the main road, just under 2km from the junction and 6.5km from Metshina is the new town of Khuruthang. All of Punakha's shops were relocated to this uninspiring concrete grid in 1999. There are several restaurants and hotels and a Saturday vegetable market.

To the side of the road is the new **Khuruthang Goemba**, built by the queen's mother and consecrated in 2005. The main Zangto Pelri Lhakhang here has excellent ceiling mandalas. The murals on the far wall depict the Zhabdrung and the various dzongs he established. The large Nepali-style chorten here was built by the Indian guru Nagi Rinchen (see p147) and is said to enshrine a speaking image of Guru Rinpoche known as Guru Samzhung.

It's a further 3km to a high school and an excellent viewpoint over the Punakha Dzong. A kilometre further on is a parking area and the footbridge leading across the Mo Chhu to gorgeous Punakha Dzong.

CHIMI LHAKHANG

On a hillock in the centre of the valley below Metshina is the yellow-roofed **Chimi Lhakhang**, built in 1499 by the cousin of Lama Drukpa Kunley, in his honour after he subdued the demoness of the nearby Dochu La with his 'magic thunderbolt of wisdom'. A wooden effigy of the lama's thunderbolt is preserved in the lhakhang, and childless women go to the temple to receive a *wang* (blessing or empowerment) from the saint.

It's a 20-minute walk across fields from the road at Sopsokha to the temple. The trail leads across rice fields to the tiny settlement of Pana, which means 'field'. It then follows a tiny stream downhill to Yoaka (which means 'in the drain') and across an archery ground before making a short climb to Chimi Lhakhang. During the wet season, this is an especially muddy and slippery walk. Kunley characteristically likened the shape of the hillock to that of a woman's breast.

There are a few monks at the temple, which is surrounded by a row of prayer wheels and some beautiful slate carvings. No permit is required for entrance to the temple, so you may visit and see the central statue of the lama and his dog Sachi, as well as statues of the Zhabdrung, Sakyamuni and Chenresig. Make a small offering and you'll be rewarded with a blessing from the lama's wooden and bone phalluses and his iron archery set. Mothers-to-be then select their future baby's name from a collection of bamboo slips. The small chorten on the altar is said to have been crafted by Drukpa Kunley himself. Murals to the right of the chapel depict events from Kunley's colourful life.

PUNAKHA & KHURUTHANG

☎ 02 / elev 1250m

Punakha sits in a fertile, warm and beautiful valley at the junction of the Mo Chhu (Mother River) and Pho Chhu (Father River). Commanding the river junction is the gorgeous Punakha Dzong, one of Bhutan's most impressive buildings. Punakha served as Bhutan's capital for over 300 years and the first king was crowned here in 1907. The third king convened the new Bhutan National Assembly here in 1952.

From Punakha, the Punak Tsang Chhu continues past Wangdue Phodrang, dropping away into southern Bhutan, where it is known locally as the Sankosh. The low altitude of the Punakha valley allows two rice crops a year, and oranges and bananas are in abundance.

All of Punakha's shops and facilities are in the unappealing new town of Khuruthang, 4km to the south. The older village opposite the dzong has only private homes, a hospital and an antique-looking fire engine.

Punakha also has one of the most famous festivals in the country, dedicated to the protector deity Yeshe Goeipo (Mahakala).

Sights

PUNAKHA DZONG

Punakha Dzong was the second of Bhutan's dzongs and until the mid-1950s it served as the seat of the government. It's arguably the most beautiful dzong in the country, especially in spring when the lilac-coloured jaracanda trees bring a rare sensuality to the dzong's characteristically towering white-washed walls. Elaborately painted gold, red and black carved woods add to the artistic lightness of touch.

The construction of Punakha Dzong was foretold by Guru Rinpoche, who predicted that '...a person named Namgyal will arrive at a hill that looks like an elephant'. The Zhabdrung visited Punakha and chose the tip

of the trunk of the sleeping elephant at the confluence of the Mo Chhu and Pho Chhu as the place to build a dzong. It's not obvious, but with a bit of imagination you may be able to visualise the hill as an elephant.

As early as 1326 a smaller building called Dzong Chug (Small Dzong) housed a statue of the Buddha here. It is said that the Zhabdrung ordered the architect, Zowe Palep, to sleep in front of the statue. While Palep was sleeping, the Zhabdrung took him in his dreams to Zangto Pelri and showed him the palace of Guru Rinpoche. From his vision, the architect conceived the design for the new dzong, which, in keeping with tradition, was never committed to paper.

Construction began in 1637 and was completed the following year, when the building was christened Pungthang Dechen Phodrang (Palace of Great Happiness). Later embellishments included the construction of a chapel to commemorate the victory over the Tibetans in 1639. The arms captured during the battle are preserved in the dzong.

The Zhabdrung established a monk body here with 600 monks from Cheri Goemba in the upper Thimphu valley and he lived out the rest of his life here. Punakha is still the winter residence of the *dratshang*.

Punakha Dzong is 180m long and 72m wide and the *utse* is six storeys high. The gold dome on the *utse* was built in 1676 by the *dzongpen* (lord of the dzong), Gyaltsen Tenzin Rabgye. Many of the dzong's features were added between 1744 and 1763 during the reign of the 13th deshi, Sherab Wangchuk. One item he donated was the *chenmo* (great) *thondrol*, a large *thangka* depicting the Zhabdrung that is exhibited to the public once a year during the tsechu festival. A brass roof for the dzong was a gift of the seventh Dalai Lama, Kelzang Gyatso.

Frequent fires (five between 1750 and 1849) damaged the dzong, as did the severe 1897 earthquake. A glacial lake burst on the Pho Chhu in 1960 and again in 1994, causing damage to the dzong that has since been repaired. Outside the dzong is a memorial to the 23 people killed in that flood. The latest fire, in 1986, damaged the residence of the Je Khenpo in the southwest corner of the dzong.

Cantilever bridges across the Mo Chhu and the Pho Chhu were constructed between 1720 and 1730. They have both been destroyed, however, and the Mo Chhu is now spanned by

a cable suspension bridge that stands next to the remains of the original cantilever bridge.

Visiting The Dzong

In addition to its strategic position at the river confluence, the dzong has several features to protect it against invasion. The steep wooden entry stairs are designed to be pulled up, and there is a heavy wooden door that is still closed at night.

The dzong is unique because it has three *docheys* instead of the usual two. The first (northern) courtyard is for administrative functions and houses a huge white chorten and bodhi tree. In the far left corner is a collection of stones and a shrine to the queen of the *nagas* (snake spirits), whose image is to the side. The second courtyard houses the monastic quarters and is separated from the first by the *utse*. In this courtyard are two halls, one of which was used when Ugyen Wangchuck, later the first king, was presented with the Order of Knight Commander of the Indian Empire by John Claude White in 1905.

In the southernmost courtyard is the temple where the remains of the *terton*, Pema Lingpa, and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal are preserved. The Zhabdrung died in Punakha Dzong, and his body is still preserved in Machey Lhakhang (*machey* means 'sacred embalmed body'), which was rebuilt in 1995. The casket is sealed and may not be opened. Other than two guardian lamas, only the king and the Je Khenpo may enter this room. Both come to take blessings before they take up their offices.

At the south end is the 'hundred-pillar' assembly hall (which actually has only 54 pillars).

The exceptional murals, which were commissioned by the second *druk deshi*, depict the life of Buddha. The massive gold statues of the Buddha, Guru Rinpoche and the Zhabdrung date back to the mid-18th century, and there are some fine gold panels on the pillars.

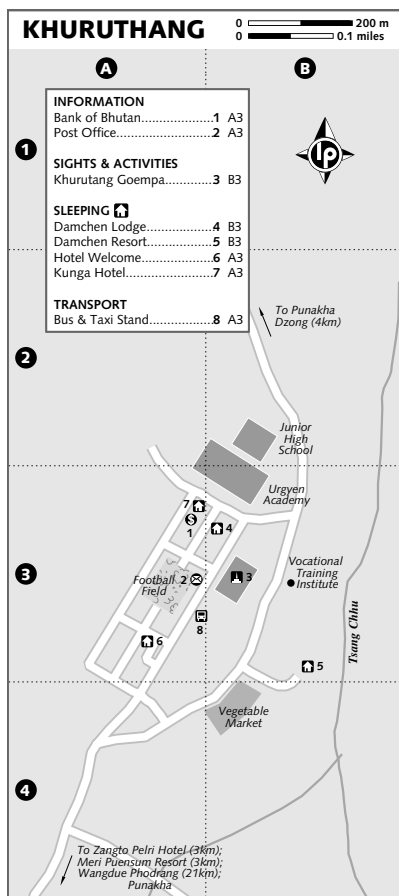
Bhutan's most treasured possession is the Rangjung ('Self-Created') Kharsapani, an image of Chenresig that is kept in the Tse Lhakhang in the *utse* of the Punakha Dzong. It was brought to Bhutan from Tibet by the Zhabdrung and features heavily in Punakha's famous *domchoe* (type of festival).

After you exit the dzong from the north you can visit the *dzong chug*, which houses a statue of Sakyamuni said to have the ability to talk. North of the dzong is a cremation ground, marked by a large chorten.

THE UPPER PUNAKHA VALLEY

The road up the west side of Mo Chhu valley passes several country houses owned by Bhutan's nobility, including the Phuntscho Pelri palace, a summer residence of the king, and a former residence of the queen mother, now the Amankora resort (see p148). The current queens' father built many of the lhakhangs in the valley and owns several hotels, including the Zangto Pelri.

Just 1km north of the dzong is the **Bhutan Souvenir Production Training Centre** (☎ 584664; ☎ Sun-Fri), a program that trains 20 disadvantaged girls in a one-year course to produce souvenir handicrafts. Products include hand-woven bags, embroidered purses, Bhutanese paper products, dolls and Christmas decorations. It's a worthy cause and worth a stop.



PUNAKHA FESTIVAL

The Punakha festival in February/March is unusual because of its dramatic recreation of a 17th-century battle scene. In 1639 a Tibetan army invaded Bhutan to seize Bhutan's most precious relic, the Rangjung Kharsapani, a self-created image of Chenresig. The Zhabdrung concocted an elaborate ceremony in which he pretended to throw the relic into the Mo Chhu, after which the disappointed Tibetans withdrew.

On the final day of the five-day Punakha Domchoe the *thondrol*, which features an image of the Zhabdrung, is displayed. Later a group of 136 people dressed as *pazaps* (warriors) perform a dance in the main courtyard, then shout and whistle as they descend the front stairs of the dzong. Next, a procession of monks led by the Je Khenpo proceeds to the river to the accompaniment of cymbals, drums and trumpets. At the river the Je Khenpo throws a handful of oranges symbolising the Rangjung Kharsapani into the river. This is both a recreation of the Zhabdrung's trick and also an offering to the *naga* (*lu* in Dzongkha), the sub-surface spirits in the river. The singing and cheering warriors then carry their generals back into the dzong as firecrackers explode around them. Mask dances then celebrate the Zhabdrung's construction of the dzong.

On the left side of the road, 4.5km from Punakha, look out for the **Dho Jhaga Lam Lhakhang**, whose pretty gardens shelter a huge boulder split miraculously in two. It is said that the Indian guru-magician Nagi Rinchen sent lightning and hail to split the rock to liberate his mother who was trapped inside. The chapel houses a statue of the guru (to the far right), who is recognisable by the scriptures in his top knot. Rinchen meditated in a cave across the river (marked by prayer flags next to the Sona Gasa, the former palace of the third king), and so is depicted here as a long-haired *drubthob* (hermit-magician). To the far left is a statue of the local female protector Chabdrab, riding a snowlion.

In Yambesa, 7km from Punakha, is the huge **Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten**, perched high on a hill on the opposite bank of the river. The 30m-tall chorten, which took eight years to build, was consecrated during a three-day ceremony in December 1999. The chorten is dedicated to the crown prince and serves to protect the country so is stuffed with every form of protector deity imaginable, including a yeti with characteristically pendulous breasts. You can ascend up to the roof for superb views of the valley. A side road leads down to a parking lot by the river, where a bridge provides access to a steep 45-minute hike uphill to the chorten. Ask your guide to point out the wonderfully fragrant *tingye* (flower pepper) plants that grow along the trail.

The bridge is a put-in spot for relaxing rafting and kayaking float trips down the Mo Chhu to Punakha Dzong (see p244).

Beyond the chorten the road leads up to Tashithang and then Damji, a half-day walk from Gasa (see p159). This is the jumping-off point for treks to Gasa and the hot springs below it; it's also the ending point of the Laya-Gasa trek (see p222 for details).

Activities

Punakha's mountain-bike trails offer one of the best chances to break out the fat tyres, though you'll have to bring your own bike as there's nowhere to rent locally.

A 27km loop route from Kuruthang crosses the bridge there and heads up the east side of the valley along a feeder road to Samdingkha (14km), then returns along a trail to Punakha Dzong (7.5km), finally coasting back to Khuruthang along the paved road.

A longer 40km loop starts from Bajo, just north of Wangdue Phodrang, and heads up the east side of the valley to Jangsabu (14km), before climbing a trail to Olodama and Tschochagsa (9.5km). From here you can detour to Lingmukha or coast down 10km to the Aumtekha junction, across the river from Chimi Lhakhang, and then pedal back to Bajo and Wangdi.

Sleeping

Many people visit Punakha as a day trip from Thimphu or visit en route to Wangdue Phodrang, where there are several more hotels (see p151). An **Uma** (www.uma.como.bz) resort is planned above Punakha Dzong.

Meri Puensum Resort (Map p146; ☎ 584195; mpuensum@druknet.net.com; s/d Nu 1100/1300, deluxe s/d Nu 1250/1450; 🚻) This privately-run place next door to Zangto Pelri is smaller, cosier and has much better service. Rooms are in a central building and cottages that hug the steep hillside overlooking the rice terraces of the Punakha valley. The garden gazebo is a great place to have breakfast or relax after a long day's touring. If you stay here (or at the Zangto Pelri), consider getting up at dawn and driving 8km up the paved road to Laptshaka (1900m) for a beautiful view of the mountains.

Hotel Zangto Pelri (Map p146; ☎ 584125; hotzang@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1100/1320, cottage s/d Nu 1200/1440) Named after the paradise of Guru Rinpoche, this hotel is 6km south of Punakha, 1.2km up a side road, on a hill above the Punakha valley. There are 45 rooms in the central building and quieter surrounding cottages (upper-floor rooms are best), with a neglected swimming pool on the grounds below the hotel. Service is lacklustre at best.

Amankora (Map p128; ☎ 584222; www.amanresorts.com; s/d full board US\$925/1000; 🚻) This is the smallest and most intimate of these über-luxury resorts, with only eight rooms in three buildings (rooms are identical in all Bhutan's Amankoras). The main farmhouse (now the restaurant and reading room) was the former residence of the queen mother and has some charming touches, including a traditional altar room. The spa reception area is in the former farmhouse kitchen. The lovely outdoor dining area is surrounded by rice fields and orchards. Park at the suspension bridge over the Mo Chhu and take a golf cart up to the resort (ring in advance to arrange this).

Damchen Resort (Map p146; ☎ 584354; s/d Nu 1200/1400) On the banks of the Punak Chhu,

below Khuruthang, this riverside resort was being rebuilt and expanded in 2006. It has a good location near the Khuruthang Goemba but on Saturdays brace yourself for the disco in the underground Blue River Club.

In Khuruthang there are several basic local guest houses, including **Hotel Welcome** (Map p146; ☎ 584106; s/d Nu 200/300) and the better **Kunga Hotel** (Map p146; ☎ 584128; r without/with private bathroom Nu 300/450). Best is the **Damchen Lodge** (Map p146; ☎ 584650; d Nu 1400), where some rooms have balconies overlooking the goemba.

Hotel Y.T. (☎ 376012; hotelyt@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1300/1500) Above the road department complex in Lobesa, 2km from Metshina en route to Wangdue Phodrang, this intimate family-run hotel has great views of the valley and a comfortable Bhutanese-style sitting room. The friendly owner is an ex-forester, which is why the gardens are stuffed with mango, avocado and papaya trees. He is planning a new hotel 1km along the road towards Wangdi.

Eating

You can get curries, *momos*, rice and dal at several small restaurants in Khuruthang, of which the best are at the Kunga Hotel and Hotel Welcome. Otherwise, your guide will book lunch at one of the tourist sites.

WANGDUE PHODRANG DZONGKHAG

The scenic dzongkhag of Wangdue Phodrang is centred on the town and dzong of that name and stretches all the way to the Pele La and Phobjikha valley.

PUNAKHA TO WANGDUE PHODRANG (21KM)

It's a half-hour drive from Punakha to Wangdue Phodrang. Follow the road back to Metshina and drive 1.5km to Lobesa, following the Punak Tsang Chhu.

Soon the dramatic Wangdue Phodrang Dzong comes into view, draped along the end of a ridge above the river. There is a police and immigration checkpoint before the bridge across the Punak Tsang Chhu. A road leads from the bridge south to the Basochhu hydroelectric project and the southern region of Tsirang.

The original bridge over the Punak Tsang Chhu is said to have been built in 1685. Old

photos show a wooden cantilever structure with massive turrets. Floods washed it away in 1968, and now a two-lane Swiss-engineered bridge spans the river downstream of the remains of the original structure.

WANGDUE PHODRANG

☎ 02 / elev 1240m

Legends relate that the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal met a small boy named Wangdi playing in the sand on the banks of the Punak Chhu and was moved to name his new dzong Wangdi – later Wangdue – Phodrang (Wangdi's Palace). The town is still known colloquially as Wangdi.

The small town of whitewashed wooden shops and restaurants has a ramshackle but untouched air. Many houses in town have roofs made from slate that was mined at Tashi Chholing and Tsheshinang, on the hills above Wangdi. Sadly, this looks all set to change, as plans are afoot to demolish the wooden shacks and relocate the old town 4km to the north. There's no timeline for this as yet (2006 and 2007 were divined as inauspicious years for such a move) but the concrete grid of the new site is waiting expectantly.

Because it is on an exposed promontory overlooking the river, Wangdi is usually windy and dusty, particularly in the afternoon.

Orientation

The town's only hotel and the dzong are down a side road to the southwest of the central bazaar. Nearby is the Radak Naktshang, the town temple. The weekly vegetable market is far below the bazaar on a side road.

Information

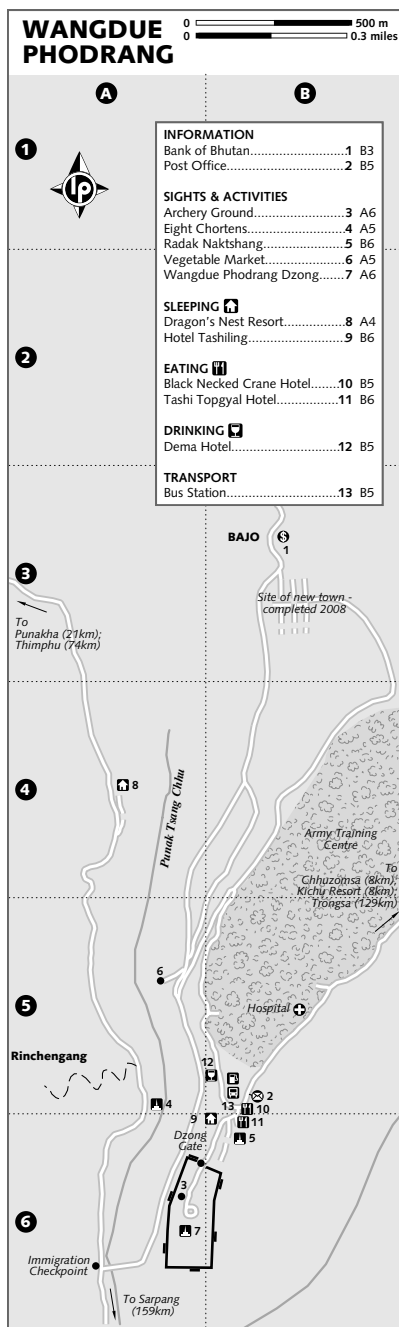
Bank of Bhutan (☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques. It's in Bajo village, just north of the planned new town, 2.5km from Wangdue Phodrang.

Post Office (☎ 8.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1pm Sat) In a courtyard just off the main traffic circle.

Sights

WANGDUE PHODRANG DZONG

Wangdue Phodrang Dzong was founded by the Zhabdrung in 1638. It sits atop a high ridge between the Punak Tsang Chhu and the Dang Chhu. It is obvious that the site was selected for its commanding view of the valleys below. Legend relates another reason for choosing this spot: as people searched



for a site for the dzong, four ravens were seen flying away in four directions. This was considered an auspicious sign, representing the spreading of religion to the four points of the compass.

Wangdi is important in the history of Bhutan because in the early days it was the country's secondary capital. After Trongsa Dzong was established in 1644 the *penlop* of Wangdue Phodrang became the third most powerful ruler, after the *penlops* of Paro and Trongsa. The dzong's position gave the *penlop* control of the routes to Trongsa, Punakha, Dagana and Thimphu. It was repaired after a fire in 1837 and again after it was severely damaged in the 1897 earthquake.

The dzong's complex shape consists of three separate narrow structures that follow the contours of the hill. The buildings are refreshingly unrestored, with a wooden roof still held in place by large stones, and the occasional lost chicken wandering across the empty courtyards.

There is only one entrance, fronted by a large *darchen* (prayer pole) and reached by a road that leads downhill from the bazaar. The cacti that cover the hillside below the dzong were planted long ago to discourage invaders from climbing the steep slope.

The administrative portion surrounds a large flagstone-paved *dochey* at the north end of the dzong. The *utse* divides the two portions of the dzong. The Guru Tshengye Thondrol, depicting Guru Rinpoche, is unfurled here each year in the early hours of the final day of the autumn tsechu festival. As you detour around the *utse* you can peer through arrow slits into the valley below. The main assembly hall in the far south of the dzong features a central Dzum Sangyay – the past, present and future Buddhas.

RADAK NATSHANG

Just behind the bazaar, by the tall cypress trees of the district court, is this timeless 17th-century **temple**. The temple is dedicated to an ancient warrior king and there's a large collection of helmets, arrows and shields in the anteroom. Inside are five versions of the local protector deity, as well as a statue to the far right of a *tshomen* (mermaid), who lived in the river and was an obstacle to the construction of this building. Make an offering and roll the chapel dice and the resident monk will read your future.

RINCHENGANG

From the dzong you can clearly see the compact village of **Rinchengang** on the opposite side of the river. Many of the people who live in this traditional village work as stonemasons, and the services of Rinchengang's craftsmen are sought after for the construction of dzongs and lhakhangs. While Rinchengang is believed to be one of the oldest villages in Bhutan, electricity, water and schools only arrived here in the early 1990s. There's a small lhakhang at the top of the village.

Sleeping

There's not a great deal of demand for hotel rooms in Wangdi. Many travellers just make a day trip to see the dzong or stay in Punakha (30 minutes' drive away) and drive straight through to Gangte, Trongsa or Bumthang. At tsechu time in autumn, however, the town is packed and rooms are at a premium.

Dragon's Nest Resort (Map p150; ☎ 480521; nest@druknet.bt; s/d from Nu 1400/1700; 🚗) This trusty place is on the west side of the river, 4km below Wangdi and diagonally across from the new town. The spacious rooms overlook the river and are safely away from the nocturnal canine hullabaloo of the town. The hot water takes time to kick in so let it run for a while before you call for help. The restaurant staff seem to be in a competition to see who can ignore the guests the longest. Apparently our waiter won.

Kichu Resort (Map p128; ☎ 481359; fax 481360; s/d Nu 1650/2400) In Chhuzomsa, 8km east of the town, this tranquil hotel has 22 well-appointed rooms in a lovely landscaped garden overlooking the rushing Dang Chhu. The son of the resort's owners is a *rinpoche* (title given to a revered lama) and so the restaurant serves only vegetarian food. Ask for a riverside balcony room and pack insect repellent against the sand flies.

Hotel Tashiling (Map p150; ☎ 481403; fax 481682; s/d Nu 1200/1500; Dzong Lam) This place sits somewhere between a tourist and local hotel, with 16 pine-walled rooms and strings of meat drying from the balconies. It's a decent option if for some reason you want to stay in the town.

Eating & Drinking

The **Black Necked Crane Hotel** (Map p150) is a decent local-style place for a lunch of Nepali-style *dal bhat* (rice and lentils). The **Tashi Topgyal Hotel** (Map p150) is run by a friendly family and has simple food. The **Demā Hotel** (Map p150) has overstuffed chairs and a sofa so you can relax

with a beer and watch the world pass by the front window.

WANGDUE PHODRANG TO PELE LA

61km / 1¼ hours

The beautiful drive east to the Pele La offers access to central Bhutan and the Phobjikha valley, known for its winter population of black-necked cranes. The pass itself takes you over the Black Mountains, the boundary between western and central Bhutan, before dropping down to Trongsa (p163).

Leaving Wangdue Phodrang, the road traverses bare hillsides high above the Dang Chhu. The large building far below the road, alongside the river, is a jail.

By the time the road reaches Chhuzomsa at the confluence of the Pe Chhu and the Dang Chhu, 8km from Wangdi, it is level with the river (Chhuzomsa means 'meeting of two rivers'). There are a few shops and a charming lhakhang here, and the Kichu Resort (see left) lies below the road on the idyllic banks of the river.

Just beyond Chhuzomsa is a ropeway that climbs 1340m in 6km to Tashila. The ropeway is primarily used to carry goods up to the village and to bring logs back down the hill, but it makes two special trips daily to carry people. Passengers sit in an open wooden box and dangle high above the trees for 45 minutes (if there is no breakdown) to the top. The price is Nu 60 for locals and Nu 250 for tourists, who are only allowed to ride in cases of emergency. The Gangte trek (p228) passes the top of the ropeway, and some tired trekkers declare an emergency and ride down from Tashila.

At Tikke Zampa, 4km past Chhuzomsa, the road crosses to the south bank of the Dang Chhu and begins a long climb to the Pele La. You may see horsemen here waiting for their trekking groups to arrive. A further 10km and you'll see a superbly located monastery on a hillock to the left. The valley gets steeper as the road ascends along the edge of the valley, following a spectacular, and occasionally frightening, route. In many places the way for the road has been blasted out of the side of the cliff and the road hangs high above the deep forests of the valley below.

The road detours frequently into side valleys, passing the Phama Hotel at Kalekha (or Khelaykha), the end of an interesting hike from the Phobjikha valley (see p153). From here it's 12km to the village of Nobding

(2640m), and then another 7km to Dungdung Nyelsa, where there are a few basic local-style restaurants. In spring the upper hillsides are covered with red, white and pink rhododendron blossoms. The road climbs steeply up the hillside for 5km to a turn-off that leads 6km to Gangte in the Phobjikha valley (see p154).

From the turn-off, it's 3km through forests to the top of Pele La (3420m), which is marked by a chorten and an array of prayer flags. On a clear day (which is rare in these parts) there is a view of Jhomolhari (7314m), Jichu Drakye (6989m) and Kang Bum (6526m) from a viewpoint 500m down the old road between Nobding and the Pele La. There are no mountain views from the pass itself. The Pele La marks the western border of the Singye Wangchuck (formerly the Black Mountains) National Park and the gateway to central Bhutan.

PHOBJIKHA VALLEY

📍 02 / elev 2900m

Phobjikha is a bowl-shaped glacial valley on the western slopes of the Black Mountains, bordering the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park. Because of the large flock of black-necked cranes that winters here, it is one of the most important wildlife preserves in the country. In addition to the cranes there are also muntjacs (barking deer), wild boars, sambars, Himalayan black bears, leopards and red foxes in the surrounding hills. The Nakey Chhu drains the marshy valley, eventually flowing into the lower reaches of the Punak Tsang Chhu.

Some people refer to this entire region as Gangte (or Gangtey), after the goemba that sits on a ridge above the valley. The three-day Gangte trek takes off from this valley (see p228).

The road from Gangte Goemba winds down to the valley floor and passes extensive russet-coloured fields of potatoes that contrast with the rich green of the valley. Gangte potatoes are the region's primary cash crop and one of Bhutan's important exports to India.

The valley is snowbound during the height of winter and many of the valley's 4500 residents, including the monks, shift to winter residences in Wangdue Phodrang during December and January, just as the cranes move in to take their place. The local residents, known as Gangteps, speak a dialect called Henke. Pockets of the Bon religion reputedly exist in the Taphu Valley.

Sights

GANGTE GOEMBA

Gangte Goemba enjoys the valley's prime chunk of real estate, on a hill overlooking the green expanse of the entire Phobjikha valley. The extensive complex consists of the central goemba and outlying monks' quarters, meditation centres, schools and a small guesthouse.

During a visit to the Phobjikha valley, the 15th-century treasure-finder Pema Lingpa prophesied that a goemba named *gang-teng* (hill top) would be built on this site and that his teachings would spread from here. A Nyingma temple was founded here in 1613 by Gyalse Pema Thinley, the grandson and reincarnation of Pema Lingpa, and the goemba was built by Tenzing Legpai Dhendup, the second

reincarnation. The current abbot, Kunzang Pema Namgyal, is the ninth *trulku* of the mind of Pema Lingpa (see p175). The monastery is looked after by 100 or so lay monks, known as *gomchen*.

The *tshokhang* (prayer hall) is built in the Tibetan style with eight great pillars, and is one of the largest in Bhutan. Much of the interior and exterior woodwork of the 450-year-old goemba has been replaced over the last couple of years due to a beetle infestation and a major renovation project is still under way, with all the wood carved on site. A three-day tsechu is held here from the 5th to 10th day of the eighth lunar month (October).

A nearby *shedra* offers a nine-year course in Buddhist studies. The long white building on the hill to the north of the goemba is Kuenzang Chholing, a *drubdey* (retreat and meditation centre for monks) that was started in 1990 by the Je Khenpo. The normal period of meditation is three years, three months and three (sometimes seven) days, during which time the monks remain inside and eat food that is passed in to them by another monk.

THE VALLEY

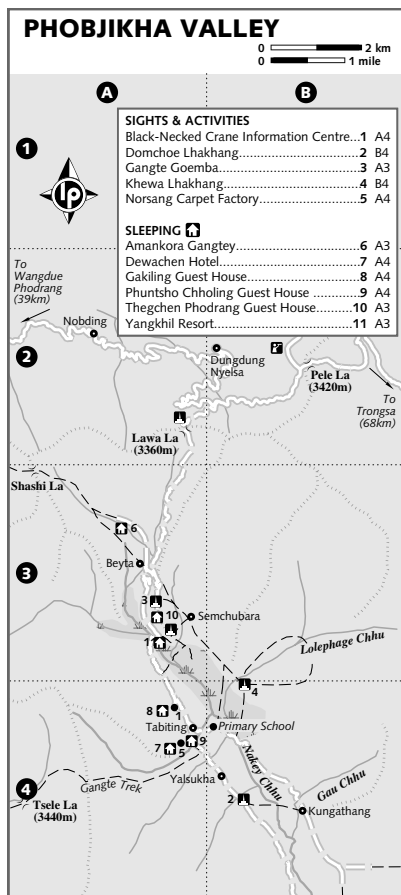
The beautiful glacial valley bowl below the goemba is peppered with villages, hiking trails, potato fields, lhakhangs and, if you time

your visit right, nesting pairs of black-necked cranes. It's a great place to hike and explore surrounding valleys and it's a good idea to budget an extra day here for that.

Your first stop should be the Royal Society for Protection of Nature's (RSPN) **Black-Necked Crane Information Centre** (Map p152; ☎ 490002; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), which has informative displays about the cranes and the valley environment. You can use the centre's powerful spotting scopes and check what you see against its pamphlet 'Field Guide to Crane Behaviour'. If the weather's iffy you can browse the library and handicraft shop, and watch videos at 10am and 3pm (Nu 200). This is also the centre of the valley's fledgling ecotourism initiative and they can arrange mountain-bike hire (Nu 700 per day), a local guide (Nu 300), an overnight stay in a local farmhouse (Nu 500) or lectures on the local ecosystem.

A further 1.5km is the village and hotels at Tabiting. Behind the Phuntsho Chholing Guest House is the small **Norsang Carpet Factory**. Established in 1992 by a local woman, Dorji Wangmo, it has a small hall housing eight weavers, who produce about 90 carpets a year.

Further on the road becomes a rough 4WD track as it continues past Yalsukha village to the small Domchoe Lhakhang, a 45-minute walk from Tabiting.



HIKING THE PHOBJIKHA VALLEY

There's some great hiking in the valley and surprisingly for Bhutan it's mostly flat going! The information centre has suggested the following walking routes and you can get information on these and other trails there (though take their trail maps with a pinch of salt).

A good short walk is the **Gangte Nature Trail** (1½ hours), which leads downhill from the *mani* stone wall just north of the Gangte Goemba to the Khewa Lhakhang. The trail descends to Semchubara village and keeps straight at the chorten into the edge of the forest, before descending to a square chorten and the lhakhang. From here you can cross over the metal bridge to the local school.

You could add on a half-day hike into the valley behind Khewa Lhakhang along the **Tenkhor Yuetshe Sum trail**, linking up the villages of Gopphu, Dogsena, Pangsa and Jangchu Goemba in a loop back to Khewa.

Another option is the one-hour **Kilkhorthang Trail**, from the small lhakhang at Kungathang across the valley to the Damchoe Lhakhang, south of Tabiting. Alternatively, drive further south from Kungathang to the lovely side valley of Lawog and explore on foot from there.

The tougher half-day **Shashi La Nature Trail** leads up the valley behind Beyta school, though the trail is easier to follow from the track behind the Amankora resort. The path leads through rhododendron forests to the village of Ramgokha, a collection of chortens and then Shashi La pass, before descending through old-growth forest to the Phama Hotel at Kalekha on the main Wangdue Phodrang road. Arrange to get picked up here and continue on to Wangdi. This is the traditional route taken by the Gangte *trulku* and local farmers when they leave the valley for the winter. A local guide would be sensible for this route.

WATCHING THE CRANES

The marshy centre of the Phobjikha valley means it's best avoided on foot but it's a perfect winter residence for the flock of 350 (up from 212 a decade ago) rare and endangered black-necked cranes that migrate from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau to Bhutan in late autumn, typically between 23 and 26 October. The Bhutanese have great respect for these 'heavenly birds', and songs about the cranes are popular among village folk. In mid-February, the cranes circle Gangte Goemba and fly back across the Himalaya to their summer homes in Tibet. One of the most popular folk songs of the people of Phobjikha laments the time when the cranes leave the valley.

The best months to spot cranes are between October and March, with the best chance between November and January. The best times for viewing are at dawn or dusk, when all the birds in the valley congregate for the night. The RSPN removed a viewing hide in 2005 out of concern for the bird's well-being but you can watch the birds from the centre's viewing area or from the valley-side hiking trails. Wear dull-coloured clothes, keep your distance and refrain from flash photography. For more on black-necked cranes see p88.

The RSPN initiated and sponsors the annual **Black-Necked Crane Festival** on 12 November, the day following the king's birthday. It's primarily an effort to instil conservation values into the people of Phobjikha, but tourists are welcome to watch the festivities, most of which are folk dances staged by school children.

Across the valley from Tabiting is the **Khewa Lhakhang**, which has a tsechu on the first day of the ninth month, when local men (not monks) do the dancing.

Sleeping

Telephone connections are patchy in this sparsely populated valley and most of the electricity is solar-powered. Bring warm clothes and a torch.

Dewachen Hotel (Map p152; ☎ 490007; s/d 1900/2400) Built in conjunction with a US travel company, this huge stone-and-wood building in Tabiting village has large and stylish rooms and a good restaurant with floor-to-ceiling bay windows that offer great valley views. There's electricity between 6pm and 9pm. Dewachen is the 'Pure Land' paradise of the Buddha Amithaba.

Gakiling Guest House (Map p152; ☎ 490003; r Nu 900) For something more intimate, try this new wooden guest house just behind the Black-Necked Crane Information Centre. Family run, it's the only locally-owned guesthouse in the valley. There are *bukharis* in all the rooms, plus attached bathrooms and great views from the upper-storey balconies.

Phuntsho Chholog Guest House (Map p152; ☎ 490011; s/d Nu 800/1100) Next to the Dewachen, this large Bhutanese-style house was converted to a hotel in 1994. It has creaking wooden floors, traditional wall paintings, a cosy sitting room and even a chapel on the 2nd floor, though the rooms themselves are pretty basic

for the money. Still, if you value experience over mod-cons this is a good opportunity to get a close-up look at the traditional architecture and domestic lifestyle of rural Bhutan. Hot water comes in buckets.

Thegchen Phodrang Guest House (Map p152; ☎ 490024; s/d Nu 700/800) Opposite Gangte Goemba, this concrete monastery guesthouse is a last-ditch option, though rooms do come with a private bathroom and renovations are planned.

Amankora Gangtey (Map p152; ☎ 490049; www.amanresorts.com; full board s/d US\$925/1000) A side road branches 1km to this top-of-the-line lodge from just below the goemba. Rooms are identical to Bhutan's other Amankoras and the views, service and style won't disappoint.

A new resort, possibly called the Yangkhil Resort, is being built by the bridge at the base of the Gangte hill.

Getting There & Away

The road to Phobjikha diverges from the main road below the Pele La. It's then a 1.5km drive through forests to the Lawa La (3360m), where you may encounter a few stray yaks. There are also barking deer and serows in this area. After the pass the trees disappear and the scenery switches dramatically to low-lying marsh bamboo as the road descends to Gangte Goemba. From the goemba junction the road switchbacks down, past the turn-off to the Amankora resort, to the green expanse of the valley floor.

CHHUKHA DZONGKHAG

For travellers Chhukha district effectively consists of the winding road that drops from the mountains through the lush tropical foothills of southern Bhutan to Phuentsholing, the primary land crossing into India. There's little reason to take this route unless you are headed to or from India, but it's a dramatic ride and gives you a sense of geographical continuity that flying into Paro doesn't. En route you'll pass gigantic 'Lost World' ferns that spill into the road and dozens of silver-threaded waterfalls, cascading off high cliffs into the mist.

Along this winding and dangerous 1½-lane highway you may want to point out to your driver the superbly cheesy Indian signboards that remind travellers, for example, that 'Speed is the knife that kills life', 'Speed thrills but kills', and 'Impatient on Road, patient of Hospital'. You can't say you haven't been warned...

THIMPHU TO PHUENTSHOLING (172KM)

The trip by car from Thimphu to Phuentsholing takes about six hours. The route follows the first road in Bhutan, built in 1962 by Dantak, the Indian border-roads organisation, and it's still the most important road in the country. Road crews will be widening the road until 2010, eventually cutting travel time to around four hours.

The first stage of the trip is from Thimphu to Chhuzom (31km, one hour). See p131 for a description of this route (as travelled in the opposite direction, ie from Chhuzom to Thimphu).

Chhuzom to Chapcha

23km / 45 mins

The road drops quickly, following the Wang Chhu south from Chhuzom. You can see the road to Haa climbing on the opposite side of the valley. The road passes beneath Dobji Dzong, which sits atop a promontory high above the river. Staying near the banks of the river, the road passes the settlement of Hebji Damchu (2020m). About 4km further on is the tiny Hotel Damchu, which has a huge parking lot and almost no business. Here the road starts climbing away from the river, making several switchbacks as it makes its way out of the valley.

Finally the road crests a ridge and passes the Chapcha Bja (Chapcha Rocks), as you squeeze between a vertical rock face to the left and an equally vertical sheer drop to the right. Cross the Chapcha La to reach the Dantak road construction camp at Chapcha (2450m).

Chapcha to Chhukha

34km / 1 hour

As you wind around the huge side valley from Chapcha look back to see the small Chapcha Dzong and, on a cliff far above to the right, the dramatic-looking Thadra Ney Lhakhang, built into the side of a rock face. The road switchbacks steeply down through lovely forest to the large Tachhong Zam (Most Excellent High Bridge) and the immigration checkpoint of Tanalung. It then climbs the side of a steep forested slope 10km to Bunakha (2270m), where the **Tourist Hotel Bunagu** (☎ 08-460522; set meal Nu 260) caters to travellers who have booked in advance. The restaurant has a log-cabin feel, pleasant balcony seating and clean toilets.

From Bunakha the road passes a lovely waterfall to the goemba of Chhukha Rabdey. There is a large monk body here, which is expected to move into the district dzong when it is built in 2008. The monks perform the Chhukha tsechu each April. A few kilometres further on, in the lower part of Tsimasham (formerly Chimakothi) at 2210m, is the **Karma Hotel** (☎ 08-478221; r Nu 150), which has food and, across the road, renovated rooms. The Karma Transport buses stop here for lunch.

As the road switchbacks down to the Chhukha hydroelectric project the air gets thicker and warmer. Several side roads lead down to the dam site and the intake structures that divert the river into seven tunnels bored through the hill. The Chhukha and nearby Tala hydroelectric projects produce electricity for all of western Bhutan, with enough surplus to export to India.

Beyond the basic Deki Hotel & Bar there is an immigration checkpoint at the Thegchen Zam (Strong High Bridge), which takes the road to the west side of the Wang Chhu. This is the mid-point between Thimphu and Phuentsholing, both around 95km away.

Chhukha to Gedu

38km / 1 hour

The road climbs to a lookout over the Chhukha project. The turbines are hidden inside the hillside (the entry is marked by a white needle-like

monument), but you can see the transformers and the transmission station. Beside the distribution station is the yellow-roofed Zangto Pelri Lhakhang and the old Chhukha Dzong. Beyond the lookout is the first of several roads leading to the new (2007) 1020MW Tala hydroelectric project. This road leads 8.5km to the intake structure where water is diverted into a 22km-long tunnel.

The rest of the climb is over the ridge that separates the Wang Chhu valley from the Torsa Chhu drainage. The road passes the unfortunately named road construction camp of Wangkha, then climbs to a memorial chorten that commemorates an important official who died here in a road accident. Look out for the spectacular high waterfall visible to the east across the valley. There's then a short bridge over what's left of Toktokachhu Falls (also known as Takti Chhu), much diminished after a flood brought down a collection of huge boulders.

Atop the next ridge at 2020m is a Dantak canteen that specialises in *dosas* (paper-thin pancakes made from lentil flour). It also has public toilets ('officers only'). Beyond a second road to the Tala project is another road-crew camp at Makaibari (Cornfield), then Asinabari (Field of Hailstones) and the small settlement of Chasilakha (*la kha* means 'grazing field'). About 9km before Gedu is the *shedra* of Tsatse Lhakhang.

Another climb leads to Gedu, a fair-sized village with several small restaurants near the road. The best bet for a meal is the **Lhamu Restaurant & Bar** (☎ 05-272332) at the south end of town, with great Nepali-style food and cheese *momos*. The nearby Laptshakha Lhakhang has some nice new murals.

Beyond Gedu a side road leads downhill to Mirching and the Tala power station and will eventually be completed all the way to join the Phuentsholing road just north of Rinchening.

Gedu to Rinchening

41km / 1½ hours

A short distance on from Gedu is a chorten that marks Jumja village at 2050m. Farmers here sell bottles of buttermilk and squares of local *datse* (cheese), wrapped up in banana leaves. The road makes a sharp bend and gingerly crosses the huge Jumja slide that often wipes away the road during the monsoon, closing the road for up to a week at a time. A sign apologises for

'inconvenience regretted'. Passing the Kuenga Chholing Lhakhang in the village of Kamji, the road turns a corner and starts to drop like a stone, winding its way down to the plains.

At Sorchen a road construction camp houses the workers who continually repair damage from the huge landslides that frequently close this section of road. A diversion ('bye pass') was built in 2001 to provide an alternative road for when the main road is blocked. A new road from Jumja to Phuentsholing via Pasakha should soon provide a short cut around this volatile section of road.

From the bottom of the slide area it's a 12km drive past an industrial area and army camp to the checkpoint at Rinchening.

Rinchening to Phuentsholing

5km / 10 minutes

Rinchening is the former immigration checkpoint, where you may have to register. If you are heading northwards invest in the fruit stalls here as the price of bananas rises almost as quickly as the altitude.

Below Rinchening is the small **Kharbandi Goemba**, built in 1967 by the late royal grandmother Ashi Phuentso Choedron, who has had a winter residence here. The modern temple houses large statues of Sakyamuni, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and Guru Rinpoche. In the lush grounds are examples of eight different styles of Tibetan chortens.

Below Kharbandi the road switchbacks down to Phuentsholing, offering spectacular views over the Torsa Chhu valley as it bursts out from the hills onto the plains.

PHUENTSHOLING

☎ 05

The small, sweltering border town of Phuentsholing sits opposite the much larger Indian bazaar town of Jaigaon, separated only by a flimsy fence and a much-photographed Bhutanese-style entrance gate. Coming from India you will notice an instantaneous change in the degree of cleanliness and organisation. Coming from Bhutan the new air is thick with the smells of the subcontinent. There's not a great deal to do here but keep cool and soak up the border atmosphere, as Bhutan blurs into India.

Just to the west of town is the wide flood plain of the Torsa Chhu, which in its upper reaches is known as the Amo Chhu and has its headwaters in Tibet's Chumbi valley. Several hours' walk away, on the opposite side

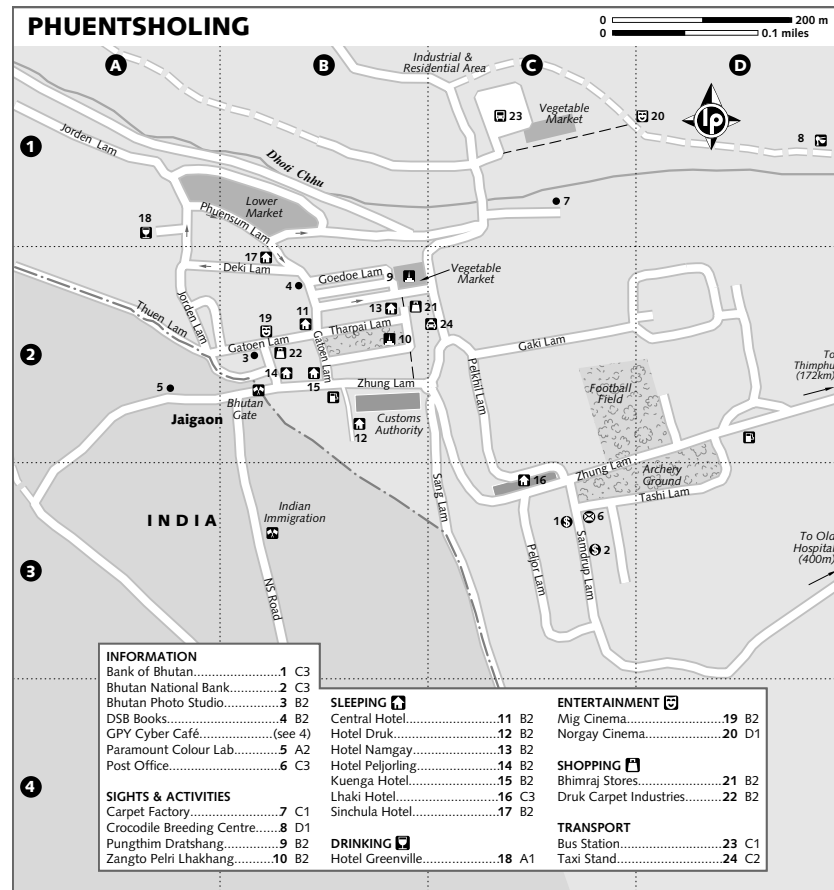
of the Torsa Chhu, is the home of the Doya minority group.

Orientation

The busy bazaar, called the upper market, is close to the border. From here the truck-clogged main road leads uphill to the post office, banks and government offices, then starts immediately climbing towards the capital, 172km away.

Information

See p261 for information about visa and other formalities upon arrival in Phuentsholing for foreigners and Indian nationals. All the banks will swap Bhutanese ngultrums for Indian rupees, and vice versa.



Post Office (Map p157; Samdrup Lam; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, Sat to 1pm) Next to the Bank of Bhutan on a hill above the town.

Sights

The modern **Zangto Pelri Lhakhang** is a replica of Guru Rinpoche's celestial paradise, though we're guessing the original isn't made out of concrete. There's not much to see but the surrounding garden is pleasant and there are always lots of pilgrims spinning prayer wheels.

If you have half an hour to kill, you can visit the sleepy collection of marsh mugger and gharial crocodiles at the **Crocodile Breeding Centre** (Map p157; free; ☎ dawn-dusk), a 10-minute walk north of the bus station. The crocs are fed every other day at noon.

For an afternoon stroll, follow the prayer flag-lined Dhotoi Chhu down to its confluence with the Torsa Chhu. In 1999 monsoon floods caused the river to jump its banks and submerge much of the town. An extensive embankment system now protects against a repeat performance.

The new **Pungthim Dratshang** is currently being built on the site of the former vegetable market to house the local *rabdey* (monk community).

Sleeping & Eating

The following hotels all have rooms with attached toilets. The smaller hotels have a limited number of air-con rooms and fill up quickly with Indian extended families and businessmen, so book in advance.

Hotel Druk (Map p157; ☎ 252426; www.drukhoteles.com; Zhung Lam; s/d Nu 2000/2500, deluxe s/d Nu 2900/3200; 🍷) This old hotel is in a secluded spot near the Bhutan gate and has excellent rooms, with hot water in the mornings and evenings. The restaurant serves decent Indian food.

Lhaki Hotel (Map p157; ☎ 257111; lhakihotel@druknet.bt; Pelkhil Lam; s/d Nu 1800/2300, ste Nu 2800-4500; 🍷) The other main tourist place is this newly-built modern and marbly place, with clean and spacious rooms. There's a good restaurant here, plus a shopping arcade and a snooker hall in the basement.

Hotel Namgay (Map p157; ☎ 252374; hotel_namgay@yahoo.com; Tharpai Lam; s/d Nu 1100/1300, deluxe s/d Nu 1300/1500; ste Nu 1750-2500; 🍷) Overlooking the Zangto Pelri Lhakhang, the Namgay is a step down in quality but still pleasant, with tropical plants in the lobby, and money exchange.

Sinchula Hotel (Map p157; ☎ 252589; hotelsinchula@yahoo.com; Phuensum Lam; s/d Nu 450/650, deluxe Nu 550/750, AC 750/1000; 🍷) This older local hotel has clean, tiled rooms with hot-water bathroom, a good restaurant and a rooftop terrace bar. It's next to an old peepul tree.

Two hotels popular with Indian tourists are the **Central Hotel** (Map p157; ☎ 252172; centralhotel@druknet.bt; nr Tharpai & Gatoen Lams; s/d Nu 450/675, ste Nu 1000; 🍷) and the old-fashioned **Kuenga Hotel** (Map p157; ☎ 252293; 5-53 Gatoen Lam; s/d Nu 200/360, deluxe s/d Nu 300/400). Only a few rooms at the Kuenga have hot water but the lobby restaurant is popular with locals.

Another local place is the noisy **Hotel Peljorling** (Map p157; ☎ 252833; Zhung Lam; s/d Nu 225/300, deluxe s/d Nu 400/600), with a good restaurant and bar but basic rooms.

The main hotels all have good restaurants, with Indian and Bhutanese dishes the best bet. The Peljorling menu boasts sizzlers and a 'Macdonalds Burger'.

Shopping

Phuentsholing has the cheapest consumer goods in Bhutan and many Bhutanese come here especially to load up on shopping trips. It's also one of the cheapest places to have a *gho* made. **Bhimraj Stores** (Map p157), in the bazaar, sells a range of cloth from Nu 120 to 200 per metre; you'll need about 3.75m for a *gho*.

Druk Carpet Industries has a factory in north of town where you can see Bhutanese carpets being woven by hand from imported New Zealand wool. The **showroom** (Map p157; ☎ 252004; ☎ 9am-8pm Wed-Mon) in town is the place if you are looking to buy. An 18in-by-48in carpet costs around US\$400.

Entertainment

If you like Hindi movies, you are in luck. The **Mig Cinema** (Map p157) in the centre of town and the **Norgay Cinema** (Map p157) near the Dhotoi Chhu at the north end of town offer several three-hour screenings daily.

For a cold beer, watch the border traffic over a bottle of Indian Fosters (Nu 50) in the terrace of the Hotel Peljorling or star gaze on the roof terrace of the Sinchula Hotel. More earthy is the funky bar at the Bhutan Hotel, though you might get more attention than you can handle here.

The garden bar at the **Hotel Greenville** (Map p157; Jordan Lam) is a good place to get some peace and quiet.

Getting There & Away

For details on getting to and from India see p261.

Companies like Dawa Transport, Karma Transport and De-Keeling run morning Coaster minibuses from the new bus station to Thimphu (Nu 171) and Paro (Nu 165), with a few weekly services to Haa and Punakha. There are early-morning buses to Siliguri (3½ hours) but these aren't really set up for foreigners as you would have to detour via immigration en route. Bhutan Post has one 3pm bus to Kolkata (Nu 300), arriving the next morning.

There is talk of building an international airport in Phuentsholing but there are no concrete plans at present.

GASA DZONGKHAG

Gasa is in the far north of the country. Previously a subdistrict of Punakha, it was upgraded to a dzongkhag in 1993, with headquarters in Gasa's Trashi Thongmoen Dzong.

The only way to get here is on foot. The Gasa Hot Springs and Jhomolhari treks touch on the region but only the epic Laya-Gasa and Snowman treks take you through all three districts. For more on the region see p222.

GASA

The village of Gasa is north of Punakha on the old trade route to Tibet and has a renovated 17th-century dzong. There is a road from Punakha to Damji in Gasa dzongkhag, but the final 18km is not yet complete.

LAYA

Laya is a large, isolated region in the far northwest of the Gasa district near the Tibetan border. The roughly 800 people of this area are from a group called the Layap, who have their own distinct language, customs and, most famously, conical bamboo hats with a bamboo spike at the top, which makes Laya women instantly recognisable.

The region is believed to be one of Bhutan's *bey-yul* (hidden lands).

LINGZHI

In the far northwestern corner of the country, Lingzhi is a very isolated region, mostly

above 4000m. From whatever direction you approach it, it's necessary to trek for days and cross a 4500m-plus pass to reach it.

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.

SOUTHERN DZONGKHAGS

The following dzongkhags are generally closed to tourists.

TSIRANG DZONGKHAG

This district (previously spelt 'Chirang') is in the south of the country, but is separated from the southern border by Sarpang Dzongkhag.

The major town is Damphu, reached by a road leading south from Wangdue Phodrang. The road passes through Sankosh, said to be the hottest place in the country, then continues southeast from Damphu to the border town of Sarpang.

DAGANA DZONGKHAG

This dzongkhag, previously known as Daga, is accessed from Wangdue Phodrang. The administrative headquarters is in Dagana and the region is noted for farming and cattle production. It is said that the people of 17th-century Dagana were lawless and out of control, and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal sent Donyer Druk Namgyal with soldiers to conquer them. Druk Namgyal built the dzong in 1655 and gave it the name Daga Trashi Yangtse Dzong.

SAMTSE DZONGKHAG

Samtse (previously spelt 'Samchi') is in the far southwest. Access is from India, though a road is under construction from Phuentsholing. The Teachers' Training College is here, as is the factory that produces the ubiquitous Druk-brand tinned fruit and jams.

Early British expeditions used a route through Samtse to travel to the centre of Bhutan. From Darjeeling they crossed over the hills of Samtse to Haa, then over the Cheli La to Paro.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'