

Sikkim



If you're feeling jaded by the heat and hassles of India, Sikkim is the perfect antidote. It's clean (plastic bags are banned) and the mountain air is fresh. Best of all the people are among India's most friendly, with a charming manner that's unobtrusive and slightly shy. To really savour some true Sikkimese atmosphere, visit a village tongba-bar for some local millet beer: it's a bit like warm Japanese sake. Plunging mountain valleys are lushly forested, interspersed occasionally with rice terraces and groves of flowering rhododendrons. Tibetan-style Buddhist monasteries (gompas) add splashes of vermilion to the green ridgetops and are approached through atmospheric avenues of colourful prayer flags set on long bamboo poles.

Straddling the Sikkim–Nepal border is Khangchendzonga (Kanchenjunga; 8598m), the world's third-highest mountain. Khangchendzonga's guardian spirit is worshipped in a series of spectacular autumn festivals and its magnificent multiple white peaks can be spied from many points around the state.

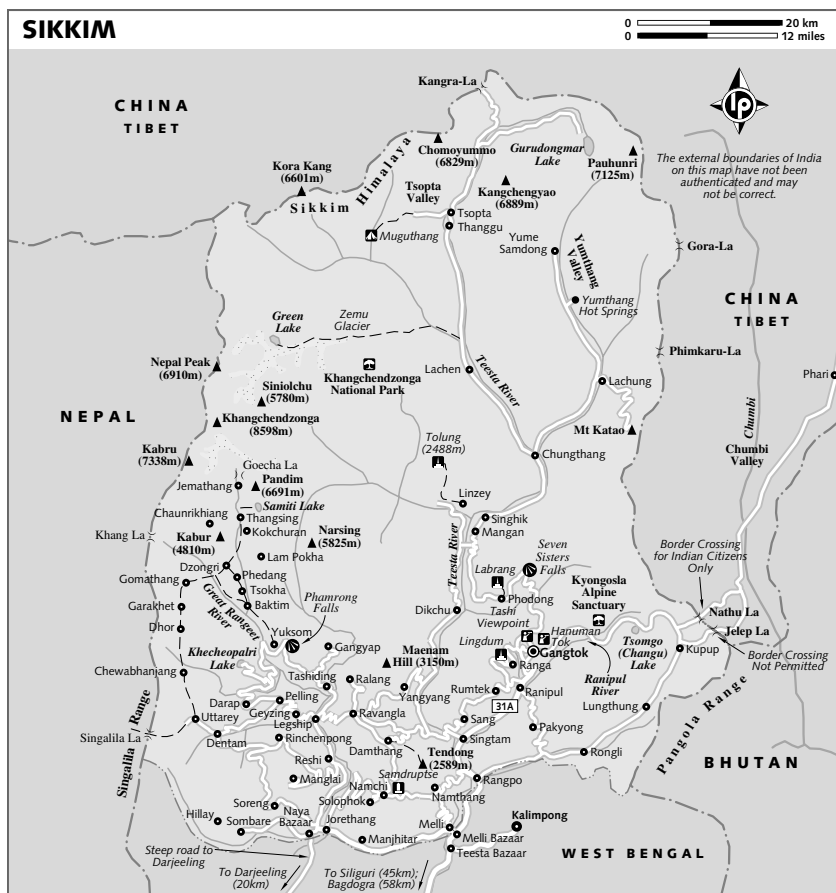
An independent kingdom until 1975, Sikkim has long been considered one of the last Himalayan Shangri Las. But hurry. In the last few years a tourist boom has seen ever multiplying numbers of visitors, mostly middle-class Bengalis escaping the Kolkata heat. Every year more concrete hotels protrude from once-idyllic villagescapes and most towns are already architecturally lacklustre huddles of multistorey box-homes.

Fortunately, although Sikkim is tiny, its crazy contours make road construction very tough. So for now, finding the 'real' Sikkim is just a matter of hiking away from the metalled roads. Just watch out for those infamous leeches.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike between the endearing Buddhist gumpa villages of **Yuksom** (p585) and **Tashiding** (p588)
- Get that *Sound of Music* feeling in the Alpine **Yumthang Valley** (p590)
- See two gigantic religious statues face-off at **Namchi** (p579)
- Gaze awestruck at India's highest mountain, Khangchendzonga, from the comfort of a café in **Pelling** (p582) or the strenuous trek to **Goecha La** (p587)
- Sup millet beer from antiquated tongba-tubs in end-of-the-world hamlets like **Thanggu** (p590)





History

Lepchas, the 'original' Sikkimese, migrated here from Assam or Myanmar (Burma) in the 13th century, followed by Bhutias (Khambas) who fled from religious strife in Tibet during the 15th century. The Nyingmapa form of Mahayana Buddhism arrived with three refugee Tibetan lamas who bumped into each other at the site of modern-day Yuksom. Here in 1641 they crowned Phuntsog Namgyal as first chogyal (king) of Sikkim. The capital later moved to Rabdentse (near Pelling), then to Tumlong (now hidden ruins behind Phodong) before finally settling in Gangtok.

At their most powerful the chogyals' rule encompassed eastern Nepal, upper Bengal and Darjeeling. However, much territory

was later lost during wars with Bhutan and Nepal, and throughout the 19th century large numbers of Hindu Nepali migrants arrived, eventually coming to form a majority of Sikkim's population.

In 1835 the British bribed Sikkim's chogyal to cede Darjeeling to the East India Company.

FAST FACTS

- Population: 540,490
- Area: 7096 sq km
- Main language: Nepali
- When to go: late September to mid-November; April and May

Tibet, which regarded Sikkim as a vassal state, raised strong objections. In 1849, amid rising tensions, the British annexed the entire area between the present Sikkim border and the Ganges plains, repulsing a counterinvasion by Tibet in 1886. In 1903-04, Britain's real-life James Bond character Francis Younghusband twice trekked up to the Sikkim-Tibet border. There, armed with little more than derring-do, he deliberately set about inciting a fracas that would 'justify' his astonishing single-handed invasion of Tibet.

Sikkim's last chogyal ruled from 1963 to 1975, when he was deposed by the Indian government after a revolt by Sikkim's Nepali population. China has never officially recognised India's claim to Sikkim, so to bolster pro-Delhi sentiment the Indian government has made Sikkim a tax-free zone, pouring crores of rupees into road building, electricity, water supplies and local industry – including liquor production. As a result Sikkim is surprisingly affluent by Himalayan standards – and rates of alcoholism are the highest in the country. Meanwhile the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) state government has earned a reputation as the most environmentally aware in India, banning plastic bags and fining people who pollute streams.

Climate

When visiting Sikkim timing is crucial. Summer's monsoon rains hide the main attraction, those soaring mountains. The Yumthang and

Tsopta Valleys are already very cold by October and will scare brass monkeys between December and February. Overall Sikkim's best season is late September to mid-November plus April and May.

Information

October and May are high seasons for Bengali tourists: prices double and normally serene monasteries get overrun. Crowd pressure is worst directly after the Durga Puja celebrations (early October). However, immediately before Durga Puja, things are contrastingly very quiet. Those few days can make a truly vast difference.

PERMITS

Standard Permits

Entering Sikkim requires a permit. Happily these are free and a mere formality, although you might need photos and passport photocopies to apply. Permits are most easily obtainable at the following:

- Indian Embassies abroad when getting your Indian visa (the best solution)
- the Rangpo border post on arrival (but not at Melli or Jorethang)
- Sikkim House in Kolkata (p491)
- Sikkim Tourism in Siliguri (p525)
- Major Foreigners' Regional Registration Offices (FROs), including those in Kolkata (Calcutta; p491), Mumbai (Bombay; p773) or Darjeeling (p541)

FESTIVALS IN SIKKIM

Sikkim has dozens of festivals, many explained on www.sikkiminfo.net/fairs&festivals.htm. The most characteristic festivals feature colourful masked dances known as *chaams*, retelling stories from Buddhist mythology. Exact dates generally follow the Tibetan lunar calendar, handily listed under 'Government Holiday' on www.sikkim.gov.in.

Bumchu (Jan/Feb; Tashiding Gumpa, p588)

Losar (Feb/Mar; Pemayangtse, p584, Rumtek, p577) Sikkim's biggest *chaam* dances take place just before Tibetan New Year.

Khachoeopalri Mela (Mar/Apr; Khecheopalri Lake, p585) Butter candles float across the lake.

Drupchen (May/Jun; Rumtek, p577) *Chaam* dances form part of the annual group-meditation ceremony, with Tse Chu dances every second year honouring Padmasambhava.

Saga Dawa (May/Jun; all monastery towns) Buddhist scriptures paraded through the streets.

Phang Lhabsol (Aug/Sep; Ralang, p581) Masked dances honouring Khangchendzonga.

Diwali (Oct/Nov; widespread) Firework time for the Nepali community.

Mahakala Dance (Nov; Ralang, p581)

Teesta-Tea-Tourism Festival (Dec; Gangtok & Rumtek, p578) Music, dancing, floral displays, archery and a river-rafting competition.

Losoong (Dec/Jan; widespread incl Old Rumtek, p578, Lingdum, p578, Phodong, p588) Sikkimese New Year, preceded by *chaam* dances in many locations.

Extensions

Standard permits are valid 15 days. Two days before expiry you can extend the permit for a further 15 days (free). This is possible up to three times, so 60 days is the maximum allowed in Sikkim. For the extension go to:

- Gangtok Foreigner Registration Office (p573)
- Tikjuk police station (p582) 5km from Pelling
- Superintendent of Police (SP) offices at Mangan or Namchi (a less-reliable option).

Once you leave Sikkim you must wait three months before you can reapply for another permit. However, if you're on Sikkim-to-Sikkim public transport cutting through a corner of West Bengal (between Rangpo and Melli), your permit remains valid.

Permit Validity

The standard permit is valid for visits to the following:

- Gangtok, Rumtek and Lingdung
- South Sikkim
- anywhere on the Gangtok–Singhik road
- most of West Sikkim to which paved roads extend.

However, for more remote areas you'll need additional special permits. For foreigners, areas nearest to the Chinese border are out of bounds entirely.

Special Permits

High-altitude treks, including the main Gocha La and Singalila Ridge routes, require trekking permits valid up to 15 days and organised by trekking agents.

Restricted area permits for Tsomgo (Changu) Lake (day trips) and visits anywhere north of Singhik (maximum of five days/four nights) are issued locally through approved tour agencies. You'll have to join the agent's 'tour', but such 'tours' simply mean a rental jeep, guide and agreed itinerary. Virtually any Gangtok agency can arrange this within 24 hours. You'll usually need a minimum group size of two (sometimes four), so single travellers have every excuse to make friends.

Dangers & Annoyances

Sikkim is generally a very safe place, but some locals' alcoholic tendencies add a certain unpredictability.

Sikkim's famous little leeches aren't dangerous but they're ubiquitous in damp grass. Stick to dry, wide paths. If trekking through leechy terrain, letting them suck a little blood is often easier than endless stops to remove the morph-magician rascals.

Activities

Sikkim offers considerable **trekking** potential. Day hikes between villages follow age-old footpaths and normally don't require extra permits: the best-known options are along the Monastery Loop, notably between Yuksam and Tashiding (p587). Nepal-style, multiday group treks head into the really high mountains towards Gocha La at the base of Khangchendzonga. For this, permits and guides are required and although there are variants, most groups tend to follow pretty much the same route (p587). Tour agencies are striving to open new trekking areas, notably the fabulous route across Zemu Glacier to Green Lake in Khangchendzonga National Park. However, the permits remain very expensive and take months to arrange, while several other tempting routes are close to sensitive borders so remain off limits, at least for now.

EAST SIKKIM

GANGTOK

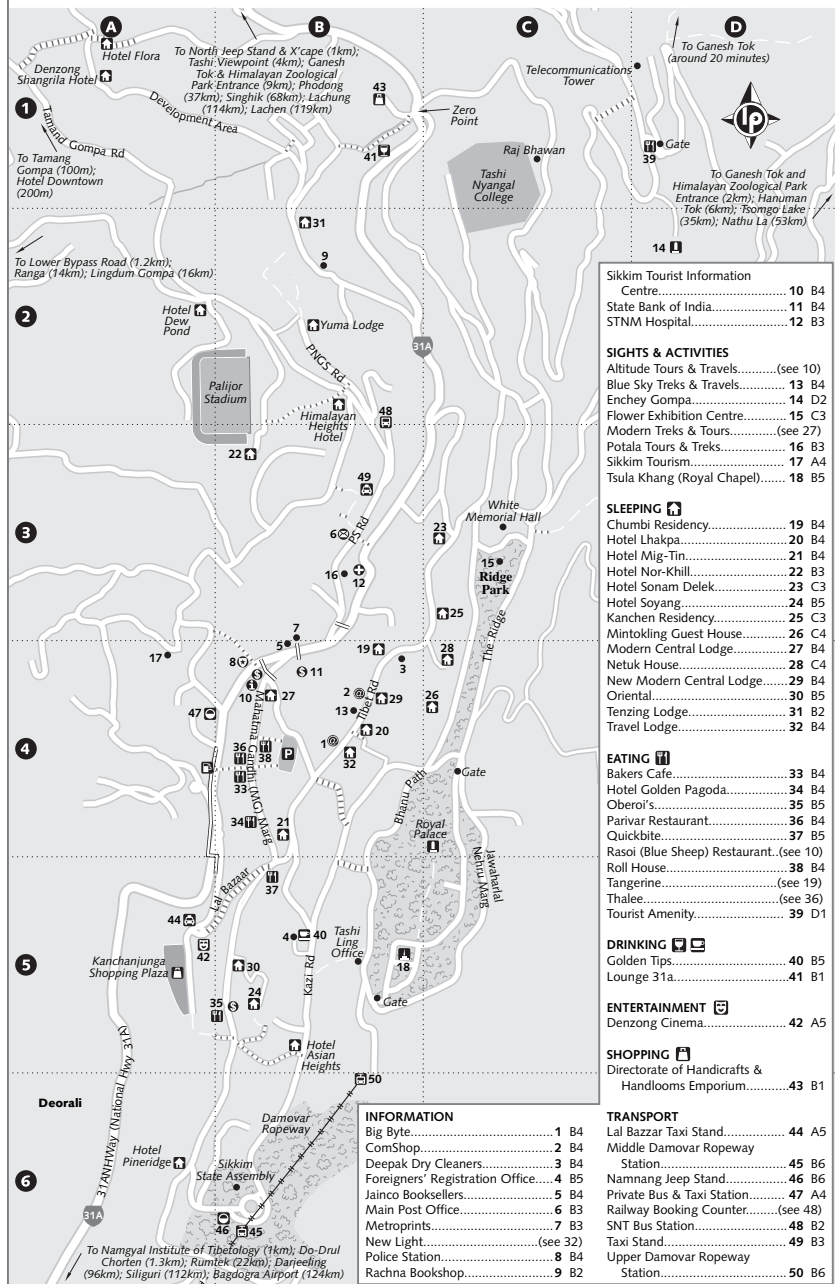
☎ 03592 / pop 31,100 / elev 1400-1700m

Sikkim's capital is mostly a functional sprawl of multistorey concrete boxes. But true to its name (meaning 'hill top') these are steeply layered along a sharp mountain ridge. When clouds clear (typically at dawn), views are inspiring, with Khangchendzonga poking its pointy white nose above the western horizon. Gangtok's manmade attractions are minor, but it's not a bad place to wait out a day or two while organising trekking permits or trips to the north.

Orientation

Gangtok's crooked spine is none other than the Rangpo–Mangan road, National Highway 31A, though commonly it's written cryptically as 31ANHWay. The tourist office, banks and many shops line central Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Marg. Nearby Tibet Rd is the nearest Gangtok gets to a travellers' enclave.

GANGTOK

0 400 m
0 0.2 miles

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Information

BOOKSHOPS

Jainco Booksellers (31ANHWay) Small but very central.

Metroprints (31ANHWay) A little photocopy stall selling the excellent artist's-view map-guide, *Gangtok, in a Nutshell* (Rs 50).

Rachna Bookshop (☎ 204336; www.rachnabooks.com; Development Area) Gangtok's best-stocked and most convivial bookshop. A mini film-club and jazz café are planned upstairs. Gentle live guitar music sometimes serenades you while you browse.

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 222033; 31ANHWay)

STNM hospital (☎ 222944; 31ANHWay)

INTERNET ACCESS

Big Byte (Tibet Rd; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) Slow but cheap.

ComShop (Tibet Rd; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am-8pm)

New Light (Tibet Rd; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am-7pm) Decent if variable connection at the back of a general store. Good Skype-phone option.

LAUNDRY

Deepak Dry Cleaners (☎ 227073; Tibet Rd; ☎ 7am-8pm Fri-Tue) Next-day laundry service.

MONEY

Stock up with rupees in Gangtok: exchange is virtually impossible elsewhere in Sikkim. ATMs accepting foreign cards include UTI Bank and HDFC, both on MG Marg.

State Bank of India (MG Marg; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Changes cash and major travellers cheques.

PERMIT EXTENSION

Foreigners' Registration Office (Kazi Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm, 10am-noon on 'holidays') In the alley beside Indian Overseas Bank. Takes under an hour.

POST

Main post office (PS Rd) Has a poste-restante service.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Bookshops overflow with listings pamphlets and guidebooks on Sikkim, but few offer useful, critical appraisals. Maps approach pure fiction. **Sikkim Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 221634; www.sikkimtourism.com; MG Marg; ☎ 10am-4pm, to 7pm high season) has some useful free booklets, sells helicopter tours and can advise on the latest permit requirements. Other queries will likely be passed to commission-paying travel agents.

Sights

NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY

Housed in traditionally styled Tibetan architecture, this unique **institute** (☎ 281642; www.tibetology.net; admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat of month) was established in 1958 to promote research into Mahayana Buddhism and Tibetan culture. It contains one of the world's largest collections of Buddhist books and manuscripts, plus statuettes, *thangkas* (Tibetan cloth paintings) and sacred objects, such as a *kapali* (sacred bowl made from a human skull). Further along the same road, the **Do-Drul Chorten** is a large white Tibetan pagoda surrounded by dormitories for young monks.

The institute sits in an **Orchid Sanctuary**, and is conveniently close to the lower station of **Damovar Ropeway** (per person Rs 50; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm), a new cable car running from just below the Tashi Ling offices on the ridge. Views are stupendous. Alternatively pay Rs 10 by share taxi from central Gangtok along 31ANHWAY.

THE RIDGE

With views east and west, it's very pleasant to stroll through shady parks and gardens on the city's central ridgetop. Sadly its focal points, the **Royal Palace** and **Raj Bhawan**, are out of bounds for visitors. When the orchids bloom (March) it's worth peeping inside the **Flower Exhibition Centre** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm), a modestly sized tropical greenhouse full of bonsai and exotic plants. The once-grand 1932 **White Memorial Hall** (Nehru Marg) opposite is now a dilapidated childrens' sports hall.

ENCHEY GOMPA & VIEWPOINTS

Approached through gently rustling conifers high above Gangtok, this **monastery** (☎ 6am-4pm Mon-Sat), dating back to 1909, is Gangtok's most attractive, with some decent murals and statues of Tantric deities. It comes alive for the colourful **Detor Chaam** (December/January) masked dances.

From the gompa, follow the access road northeast around the base of an unmissable **telecommunications tower**. An initially obvious path scrambles up in around 15 minutes to **Ganesh Tok viewpoint**. Festooned in colourful prayer flags, Ganesh Tok offers superb city views and its minicafé serves hot teas. Across the road, a lane leads into the **Himalayan Zoological Park** (☎ 223191; admission Rs 10, vehicles Rs 25, video Rs 500; ☎ 8am-4pm). Red pandas, Himalayan bears

and snow leopards roam around in extensive wooded enclosures so large that you'll really value a car to shuttle between them.

Hanuman Tok, another impressive viewpoint, sits on a hilltop around 4km drive beyond Ganesh Tok, though there are short cuts for walkers.

Perhaps Gangtok's best view of Khangchendzonga is from the **Tashi viewpoint** at the northwest edge of town beside the main route to Phodong.

Activities

SCENIC FLIGHTS

For eagle-eye mountain views, **Sikkim Tourism** (☎ 281372; stdcsikkim@yahoo.co.in) arranges scenic helicopter flights. Book at least three days ahead. Prices are for up to five passengers (four for Khangchendzonga ridge):

- brief (approximately 20 minutes) buzz over Gangtok (Rs 6900)
- circuit of West Sikkim (Rs 46,750, one hour)
- Yumthang Valley (Rs 55,250, 70 minutes)
- Khangchendzonga ridge (Rs 63,750, 1½ hours)

Tours

Classic 'three-point tours' show you Ganesh Tok, Hanuman Tok and Tashi viewpoints (Rs 350). Almost any travel agent, hotel or taxi driver offers variants, including a 'five-point tour' adding Enchey Gompa and Namgyal Institute (Rs 400), or 'seven-point tours' tacking on either old-and-new Rumtek (Rs 650) or Rumtek plus Lingdum (Rs 900). All prices are per vehicle holding three or four passengers.

TOUR AGENCIES

For high-altitude treks, visits to Tsomgo Lake or tours to Northern Sikkim you'll need a travel agency. We've been very happy with **Altitude Tours & Travels** (☎ 9832370501; www.trekkinginsikkim.com; Tourism Bldg, MG Marg) and **Modern Treks & Tours** (☎ 224670; www.modernhospitality.com; Modern Central Lodge, MG Marg). However, as there are over 120 agencies available, the best idea is to check with fellow travellers for the latest recommendations. Other well-known if less recently tested agencies include:

Blue Sky Treks & Travels (☎ 205113; blueskytourism@yahoo.com; Tourism Bldg, MG Marg)
Potala Tours & Treks (☎ 200043; www.sikkimhimalayas.com; PS Rd)

Sikkim Tours & Travels (☎ 202188; www.sikkimtours.com; Church Rd)

Sleeping

Accommodation rates typically drop 15% to 30% low season, much more if demand is very low and you're good at bargaining.

BUDGET

Many cheaper hotels quote walk-in rates of around Rs 500. Some are worth it. Others are just waiting for you to bargain them to Rs 200. Check rooms carefully as standards can vary widely even within the same hotel. Foreigners generally flock around central Tibet Rd, the only area where a Rs 150 room is likely to be approximately inhabitable.

New Modern Central Lodge (☎ 201361; newmoderncentral@hotmail.com; Tibet Rd; dm Rs 50-70, d Rs 150-250, d with private bathroom Rs 300) It's been the traveller favourite for so long that people still come here despite somewhat ill-kept rooms and the complacent albeit friendly new management. With plenty of cheap rooms and a useful meeting-point café, it will probably remain the backpacker standby.

Modern Central Lodge (☎ 204670; info@modernhospitality.com; 31ANHWay; d from Rs 200) Former managers of what is now the New Modern Central Lodge have taken their reliable services to this handy but noisy new location. All rooms have private bathroom. Although standards aren't luxurious, the price is right. Great home-cooked food on the roof garden.

Hotel Lhakpa (☎ 201175; Tibet Rd; d from Rs 200) Very gloomy, cheap box rooms with rarely functioning geysers lurk above an unrepentantly local Tibetan café.

Travel Lodge (☎ 203858; Tibet Rd; d Rs 250-600) Unusually good-value rooms have BBC World TV and well-heated showers with towels and soap provided, though the ground-floor cheapies have thin walls and upstairs a few suffer from damp. Price depends heavily on season and bargaining.

Hotel Mig-Tin (☎ 204101; Tibet Rd; d Rs 250-600) Above a lobby with naïve Tibetan-style murals and a great little meet-up café, the best rooms are slightly worn but excellent value out of season, assuming you bargain a little. Avoid the cheapest rooms that are damp and airless.

Tenzing Lodge (☎ 204036; Development Area; d Rs 300-600) Of over 40 similar hotels in Development Area, Tenzing is comparatively

inexpensive, with clean, simple rooms off misleadingly plush marble stairways. Some private bathrooms lack toilet seats. Eerily empty low season.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

All places listed here have cable TV and private bathroom with hot showers. Most add 10% tax.

Kanchen Residency (☎ 9732072614; kanchenresidency@indiatimes.com; Tibet Rd; d back/side/front Rs 450/600/700) Above the dismal (unrelated) Hotel Prince, this sparklingly airy discovery is spacious, light and well run. Front rooms have great views.

Mintokling Guest House (☎ 224226; www.mintokling.com; Bhanu Path; s/d from Rs 450/650) Set on a lawn within in a secluded garden, this expanded family home is a real oasis with Bhutanese fabrics, timber ceilings and some local design features. Very friendly.

Hotel Dntown (☎ 284219; Tamang Gompa Rd, Upper Sichey; d Rs 550/650) Certainly not downtown, but this new, out-of-centre minihotel is neat, clean and great value.

Hotel Sonam Delek (☎ 222566; slg_hsdelek@sancharmet.in; Tibet Rd; d Rs 600-1000) This longstanding favourite has good service, reliable food, and the best-value 'deluxe' rooms (Rs 700 to 880) have real mattresses, Tibetan motif bed-heads and decent views. Bigger 'super deluxe' rooms have better views, but the cheapest 'standard' rooms are a very noticeable step down – in the basement.

Hotel Soyang (☎ 229219; www.sunflower-hotels.com/soyang.html; d Rs 850-1500) The outlandish pseudo-Chinese lobby décor is simultaneously cheesy yet atmospheric. Rooms are old fashioned, but the cheapest ones are excellent value with very clean, white-tiled bathrooms. The Soyang is the third of four hotels along a quiet, winding, easy-to-miss back lane off MG Marg signed for the Hotel Ben.

Oriental (☎ 221180/1; www.orientalsikkim.com; MG Marg; s/d/ste Rs 1200/1600/1800) This cosy boutique hotel has Sanderson-style fabrics, a hint of canopy over beds, and an appealing little 1st-floor lounge area decorated with aspidistra and Tibetan ornaments.

Netuk House (☎ 202374; slg_netuk@sancharmet.in; Tibet Rd; s/d Rs 1450/2200) Perfectly central yet unsigned and easy to miss amid endless flowers, the Netuk has 10 rooms in three very different styles. The newest have colourful Tibetan-style façades, local rugs and shared

sitting terraces. There's a delightful communal sitting lounge.

Chumbi Residency (☎ 226618; www.chumbiresidency.com; Tibet Rd; s/d from Rs 1550/1950) This wonderfully central, three-star hotel has comfortable if somewhat cramped rooms with fresh white walls and green marble tables. A few have views. Service is professional and the relaxed Tangerine bar-restaurant is firmly recommended (see below).

Hotel Nor-Khill (☎ 205637; norkhill@elginhotels.com; PS Rd; d Rs 5865) Oozing 1930s elegance, this sumptuous 'house of jewels' was originally the King of Sikkim's royal guesthouse. Historical photos and artwork feature throughout, and the piano-lounge lobby features antique furniture and imperial-sized mirrors. The spaciouly luxurious old-building rooms attract film stars and Dalai Lamas.

Eating

RESTAURANTS & CAFES

Most budget hotels have cheap café-restaurants serving standard Chinese/Tibetan dishes, basic Indian meals and Western breakfasts. For good-value South Indian vegetarian food, try **Parivar Restaurant** (dishes Rs 25-50) and **Thalee** (mains Rs 25-50), next to each near the Gandhi statue (MG Marg). Beside Enchey Gompa, the misleadingly named **Tourist Amenity** (snacks Rs 8-20) is a cheap, basic teahouse serving great veg *momos* (dumplings) for a giveaway Rs 12, including complimentary soup.

Hotel Golden Pagoda (MG Marg; curries Rs 35-100 plus rice Rs 350; ☎ 10am-3pm & 7-9.30pm) The licensed restaurant on the top floor of this midrange hotel serves tasty Indian vegetarian food at reasonable prices.

Bakers Cafe (MG Marg; mains Rs 30-100; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) The perfect breakfast escape, this cosy Western-style café has great Viennese coffee (Rs 35) and excellent pastries.

our pick **Tangerine** (Ground fl, Chumbi Residency, Tibet Rd; mains Rs 50-100) Descend five floors of stairs for sublime cuisine, tasty Western snacks or cocktails at the brilliant Japanese-style floor-cushioned bar area. Try the *paneer makahani* (Indian cheese in a creamy, garlic-tomato-ginger sauce) or sample Sikkimese specialties, like *pork gyaree* (with ginger and garlic) or *sochhya* (stew with nettle shoots). Stylishly relaxed décor.

Rasoi (Blue Sheep) Restaurant (MG Marg; buffet adult/child Rs 90/50; ☎ noon-3.30pm & 6-11pm) Brand new and thus super clean, the buffet offers

four excellent vegetarian choices plus breads, rice and dessert. No alcohol.

QUICK EATS

Roll House (MG Marg; rolls Rs 10-25; ☎ 8am-8pm) In an alley just off MG Marg this hole-in-the-wall serves delicious *kati* rolls (see p509) that upstage even the Kolkata originals.

Quickbite (MG Marg; snacks Rs 20-40; ☎ 8am-8pm) Takeaway snacks from dosas to pizzas to Indian sweets.

Obero's (MG Marg; snacks Rs 25-60; ☎ 7.30am-8.30pm) *Momos*, chowmein, sandwiches, Indian snacks and pizzas.

Drinking

Lounge 31a (Zero Point; beers Rs 59, snacks Rs 40-130, waterpipes Rs 99; ☎ 11.30am-9pm) Swooping glass architecture offers light-suffused sunset views and a hip sense of modernist style.

Square (PS Rd; meals from Rs 135, beers Rs 60) This stylish little restaurant-bar has big view windows that are great for a cosy beer, but the pseudo-Thai food is overpriced.

Golden Tips (www.goldentipstea.com/Showrooms.asp; Kazi Rd; teas from Rs 25; ☎ 12.30-9.30pm) An inviting tea showroom with a wide selection of blends to buy and taste.

Entertainment

Denzong Cinema (☎ 202692; Lal Bazar; tickets from Rs 15) Screens the latest Bollywood blockbusters in Hindi.

X'cape (☎ 228636; Vajra Cinema Hall; entry Rs 400; ☎ from 7pm Sat) Gangtok's leading nightclub.

Shopping

Directorate of Handicrafts & Handloom Emporium (☎ 222926; Zero Point; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat,

daily Jul-Mar) This emporium sells a range of excellent-value gifts, including purses (Rs 25), handwoven carpets (from Rs 2110), handmade paper and ornately carved *choktse* (Sikkimese low wooden tables, from Rs 1500).

Several souvenir shops on MG Marg and PS Rd sell pricier Tibetan and Sikkimese handicrafts. Bustling Lal Bazaar has several stalls selling wooden tongba pots, prayer flags and Nepali-style knives.

A few Sikkimese liquors come in novelty souvenir containers. Opening a 1L monk-shaped bottle of Old Monk Rum (Rs 210) means screwing off the monk's head! Fireball comes in a bowling ball-style red sphere.

Getting There & Away

Landslides and route changes mean road journeys can take vastly longer than expected. If flying out of Bagdogra, play safe by making the Gangtok-Siliguri trip a full day ahead.

AIR

The nearest airport to Sikkim is Bagdogra near Siliguri (p526), with flights to Kolkata, Delhi and Guwahati. **TSA Helicopters** (☎ 0353-2531959; www.mountainflightindia.com) shuttle from Gangtok to Bagdogra (Rs 2000, 30 minutes) supposedly departing at 10am daily, returning around 1.30pm. However, service is weather dependent and might also be cancelled if bookings are insufficient. In Gangtok, **Sikkim Tourism** (☎ 221634) sells the tickets. See p1170 for information on helicopter safety in India.

Bagdogra is 124km from Gangtok. If you don't want to bother going into Siliguri (12km away) for public transport, fixed-price taxis cost Rs 1450 direct Gangtok-Bagdogra. You

SIKKIM SIPS

In much of India, drinking alcohol seems a slightly shameful activity, boozers often huddle in half-dark bars as though embarrassed to be seen. Not so in Sikkim. Here every second café serves beer (Hit and Dansberg are local brews) and the state is famous for its liquors. But although quality is pretty good, telling between Sikkimese rum, whisky and brandy isn't always easy on a blind tasting. Locals tend to slurp 'pegs' (60ml measures) at a prodigious speed. As a result it's not uncommon to see unconscious figures sprawled face down on the streets, left snoring where they fell.

In Sikkimese villages, don't miss a chance to try tongba. You'll receive a girded wooden tub of fermented millet seeds onto which you pour boiling water. Suck the resultant liquid through a bamboo straw. It tastes a little like Japanese sake. Regular sipping and topping up prevents the drink getting too strong.

Note that on full-moon and new-moon days, selling alcohol is prohibited so bars stay closed.

might get slightly better prices from jeeps in the carpark: look for Sikkim (SK) number plates.

BUS

See the table, below, for buses from the governmental **SNT bus station** (PS Rd).

SHARE JEEPS & MINIBUSES

From the hectic but relatively well-organised **private bus and taxi station** (31ANHWay), share jeeps/minibuses depart until mid afternoon to Darjeeling (Rs 125/90, five hours), Kalimpong (Rs 87/60, three hours) and Siliguri (Rs 130/80, four hours), some continuing to New Jalpaiguri train station (Rs 135/100, 4½ hours). There are one-off jeeps to Kakarbhitta (Rs 160, 4½ hours) on the Nepali border and Phuentsholing (Bhutan border, Rs 200, six hours, 8am). Prepurchase tickets.

West Sikkim sumos depart when full from **Namnang jeep stand**. That's roughly hourly for Geyzing (Rs 120, 4½ hours), Ravangla (Rs 70, three hours), Namchi (Rs 92, three hours) and Jorethang (Rs 98 to 112, three hours). Last service is around 3pm. Jeeps for Yuksom, Tashiding and Pelling (Rs 130 to 150, five hours) depart around 7am and again around 12.30pm, but services to Pelling multiply in the high season. With a small group, consider chartering for 10 times the one-way fare, thereby allowing photo stops en route.

Sumos to North Sikkim use the **north jeep stand** (31ANHWay), about 3km north of the centre.

TRAIN

The nearest major train station is over 120km away at New Jalpaiguri (NJP). There's a computerised **railway booking counter** (☎ 222016; 🕒 8am-1pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun) at the SNT Bus Stand.

BUSES FROM GANGTOK (SNT BUS STATION)

Destination	Cost (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Jorethang	55	4	7am
Kalimpong	60	4	7.15am
Namchi	55	3	7am, 2pm
Pelling	85	5½	7am
Ravangla	44	3	7am
Siliguri (via Rangpo)	75-100	5	hourly, 6am-1.30pm

Getting Around

Share taxis (Rs 10 per hop) run along 31ANHWay stopping at designated 'Taxi Stops'. Fixed-rate service (chartered) taxis loiter on MG Marg.

AROUND GANGTOK

Rumtek and Lingdum Gompa are most easily visited on a 'seven-point tour' (see p574). Viewing the temples takes perhaps half an hour each, but the infinitely winding county lane that links them is a big part of the attraction, curving through mossy forests high above river valleys and artistically terraced rice-slopes.

Rumtek

☎ 03592 / elev 1690m

Facing Gangtok distantly across a vast green valley, Rumtek village is entirely dominated by its very extensive gompa complex. Spiritually the monastery is hugely significant as the surrogate home of Buddhism's Kagyu (Black Hat) sect (see the boxed text, p578). However, visually it is not Sikkim's most spectacular and by day it can get annoyingly crowded in the high season. To experience Rumtek at its most serene, stay the night and hike around the delightful nearby hilltops at dawn.

SIGHTS

Rumtek Gompa Complex

This rambling, walled **complex** (☎ 252329; www.rumtek.org; admission free) is a whole village within a village containing religious buildings, schools and several small lodge-hotels. To enter, foreigners must show both passport and Sikkim permit.

Within, the main **monastery building** (admission Rs 5; 🕒 6am-5pm) was constructed between 1961 and 1966 to replace the Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet, which had been destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution. The giant throne within awaits the crowning of Kagyu's current spiritual leader, the (disputed) **17th Karmapa** (Ogyen Trinley Dorje; www.kagyuoffice.org). This young lama fled from Tibet in 2000 but currently remains based at Dharamsala: Indian authorities have prevented him officially taking up his Rumtek seat for fear of upsetting Chinese government sensibilities.

Rear stairs lead up to the **Golden Stupa**. It's not really a stupa at all, just a smallish concrete room, but it holds the ashes of the 16th Karmapa in a jewel-studded reliquary to which

FLYING BLACK HATS

The Black Hat sect is so named because of the priceless ruby-topped headgear used to crown the Karmapa (spiritual leader) during key ceremonies. Being woven from the hair of angels, the hat must be kept locked in a box to prevent it from flying back to heaven. But maybe that's just what it has done. Nobody has seen it since 1993 when the 16th Karmapa died. Only when the 17th Karmapa is finally crowned, will anyone dare to unlock the box and check.

pilgrims pay their deepest respects. If locked, someone from the colourful **Karma Shri Naland Institute of Buddhist Studies** opposite can usually open it for you.

Rumtek holds impressive masked *chaam* dances during the annual **Drupchen** (group meditation) in May/June, and two days before Losar (Tibetan New Year) when you might also catch traditional *lhamo* (Tibetan opera) performances.

Old Rumtek Gompa

About 1.5km beyond the gompa towards Sang, a long avenue of white prayer flags leads attractively down to powder-blue **Old Rumtek Gompa** (admission free). Despite the name, the attractive main prayer hall has been so thoroughly renovated that it looks virtually new. However, the interior is a riotous festival of colour and the lonely location is idyllic with some wonderful west-facing views. Two days before Losoong (Sikkimese New Year), Old Rumtek holds the celebrated **Kagyed Chaam** dance.

SLEEPING & EATING

Options within the gompa complex include **Sungay Guesthouse** (☎ 252221; dechenb@dte.vsnl.net.in; d/tr Rs 400/200) whose comfortable if rather Spartan rooms have varnished wood-veneer walls and private bathrooms with geyser. Doubles have great balcony views, hence the higher price. Further up where the monastery access road bends, **Sangay Hotel** (☎ 252238; s/d with shared bathroom per person Rs 100/150) is a typically Sikkimese half-timbered house offering tiny cell rooms above a rustic restaurant.

Outside the gompa walls and 300m back towards Gangtok, the friendly **Shambhala Mountain Resort** (☎ 252240; resort_shambhala@sify.com;

d Rs 2500) has attractive gardens and an appealing lobby, but the once-pleasant rooms have some scuffing and the bathtubs are somewhat stained. Rooms 201 to 204 have balconies at no extra charge.

Several new, quietly upmarket resorts are springing up along the Ranipur–Rumtek road.

Lingdum Gompa

Only completed in 1998, peaceful Lingdum Gompa is more visually exciting than Rumtek. Its structure grows out of the forest in grand layers with photogenic side towers, though the exterior paintings are not especially accomplished. The extensively muralled main prayer hall enshrines a large Sakyamuni Buddha wreathed in an expansive gilded aura. Frenetic chanting adds to the magical atmosphere. The isolated gompa complex has a café but its pilgrims' rooms no longer accept general tourists.

Getting There & Away

Rumtek is 26km from Gangtok by a very winding road. Lingdum Gompa is a 2km walk from Ranka village, reached by rough backlanes from Gangtok. Relatively sporadic share jeeps run to either from Gangtok's Lal Bazaar (Rs 22, one hour), but return transport fizzles out by 1pm. Linking the two sites requires private transport or a tour.

TOWARDS TIBET

Tsomo (Changu, Tsangu) Lake

elev 3780m

Pronounced Changu, this scenic lake is an established tour stop for Indian visitors, but permits are necessary. To get one sign up for a 'tour' by 2pm and most Gangtok agents can get the permit for next-day departure (two photos required). Tours (ie guided shared taxis) typically cost Rs 700/450 per person for groups of two/three. Individual travellers usually can't get the permit.

At the lakeside, food stalls sell hot chai, chow mein and *momos*, while short **yak rides** (about Rs 80) potter along the shore. If you can muster the puff, the main attraction is clambering up a nearby hilltop for inspiring views.

Nathu La

Four days a week, Indian citizens (but not foreigners) are permitted to continue 18km

along the spectacular road from Tsomgo Lake to the 4130m **Nathu La** (Listening Ears Pass). Here the border post to southeastern Tibet 'opened' with much fanfare in 2006. As yet only local villagers are eligible to cross, and only to travel 8km to the first Tibetan market. But keep asking. Maybe one day it will be possible to reach Yatung (52km) in Tibet's fabled **Chumbi Valley**, where the Sikkimese kings once had their summer palace. From there, the road towards Lhasa (525km) winds up onto the Tibetan plateau via the old fortress town of **Phari**, one of the world's highest settlements.

A few kilometres southeast of Nathu La, better-known **Jelep La** was the pass used by Francis Younghusband in the British Great Game era attack on Tibet (1904). Until 1962 Jelep La was the main trade route between Kalimpong and Lhasa, but it shows no signs whatsoever of reopening.

SOUTH SIKKIM

The main sights in South Sikkim are Namchi's gigantic statues. The region has plenty of other great viewpoints, too, but visitors generally hurry straight through en route to Pelling leaving much of the region comparatively untouristed. Ravangla (p581) falls administratively within South Sikkim, but we cover it in the Gangtok to Pelling section (see p580) where it fits more logically.

NAMCHI

☎ 03595 / elev 1524m

Soon, two utterly vast statues will be facing off from opposite hillsides across this quietly prosperous market town. The Buddhist one at Samdruptse is already finished, the Hindu one at Solophok is still under construction.

Sights

SAMDRUPTSE

Painted in shimmering copper and bronze tones, the impressively vast 45m **Padmasambhava statue** (Indian adult/child Rs 10/5, foreigner Rs 50/10; ☎ 7am-5pm) stops just short of kitsch. Completed in 2004 on a foundation stone laid by the Dalai Lama, it's visible from miles around, shining like a golden cone amid the forests of Samdruptse hill. The site is 7km from Namchi, 2km off the Damthang road.

Taxis want around Rs 250 return. Alternatively you could walk back to Namchi,

short-cutting via steps down to and through a **rock garden** (admission Rs 10). Or more interestingly follow the nose of the Samdruptse hill down to **Ngadak Gompa**. Ngadak's ruined **old dzong**, dating back to 1717, is delightfully 'real' despite the unsightly steel buttressing that stops it from falling down. Its unpainted stone exterior incorporates ancient carved door pillars and upstairs intriguing but very decrepit fragments of painting remain on the peeling old cloth wallpaper.

SOLOPHOK

As if one gigantic statue weren't enough, work is proceeding at a prodigious rate to raise a new 33m (108ft) **Shiva statue** on Solophok hilltop. Due for completion in mid 2008, the site is expected to become a major pilgrimage point. A surrounding complex of temples and visitor pavilions is already partly built. Solophok is 6km from central Namchi. The access road passes the hospital and stadium, winds around the base of the interesting **Decchen Gompa**, then continues up past Dungmali Guesthouse.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick **Dungmali Guest House** (☎ 263272; Solophok Rd, 4th km; d Rs 200-350) For now, this family homestay offers just three rooms, the best having a private bathroom and a fabulous view window and sitting room. But in the next two years, inspired owner Bimuka Dungmali plans to add traditional Sikkimese hut-bungalows and create a more upmarket ecoresort with spa, and yoga-meditation hall. She already grows her own organic veg, offers bird-watching walks in 2.4 hectares of private jungle and can take you to meet a traditional healer.

Hotel Samdruptse (☎ 264708; Jorethang Rd; d Rs 400-800) The Samdruptse has its share of scuffed paint and damp patches but the best rooms have great balconies with superb views. It's above Namchi's finest restaurant, 300m west of the centre facing the Solophok-bound road junction.

Above the main square's taxi stand, between **Padma Shova Lodge** (☎ 263144), under reconstruction, and the neat **Hotel Zimkhang** (☎ 263625), climb two floors to find internet access at the Bon Pizzeria.

Getting There & Around

Taxis gather in the central stand. Around 200m east in descending layers off the Rangpo

BUSES FROM NAMCHI

Destination	Cost (Rs)	Duration	Departures
Gangtok via Damthang	55	3hr	2pm
Jorethang	13	70 min	9am, 11.30am, 4.30pm
Ravangla	17	1½ hr	11.30am, 2pm, 4.30pm

road are the main market, the jeep stand and the **SNT bus stand** (☎ 263847). See above for details of SNT services.

Share jeeps leave when full to Jorethang (Rs 25, one hour) and Ravangla (Rs 30, one hour) plus, till lunchtime only, to Gangtok (Rs 92, 3½ hours) and Siliguri (Rs 100 via Melli, four hours). For Geyzing (Rs 90, three hours), a single jeep leaves around 12.30pm: otherwise change in Jorethang.

JORETHANG

☎ 03595 / elev 518m

This useful transport hub between West Sikkim, Namchi and Darjeeling/Siliguri could make a launching point for visits to interesting but lesser-known Sikkimese villages like **Rinchenpong** (country getaways) or **Reishi** (hot springs and holy cave).

At its westernmost edge, Jorethang's most striking feature is the **Akar Suspension Bridge**, 400m north of which are the passingly photogenic roadside Shiva niches of **Sisne Mandir** (Legship Rd).

The brightest, friendliest accommodation option remains **Hotel Namgyal** (☎ 276852; d Rs 350), on the main drag 70m east of the bridge

BUSES FROM JORETHANG

Destination	Cost (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departure
Gangtok	55	4	7.30am
Namchi	13	1	8.30am, 4pm
Pelling (via Geyzing)	45	3	3pm
Ravangla (via Namchi)	30	2½	noon
Siliguri	56	3½	9.30am

just before the SNT bus station. Across the road beside the Darjeeling jeep stand there's a particularly helpful tourist office and several other hotels. One longish block further east, turn right to find the main market and several cheap eateries, including **Sanjay Hotel** (snack meals Rs 10). Had you turned left instead, you'd have found the bustling main jeep stand hiding one short block north of the main road.

Getting There & Away

Useful services from the SNT bus station are listed on left.

From the main jeep stand, sumos leave regularly to Namchi (Rs 25, one hour), Geyzing (Rs 52, two hours), and Siliguri (Rs 94, three hours). For Gangtok jeeps cost Rs 98 via Melli, Rs 112 via Namchi. A couple of sumos leave around noon for Tashiding (Rs 47, 1½ hours) and Yuksom (Rs 96, three hours). There are also morning jeeps to Kakarbhitta (Rs 133, four hours). Buy tickets before boarding.

Jeeps to Darjeeling (Rs 90, two hours) leave until about 3pm from opposite the SNT bus stand.

WEST SIKKIM

Sikkim's greatest tourist draw is simply staring at Khangchendzonga, white-peaked magnificence from Pelling. Most visitors then add excursions to nearby waterfalls and monasteries, plus perhaps a spot of walking. Some lovely one-day hikes start from the charming village of Yuksom. That's also the trailhead for serious multiday group-trek expeditions to Dzongri (group trekking permits required).

GANGTOK TO PELLING

There are three main routes from the capital to Sikkim's main tourist hub. The longest and least interesting loops a long way south to Rongphu, then back via Melli, Jorethang and Legship. Fortunately this is normally only used by public sumos when landslides block the two possible routes via Singtam and Ravangla. Both of these are highly attractive, especially the longer, little-used route via Yangang (hired jeep only), which approaches Ravangla along an extremely dramatic cliff-edge drive around the precipitous base of Maenam Hill.

Ravangla (opposite) makes a good tea stop. Better still, if you have a chartered vehicle, have lunch 3km west of Ravangla at the lonely

PADMASAMBHAVA

Known as Guru Rinpoche in Tibetan, Sibaji in Nepali/Hindi or Padmasambhava in Sanskrit, this 8th-century 'second Buddha' is credited with introducing Tantric Buddhism to Tibet. Padmasambhava statues and murals are common throughout Sikkim. In his most classic form, he's usually shown sitting cross-legged with wild, staring eyes and a *tirslu* rod tucked into the folds of his left sleeve. This spears a trio of heads in progressive stages of decomposition representing the three *kayas* (aspects of enlightenment). Meanwhile notice Padmasambhava's right hand surreptitiously giving a two-fingered Aloha greeting from behind a *dorje* (mini sceptre).

Padmasambhava has seven other alternative manifestations. The most striking of these, Dorje Bhurpa Vajrakila, shows him with three frightful heads and a lusty wench gyrating on his groin.

Mt Narsing Resort (☎ 9733084105; mains Rs 30-75), a rustic bungalow place with fabulous tree-framed views towards the mountains. You could also sleep here in simple bungalows (s/d Rs 550/850) with shared amenities or more luxurious cottages (Rs 1600/3100)

Don't miss the charming little **Bon Monastery** (right) before reaching Kewzing where the road starts its descent on seemingly endless hairpins to Legship (p582), only to climb all the way back up the other side again to Geyzing (p582).

Ravangla (Rabongla)

☎ 03595 / elev 2009m

Rapidly expanding Ravangla is spectacularly perched overlooking a wide sweep of western Sikkim, the gompas of Old Ralang, Tashiding, Pemayangtse and Sangachoeling, all distantly visible against a horizon that's sawtoothed with snow-capped peaks.

The town itself is a modern creation of little aesthetic distinction, but useful as a hub to visit Ralang. Around the main road junction is a concentration of shops, small eateries and plentiful hotels, including **Hotel 10-Zing** (☎ 260705; d from Rs 300), a slightly eccentric place whose best room (Rs 450) has a new bathroom, gingham-wrapped TV and comes complete with Ozzy Osbourne poster.

Hotel Snow-White (☎ 9836089533; s/d/tr Rs 300/400/700) has small but clean new rooms sharing very neat bathrooms. There are good if partially obscured views from the rear.

Several more hotels, many with views, line the Kewzing road for about a kilometre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Transport gathers in front of Hotel 10-Zing. Buses leave around 9.30am for Gangtok (Rs 44, three hours), and at 9am and 1pm for Namchi (Rs 17, 1½ hours). Until around 2pm, share jeeps leave when full to Namchi (Rs 30,

one hour) and Geyzing (Rs 60, two hours) via Legship (Rs 32). **Mainamla Travels** (☎ 260688) runs several morning jeeps to Gangtok (Rs 74, three hours).

Around Ravangla

RALANG

At Ralang 13km below Ravangla, the splendid 1995 **Palchen Choeling Monastic Institute** (New Ralang Gompa) is home to about 200 Kagyu-order monks. Arrive early morning or around 3pm to hear them chanting in mesmerising unison. There's a 9m-high golden statue of the historical Buddha in the main hall, and locally the gompa is famous for elaborate butter sculptures. At November's very impressive **Mahakala Dance** the dancers wear masks representing the Great Protector and chase away negative energy. Ask to peek inside the room where the amazing costumes are stored.

About 1.5km downhill on the same road is peaceful **Old Ralang Gompa**, established in 1768.

A chartered taxi to Ralang costs around Rs 350 from Ravangla (return with two hours' wait).

BON MONASTERY

Beside the main Legship road, 5.5km from central Ravangla, small but fascinating **Yung Drung Kundrak Lingbon** is the only Bon monastery in Sikkim. The Bon faith, ('Mahayana with more laughs') preceded Buddhism in Tibet. It's relevance and impact on Buddhist philosophy is brought superbly alive by the impeccable explanations of the monastery's joyful English teacher, Lama Yungdrung Tenzing.

MAENAM HILL

A steep three- to four-hour hiking trail leads from the Ravangla-Ralang road to the top of **Maenam Hill** through the rhododendrons and magnolia blooms of the **Maenam Wildlife**

Sanctuary. The views are wonderful and you just might see rare red pandas and monal pheasants (Sikkim's state bird). A guide is useful to avoid getting lost in the forest on return. Longer treks continue to **Borong** village.

GEYZING, TIKJUK & LEGSHIP

☎ 03595

Geyzing is West Sikkim's capital, but for permit extensions you need Tikjuk, half way to Pelling.

Tikjuk

Sikkim Permits can be extended at Tikjuk's **Police Station** (☎ 250844; ⌚ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) beside the main Pelling Rd, 4km from Geyzing. Nearby the **District Secretariat** (☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri) offers internet access in its **Community Information Centre** (per hr Rs 20).

Geyzing (Gyashaling)

elev 1552m

Apart from its vaguely interesting Sunday market, Geyzing is most useful as West Sikkim's transport hub. However, for a pleasantly peaceful accommodation alternative, go 2.3km towards Sakyong (itself a village with considerable potential). Here the **Tashigang Resort** (☎ 250340; www.tashigangresort.com; s Rs 900-1300, d Rs 1150-1560, plus tax 20%) offers magnificently wide views from almost all except the cheapest 'deluxe rooms'. Curious roof lawns top the slightly frumpy red-brick building offering more chances for mountain contemplation.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Useful SNT bus services are listed below.

Share jeeps to Pelling (Rs 20, 20 minutes) and Legship (Rs 25, 30 minutes) leave when full, roughly every half-hour. Taxis cost Rs 150 to 200.

Jorethang-bound jeeps (Rs 52, 1½ hours) leave regularly throughout the day. There are

several morning jeeps to Siliguri (Rs 125, four hours) and Gangtok (Rs 120, five hours) via Ravangla (Rs 60, two hours). Services to Tashiding (Rs 50, 1½ hours), Khecheopalri Lake (Rs 60, two hours) and Yuksom (Rs 70, 2½ hours) depart around 11am.

Legship

When no other transport is available, especially to or from Tashiding, try connecting here. Should you get stranded, **Hotel Trishna** (☎ 259887; d with shared/private bathroom from Rs 200/300) is simple but has plenty of greenery and a rooftop terrace.

PELLING

☎ 03595 / elev 2083m

Pelling's raison d'être is its jaw-dropping dawn view of Khangchendzonga. It's not so much a town as a 2km string of tourist hotels, but don't be put off. The view *is* worth it. Despite hordes of visitors, locals remain surprisingly unjaded, and the best budget hotels are great for meeting fellow travellers. Don't miss strolling up to the **helipad** for even more panoramic views.

Orientation & Information

Pelling is nominally divided into Upper, Middle and Lower areas, though these effectively merge. A focal point of Upper Pelling is a small roundabout where the main road from Geyzing turns 180 degrees in front of Hotel Garuda. At the same point, minor roads branch south to Dentem and southwest to the helipad and **tourist office** (⌚ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat).

Until Pelling's new telephone exchange is finished, the nearest internet access is in Tikjuk (left)

Tours

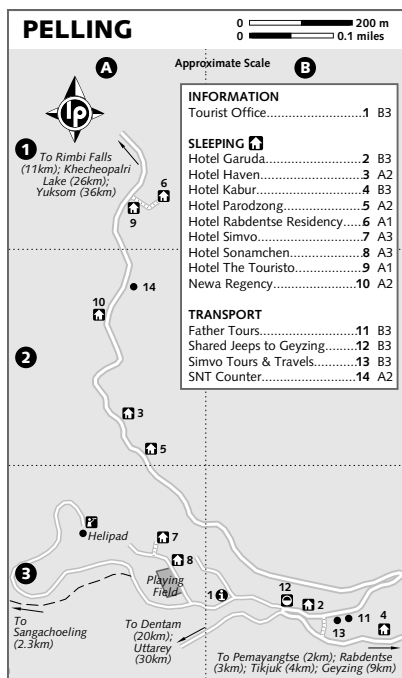
Hotel Garuda (opposite) and **Simvo Tour & Travels** (☎ 258549; per person/jeep Rs 175/1600) plus several other agencies offer one-day tours. A popular choice visits Yuksom via Khecheopalri Lake and three waterfalls. Several agents can arrange treks and permits for groups of four or more.

Sleeping

Unless otherwise stated all places listed have private bathrooms with hot water. Note that many hotels build new floors whenever they can afford to do so. That means that top storey rooms are usually the freshest. However, sometimes prices overreflect that fact.

BUSES FROM GEYZING (GYASHALING)

Destination	Cost (Rs)	Duration	Departure
Gangtok	75	4½hr	8am
Jorethang	30	2hr	8am, 1pm
Pelling	10	30min	2pm
Siliguri	95	5hr	8am
Tashiding	30	3hr	2pm



Budget

The Garuda and Kabur are backpacker specialists. Others are just cheap local hotels.

Hotel Garuda (☎ 258319; dm Rs 60, d with shared bathroom Rs 150, d with private bathroom Rs 250-400) Pelling's backpacker favourite has clean, unsophisticated rooms, unbeatable Khangchendzonga views from the roof and a cosy Tibetan-style bar-restaurant ideal for meeting other travellers. Tours are good value and guests receive a handy schematic guide map.

Hotel Kabur (☎ 258504; r Rs 150-600) The Kabur's delightful staff fall over themselves to help. Great-value rooms have cute wicker lamps, towels and toilet paper, though a few have sticking locks and broken switches. Viewed from the charming café and open terrace, Khangchendzonga preens itself above the trees. A small rental car is available.

Hotel Parodzong (☎ 9733084348; d back/front Rs 250/300) No nonsense good-value rooms have clean squat toilets and water heaters. From those facing north you can see Khangchendzonga from your bed, albeit across a communal walkway terrace.

Hotel Haven (☎ 258238; d Rs 400-700) Choose view rooms 501 or 502, which are big, very clean and not cursed with carpets. Other rooms costing the same aren't nearly as good.

Midrange & Top End

The vast majority of Pelling's hotels are midrangers catering primarily to Bengali families. Rates typically drop 30% low season (before bargaining) and are highly negotiable whenever occupancy is down. With over 100 hotels and counting, the best place is often whichever has just been finished, probably blocking the view of the place behind it. Views tend to be best from Upper Pelling hotels, especially those near the old-helipad playing field but prices are accordingly higher there. Back-facing, viewless rooms should be cheaper.

Hotel The Touristo (☎ 258206; s Rs 350-700, d Rs 475-900) The best rooms have good Khangchendzonga views and pink marble floors in the neat, clean bathrooms. Cheaper options are viewless and rather small.

Hotel Simvo (☎ 258347; d Rs 600-1200) Down steps beside the Hotel Sonamchen and with similar fine views, the Simvo's upper rooms are its best but vastly more expensive than the acceptable cheapies on the bottom floors, which aren't as dingy as the corridors might suggest.

Hotel Rabdentse Residency (☎ 258612; rabdentse.pelling@yahoo.co.in; standard s/d/tr Rs 750/850/950) Hidden away down stairs behind the Touristo, this is an excellent midrange find with unusually obliging staff and a great attention to detail. A few rooms without views rooms go for just Rs 350. The idiosyncratic, bottom-floor restaurant cooks up really excellent Indian food, but doesn't serve beer.

Hotel Sonamchen (☎ 258346; d Rs 1000-2500) A big dragon design on the ceiling welcomes you in but sadly the rooms aren't anywhere near as atmospheric. Nonetheless, most – even on the cheapest bottom floor – have truly superb Khangchendzonga views, but the upstairs rooms are overpriced.

Newa Regency (☎ 258245; www.newaregency.com; s/d Rs 1450/1800) Pelling's most stylish choice is a triangular slice of modern architecture softened within by some delightful Sikkimese touches, notably in the charming 1st-floor sitting room. Some views are often partly obscured and oblique, but the service is impeccable.

Eating

Pelling's best dining is in the hotels. The Kabur and Rabdentse Residency serve particularly good food, while the Garuda's a great place for a beer and a travel chat. There aren't really any grocery shops, just a handful of kiosks.

Getting There & Away

At 7am SNT buses leave Pelling for both Gangtok (Rs 85, 5½ hours) via Ravangla and Siliguri (Rs 105, 4½ hours) via Jorethang (Rs 35, 2½ hours). Booking ahead is advised at the **SNT counter** (☎ 250707; Hotel Pelling; 🕒 6am-7pm) in Lower Pelling.

The frequency of shared jeeps increases as the season progresses but year-round rides depart early morning and around noon to Gangtok (Rs 150, five hours) and at 8am to Siliguri (Rs 150, 4½ hours). **Simvo Tours & Travels** (☎ 258549) also offers high-season sumos to Darjeeling (Rs 175, five hours, 8am). **Father Tours** (☎ 258219) has jeeps to Kalimpong (Rs 120, four hours, 6.15am). If nothing is available ex-Pelling, change in Geyzing. Share jeeps to Geyzing (Rs 20, 20 minutes) leave when full (around twice an hour) from near Hotel Garuda. They pass close to Pemayangtse, Rabdentse and Tikjuk police station. For Khecheopalri Lake (Rs 60) or Yuksom (Rs 60) jeeps originate from Geyzing and although booking ex-Pelling is sometimes possible, it's often easier simply to join a day-trip tour and throw away the return ticket.

AROUND PELLING

Pemayangtse Gompa

elev 2105m

Literally translated as 'Perfect Sublime Lotus', 1705 **Pemayangtse** (donation appropriate) is one of Sikkim's oldest and most significant Nyingmapa gompas. Magnificently set on a hilltop overlooking the Rabdentse ruins, the atmospheric compound is ringed by gardens and traditional monks' cottages walled in unpainted stone. The contrastingly colourful prayer hall is beautifully proportioned, its doors and windows painted with Tibetan motifs. Its interior has been renovated many times, the most recent incarnation featuring murals, including multiple images of Guru Padmasambhava's three-headed form, overlaid into infinity as though for a 'Bohemian Rhapsody' video. Upstairs, fierce-looking statues depict all eight of Padmasambhava's incarnations (see p581). On the top floor, **Zandog Palri** is an astounding seven-tiered model

of Padmasambhava's heavenly abode, hand made over five laborious years by a single dedicated lama.

In February/March impressive *chaam* dances celebrating Losar culminate with the unfurling of a giant embroidered scroll and the zapping of evil demons with a great fireball.

A 10-minute stroll from the gompa, **Hotel Elgin Mount Pandim** (☎ 250756; mtpandim@elginhotels.com; s/d Rs 3350/4280) has arguably the best mountainscape viewpoint in all of Sikkim. The old hotel had become somewhat run-down but a total, rebuild should totally transform it by the time you visit.

Pemayangtse is 25 minutes' walk from Upper Pelling. The signposted turnoff from the Pelling-Geyzing road is near an obvious stupa. Follow the side lane (left), then turn right for the monastery or continue and turn left through a gateway for the hotel.

Rabdentse

The royal capital of Sikkim from 1670 to 1814, now-ruined **Rabdentse** (admission free; 🕒 dawn-dusk) consists of chunky wall-stubs with a few inset inscription stones. These would look fairly unremarkable were they not situated on such an utterly fabulous viewpoint ridge. A small almost-finished **museum** building should eventually house local archaeological finds. The entrance to the site is around 3km from Upper Pelling, 1km closer to Geyzing than the Pemayangtse turn-off. From the site's ornate yellow gateway, the ruins are a further 15 minutes' hike around a pond then across a forested hill.

Sangachoeling Gompa

The second-oldest gompa in Sikkim, **Sangachoeling** has some beautiful murals and a magnificent ridgetop setting. It's a steep 3km walk from Pelling starting along the track that veers left where the asphalted road rises to Pelling's new helipad.

A jungle trek continues 10km beyond Sangachoeling to **Rani Dhunga** (Queen's Rock), supposedly the scene of an epic Ramayana battle between Rama and 10-headed demon king Ravana. Take a guide.

Darap

For a relaxing day trip from Pelling, walk down to gently pleasant **Darap village** using the web of village footpaths through small rural hamlets. Khangchendzonga should be visible

to your right most of the way, at least if clouds are magnanimous. Hotel Garuda offers guided walks with a ride home afterwards.

THE MONASTERY LOOP

☎ 03595

The three-day 'Monastic Trek' from Pelling to Tashiding via Khecheopalri Lake remains possible; however, improvements to the Pelling–Yuksom road means dust clouds get stirred up by ever-more frequent tourist jeeps, diminishing the appeal of hiking the trek's on-road sections. Consider catching a ride to wonderful Yuksom (via Khecheopalri Lake using tour jeeps) and hiking from there to Tashiding (one day, no permit required). Even if you don't trek further than the Yak Restaurant, Yuksom is a delightful place to unwind.

Pelling to Yuksom

Tourist jeeps stop at several relatively lacklustre time-filler sites. **Rimbi** and **Khangchendzonga Falls** are forgettable but **Phamrong Falls** are impressive. Although it's several kilometres up a dead-end spur road, virtually all Yuksom-bound tours visit **Khecheopalri**, dropping you for about half an hour at a car park that's a five-minute stroll from the little lake.

KHECHEOPALRI LAKE

elev 1951m

Pronounced 'catch-a-perry', this holy lake is highly revered by Sikkimese Buddhists who believe that birds assiduously remove any leaves that fall onto its surface. During **Khachoopalri Mela** held in March/April, butter lamps rather than leaves are floated out across the lake. The birds aren't fooled. Prayer wheels line the lake's jetty, which is backed by fluttering prayerflags and Tibetan inscriptions, but the setting, ringed with forested hills, isn't really dramatic. To sense its reputed serenity you could try staying overnight and visiting once the constant trail of tourists has petered out.

Khecheopalri Trekkers Hut (☎ 9733076995; dm/tw Rs 50/150) is an isolated pale-green house-hotel about 300m back down the access road from the car park. Rooms are modest but clean and share several bathrooms. You can get tongba and filling meals, and the owners are helpful with trekking information, sometimes offering bird-watching or culturally themed guided hikes. If sleeping over, you'll have time to trek up to **Khecheopalri Gumpa** above the lake.

Around the car park is a Buddhist nunnery (behind a shrine-style gateway), a small shop, and the very basic Jigme Restaurant serving tea, *momos* and chow mein. There's no village.

Share jeeps to Geyzing (Rs 60, two hours) leave the lake at about 6am travelling via Pelling (23km).

The trail to Yuksom (9km) descends to the main road, emerging near the Khangchendzonga Falls. After a suspension bridge, follow the short-cut trail uphill to meet the Yuksom road, about 2km below Yuksom village. Ask at the Trekkers Hut for detailed directions.

Yuksom (Yuksam)

elev 1780m

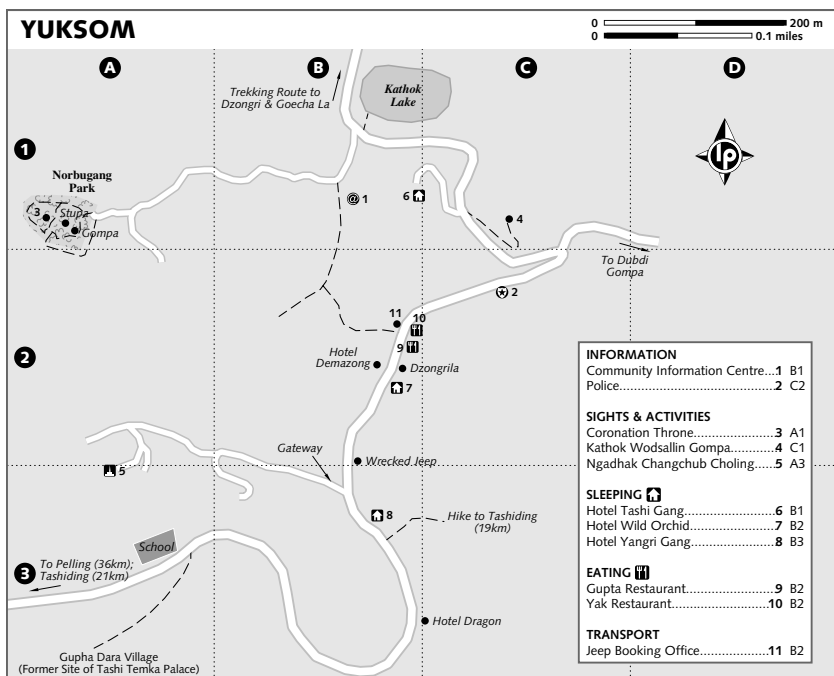
Loveable Yuksom is historic and charming. It's the main trailhead for the Khangchendzonga Trek (p587), but, lacking direct views of the high mountains, has thus far been spared the rapacious development that's overwhelming Pelling. The **Community Information Centre** (per hr Rs 50; ☎ 10am–1pm & 3–5pm) offers internet connection in an unlikely hut near Kathok Lake.

SIGHTS

The word Yuksom means 'meeting place of the three lamas', referring to the trio of Tibetan holy men who crowned the first chogyal of Sikkim here in 1641. The site is now **Norbugang Park**, which contains a prayer house, chorten and the supposedly original **Coronation Throne** (Norbugang). Standing beneath a vast cryptomeria pine it looks something like an ancient Olympic medal podium made of whitewashed stone. Just in front is a spooky footprint fused into the stone. This was supposedly left by one of the crowning lamas: lift the little wooden guard-plank to see it.

Walking to Norbugang Park from Hotel Tashi Gang you'll pass murky **Kathok Lake**, from which anointing waters were taken for the original coronation.

When Yuksom was Sikkim's capital, a royal palace complex known as **Tashi Tenka** sat on a slight ridge to the south with superb almost 360-degree views. Today barely a stone remains but the views are still superb. To find the site take the small path marked by two crumbling little whitewashed stupas near the village school. The site is less than five minutes' walk away through tiny **Gupha Dara**, a sub-hamlet of around a dozen semi-traditional houses.



High above Yuksom, **Dubdi Gompa** is set in beautifully tended gardens behind three photogenic, coarsely hewn stupas. Established in 1701, it's touted as Sikkim's oldest monastery but the cubic prayer house looks vastly newer. There's no resident monk so if you want to look inside, locate the caretaker before you start the steep 45-minute climb from Yuksom's village clinic. The way rises through thickets of trumpet lilies and some lovely mature forest.

Yuksom has two photogenic new gompas. **Kathok Wodsallin Gompa** near Hotel Tashi Gang exudes a wonderful Chinatown kitsch and enshrines a big gilded Padmasambhava statue. Similarly colourful is **Ngadhak Changchub Choling**, accessed through an ornate gateway opposite Hotel Yangri Gang.

The trail to Dzongri and Goecha La heads uphill beyond the Hotel Tashi Gang, passing a police post where trekking permits are carefully checked.

SLEEPING & EATING

Many small hotels are dotted all along the meandering main street, especially towards the entrance of the village.

Hotel Wild Orchid (☎ 241212; tw/tr Rs 150/225) This neat, clean half-timbered house is slightly ragged but the most charming budget option. Bathrooms are shared.

Hotel Yangri Gang (☎ 241217; tw without/bathroom Rs 150/200, deluxe s/d from Rs 300/400) Base-ment rooms are functional concrete cubes, but deluxe options are airy with wooden half-panelling and good hot showers.

Hotel Tashi Gang (☎ 241202; d Rs 1100, deluxe Rs 1300) Yuksom's most appealing option is tastefully designed to resemble a Sikkimese monastery. The décor of some rooms is a little too monastic, but deluxe versions have local fabrics, a *thangka* on the wall and most enjoy fine views.

Beers, chow mein and *thukpa* are cheaply available from a pair of atmospheric restaurants, Yak and Gupta, side by side at the bus/jeep stand. Both have an attractive thatched rotunda with one round table at which diners are effectively forced to get friendly. Eat early as everything closes for Yuksom's 8pm curfew.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Between 5.30am and 6.30am, several shared jeeps leave for Jorethang (Rs 80, four hours),

via Tashiding (Rs 45, 1½ hours) from in front of Yak Restaurant. Given enough demand, jeeps for Gangtok (Rs 160, six hours) and for Geyzing via Pelling (Rs 60, approximately 2½ hours) leave at 6.30am.

Dzongri & Gocha La – The Khangchendzonga Trek

For guided groups with permits, Yuksom is the starting point of Sikkim's classic trek to Gocha La, a 4940m pass with quite fabulous views of Khangchendzonga.

Taking seven to 10 days, trek costs start at US\$30 to US\$50 per person per day (assuming a group of four), including food, guides, porters and yaks.

Trekking agencies will sort out the permits. Paperwork must be done in Gangtok, but given two or three days, agents in Pelling or Yuksom can organise things by sending a fixer to the capital for you.

Don't underestimate the rigours of the trek. Don't hike too high too quickly: altitude sickness usually strikes those who are fittest and fastest (see p1188). Starting at dawn makes sense as rain is common in the afternoons, spoiling views and making trail sections annoyingly muddy.

ROUTE NOTES

The route initially follows the Rathong Valley through unspoilt forests then ascends steeply to **Bakhim** (2740m) and the rustic village of **Tsokha** (3050m), where spending two nights helps with acclimatisation.

The next stage climbs to pleasant meadows around **Dzongri** (4025m). Consider another acclimatisation day here spent strolling up to **Dablakang** or **Dzongri La** (4550m, four-hour round trip) for fabulous views of Mt Pandim (6691m).

From Dzongri, the trail drops steeply to **Kokchuran** then follows the river to **Thangsing** (3840m). From huts here or at **Samiti Lake** (4200m), an early morning assault takes you to head-spinning **Gocha La** (4940m) for those incredible views of Khangchendzonga. Readers have recommended an alternative viewpoint reached by climbing an hour up from the left side of Samiti Lake.

The return is by essentially the same route but with short cuts that are sometimes a little overgrown. Alternatively at Dzongri you could cut south for about a week following the **Singalila Ridge** along the Nepal–Sikkim border

to emerge at **Uttarey**, from where public transport runs to Jorethang.

Stage	Route	Duration (hr)
1	Yuksom to Tsokha, via Bakhim	6-7
2	Acclimatisation day at Tsokha,	2-3
3	Tsokha to Dzongri	4-5
4	Acclimatisation day at Dzongri, or continue to Kokchuran	1
5	Dzongri (or Kokchuran) to Samiti Lake, via Thangsing	7 (or 6)
6	Samiti Lake to Gocha La, then down to Thangsing	8-9
7	Thangsing to Tsokha	6-7
8	Tsokha to Yuksom	5-6

SLEEPING

There are trekkers' huts at Bakhim, Tsokha, Dzongri, Kokchuran, Thangsing and Samiti Lake (very run-down). Most have neither furniture nor mattresses, you just cuddle up with fellow trekkers on the floor. Bring a mat and good sleeping bag. Huts sometimes get booked-out during high trekking season, so some camping might be involved.

EATING

You (or your porter) will need to carry supplies, but limited food (and tongba) is available at Dzongri.

Yuksom to Tashiding trek

For this long but highly rewarding one-day trek, starting in Yuksom is easier than coming the other way. No trekking permits are required.

Start down the pathway between hotels Yangri Gang and Penathang. The most attractive but longest route leads around behind the **Phamrong Falls** (heard but not seen) then rises to **Tsong**, where **Susan Chetri** (☎ 9832352756; su_zee2000@yahoo.co.in) plans a homestay at her family's typical half-timbered house. From the terrace there are terrific views. Look for the blue-framed home towards the eastern end of the village: it's on the right side of the main trail when heading for Tashiding.

Beyond Tsong the trail divides. The upper route leads up fairly steeply to lonely **Hongri Gumpa**, a small, unusually unpainted ancient monastery building with a superlative ridge-top location. Local folklore claims the gumpa was moved here from a higher location where monks kept being ravaged by yeti.

Till this point the route is relatively easy to follow, with recently laid stone grips. But descending from Hongri there are slippery patches with lurking leeches. At **Nessa** hamlet, finding the way can be mildly confusing. A few minutes beyond in attractive **Pokhari Dara** (where a tourist lodge is mooted beside the sweet little pond), the trail divides again beside the village shop. Descending takes you the more direct way to Tashiding. Continuing high along the ridge brings you to **Sinon Gompa** very high above Tashiding. The final approach to that monastery has some fascinating, ancient *mani* walls but the descent to Tashiding is long and steep by the short-cut paths or almost 10km of long switchbacks by road.

Tashiding

elev 1490m

Little Tashiding is just a single, sloping spurstreet forking north off the Yuksom–Legship road, but its south-facing views are wide and impressive. Walking 400m south from the junction towards Legship takes you down past a series of atmospheric **mani walls** and brightly photogenic **Tibetan inscriptions** to a colourful **gateway** at the Km 14 post. From here an obvious if sometimes slippery moss-stone footpath leads somewhat steeply up to the ancient **Tashiding Gompa** in around 40 minutes. Founded in 1641 by one of the three Yuksom lamas (see p585), the monastery's five colourful religious buildings are strung out between more functional monks' quarters. Notice the giant-sized prayer wheel with Tibetan script picked out in gilt. Beautifully proportioned, the four-storey **main prayer hall** has a delicate filigree top knot and looks great from a distance. On closer inspection most of the exterior décor is rather coarse, but wonderfully wide views from here across a semi-wild flower garden encompass the whole valley towards Ravangla.

Beyond the last monastic building, a curious compound contains over a dozen white chortens, including the **Thong-Wa-Rang-Dol**, said to wash away the sins of anyone who gazes upon it. Smaller but more visually exciting is the golden **Kench Chorgi Lorde** stupa.

In January or February, the monastery celebrates the **Bumchu** festival during which lamas gingerly open a sacred pot. Then, judging from the level of holy water within, they make all-important predictions about the coming year.

Tashiding village's three basic, friendly hotels all have shared bathrooms. **Hotel Blue**

Bird (☎ 243563; dm/s/d Rs 100) serves good-value food and, like the slightly neater **Mt Siniolchu Guest House** (☎ 243211, 9733092480; d/tr Rs 100/150) further up, has very helpful owners. **New Tashiding Lodge** (☎ 243249; Legship Rd; tr Rs 200), 300m south of the market, has fine views from Rooms 3, 4 and 5 and even better ones from the shared bathroom.

Share jeeps to Geyzing (Rs 50, 1½ hours) or Jorethang (Rs 60, two hours) via Legship (Rs 25, one hour) pass the main junction, mostly between 6.30am and 8am. A few jeeps to Yuksom pass through during early afternoon.

NORTH SIKKIM

☎ 03592

The biggest attractions in North Sikkim are the idyllic Yumthang and Tsopta Valleys. Reaching them and anywhere north of Singhik currently requires a special permit but that's easy to obtain (see p571) unless you're travelling alone. It's perfectly possible to visit Phodong and Mangan/Singhik independently using public jeeps. However, they can be conveniently seen during brief stops on any Yumthang tour and at no extra cost.

GANGTOK TO SINGHIK

The narrow but mostly well paved 31ANHWay clings to steep wooded slopes high above the Teesta River, occasionally descending long coils of hairpins to a bridge, photogenically draped in prayer flags, only to coil right back up again on the other side. If driving, consider brief stops at **Tashi Viewpoint** (p574) and the **Seven Sisters Waterfall** at Km 30. The latter's a multi-stage cascade cutting a chasm above a roadside cardamon grove.

Phodong

elev 1814m

A little strip of roadside restaurants at Phodong make a popular lunch stop. Simple rooms are available, too, notably the **Hotel Dzhabamba** (☎ 9434136873; d Rs 150-250), where English is spoken. Around 1km southeast near the Km 39 post, a 15-minute walk along a very degraded former road leads to the **Phodong Gompa** (established in 1740). The potentially beautiful two-storey prayer hall is somewhat marred by metal gratings but contains extensive murals and a large statue of the 9th Karmapa.

Walk on another 30 minutes to the much more atmospheric and peaceful **Labrang Gompa** (established in 1884). Its prayerhall murals repeat the same Padmasambhava pose 1022 times. Upstairs a fearsome deity sports a necklace of severed heads. *Chaam* dances take place in early December.

Phodong to Singhik

North Sikkim's district headquarters, **Mangan** (Km 67 post) proudly declares itself to be the 'Large Cardamon Capital of the World'. Some 1.5km beyond, weather-blackened stupas on a sharp bend mark a small footpath; a three-minute descent leads to a panoramic **viewpoint**.

Singhik has two decent accommodation choices both with more great views. Set in a roadside flower garden, **Friendship Guest House** (☎ 234278; s/d Rs 200/400) has rooms with shared bathrooms within the home of an adorable Sikkimese family (who speak no English).

Singhik Tourist Lodge (☎ 234287; Km 71; d Rs 550) is a clean if slightly musty hotel where rooms have heaters and private bathrooms with geysers. There's a restaurant, too, but it's usually only open when groups are prebooked (through the tourist office in Gangtok).

Singhik is a Rs 50 taxi ride from Mangan, which is served by regular jeeps from Gangtok (Rs 90, three hours).

BEYOND SINGHIK

With relevant permits (and a tour jeep for foreigners) you can continue north of Singhik. Accommodation is available in Lachung and Lachen, with two more basic options in

Thanggu. We have listed a few favourites but normally your tour agencies will preselect for you. Some family places stay open on the off chance of passing Indian tourists, but many better lodges close up when there's no pre-booked group due.

Cheaper hotels tend to have a mixed bag of rooms whose prices are the same whether or not the room has geyser, shower, heating, window or balcony. Some do, some don't. It's pot luck, so try to see a few different rooms even if you can't choose your hotel.

Lachen and Lachung are both Lepcha villages with a unique form of local democracy in which the *pipon* (headman) is elected every year.

Upper Teesta Valley

LACHEN

Till recently Lachen was an untouched, traditional Lepcha village. That's changing fast with pretty roadside houses being progressively replaced by concrete house-hotels. Nonetheless, alleyways remain sprinkled with old wooden homes on sturdy stone bases and Tibetan-style constructions with colourful, faceted window frames. Logs are stacked everywhere for winter fuel.

Around 15 minutes' walk above town, **Lachen Gompa** is an attractive two-storey monastery with engrossing, superbly coloured murals.

Lachen is the trailhead for expedition treks to **Green Lake** along the Yeti-infested Zemu Glacier towards Khangchendzonga's north-east face. These require long advance planning and very expensive permits.

NORTH SIKKIM TOUR TIPS

- A group size of four or five people strikes the ideal to balance cost spreading and space in the jeep.
- To find jeep-share partners, try hanging out in the café at New Modern Central Lodge (Gangtok) between 6pm and 6.30pm a few days before you plan to travel. There's no fixed system, just ask other travellers.
- Less than four days is too rushed to comfortably visit both Yumthang/Lachung and Lachen. Three-night/four-day tours start at Rs 2500 per person for groups of five depending on accommodation standards.
- Leave Gangtok early on the first day: it's a shame to arrive in the dark.
- Your (obligatory) 'guide' is actually more of a translator. Don't assume he'll stop at all potential points of interest without prodding.
- Bring a torch for inevitable power cuts.
- Don't miss tasting tongba (tiny extra cost).

If you can choose your accommodation, a great budget option is super-friendly **Bayul Lodge** (tw Rs 250), whose upper façade is colourfully carved with Tibetan motifs. It's above the tiny video-cinema, beside the post office.

Hotel Sonam Palgey (www.sonampalgey.com; d Rs 3000) is considered the most comfortable in town.

THANGGU & TSOPTA

Beyond a sprawling army camp 32km north of Lachen, **Thanggu** has an appealing end-of-the-world feel. Misleadingly named, **Thanggu Resort** (tw Rs 300; ☞ May-Nov) is an outwardly ordinary family house incorporating a very traditionally styled kitchen, dining area and tongba-drinking den (tongba Rs 10). Rooms are simple but two have attached squat toilet and views of the river.

A boulder-strewn moorland stream leads on 2km to tiny **Tsopta**. Indian visitors can continue 30km north to **Gurudongmar Lake**, but for foreigners the only option (if the guide allows) is veering left up the lovely **Tsopta Valley**. Just above the tree line, the scenery feels rather like Glencoe (Scotland) but the valley's western horizon has the added drama of a glacier-toothed mountain wall. Zo-yaks and donkey convoys wander through on missions to supply some of the Indian military's more far-flung outposts way beyond.

Lachung

Soaring rock-pinnacled valley walls embroidered with long ribbons of waterfall surround amorphous little Lachung. To appreciate the full drama of its setting, take the metal cantilever bridge across the wild Yumthang River to the Sanchok side then climb 1.5km along the Katao road for great views from the **Lachung Gumpa** (established 1880). The gumpa's refined murals include one section of original paintings (inner left wall as you enter) and its twin giant prayer wheels chime periodically.

Mt Katao, nearly 30km beyond, is popular with Bengali tourists who drive up to the top to play in the snow. However, it remains off limits to foreign tourists.

SLEEPING

Hotels are dotted about a very wide area with the most convenient concentration around Faka Bazaar where the Lachung village road turns off the main Yumthang road. Rates start at Rs 250 for the most basic, but prices double in high season. Many outwardly modern places maintain traditional Tibetan-style wood-fire stoves and can churn salt-butter tea for you in a traditional *sudah* plunger device.

Sila Inn Lodge (☞ 214808; s Rs 250 d Rs 350-400) Open year-round, the family-run Sila has a typically mixed bag of rooms above a friendly hostelry-restaurant, best on the top floor.

Nearby hotels **Le Coxy** (www.nivalink.com/lecoxy resort) and **Sonam Palgey** (www.sonampalgey.com) are more upmarket.

Modern Residency (Taagsing Retreat; ☞ 214888; Singring Village; d Rs 2500) In a side lane around 3km south of Lachung, this brilliantly colourful flight of fancy rises like a fairytale Tibetan monastery. Staying here is one great advantage of taking a tour with Modern Treks & Tours (p574). Rooms have local design features and are comfortable, though walk-in prices are very steep. Even if you don't stay, the building is well worth visiting. One upper floor has a veritable minimuseum and the top-floor roof, above the prayer room, offers magnificent views across the valley, marred only by the disgracefully tasteless pink concrete of the Marco Polo Hotel, 500m directly below.

Yumthang

The main point of coming to Lachung is continuing 23km further north to admire the majestic Yumthang Valley. Guides will doubtless enthuse about the highly overrated 'holy' **hot springs**, a grimy, unlit 2 sq metre pool in an unlit, rubbish-ringed hut. However, the real drama starts about 1km north of there. After driving that 1km, walk about five minutes gently downhill to the riverbank. Now, weather permitting, you should have 360-degree views of an utterly magnificent Alpine scene: glaciers, spiky peaks and a veritable candelabra of jagged mountains rising towards Tibet.

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