

# Eastern Tibet (Kham)



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The eastern region of Tibet, known as Kham, is a land apart. Its climate, geography, flora and fauna all lend it a unique, almost magical atmosphere. The stone villages have more in common with neighbouring Bhutan, the chörtens (stupas) seem lifted from Mustang in Nepal and the forested scenery is more Swiss Alps than high Tibetan plateau. The traditional Tibetan province of Kham incorporates the eastern Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), western Sichuan and northwest Yunnan. This chapter covers only the eastern TAR, where travel permits are required. For information on overland travel through western Sichuan, see p267.

Geographically the region varies from the lush subtropical jungle and raging rivers of the southern borderlands to the arid plateau and purple gorges of the east, where the headwaters of some of Asia's greatest rivers – the Mekong, Salween and Yangzi – tumble off the Tibetan plateau. The glaciated peaks of Namche Barwa (7756m) and the remote gorges of the Yarlung Tsangpo, the world's deepest, form one of Asia's last secret corners.

Kham gains much of its charm from its people. Khampa cowboys, dressed in sheepskin cloaks and braided hair, cruise the region's highways on their motorbikes. Kham sometimes feels like the America's Wild West, with the cowboys and buffalos replaced by Khampas and yaks. There are two main routes through the region, offering a once-in-a-lifetime route in or out of Tibet. The busier and strategically important southern road takes in the best of the alpine scenery. The unpaved northern road is a higher roller-coaster ride past ancient temples, remote Bön monasteries and herding communities.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Take a perfect photo of **Draksum-tso** (p247), a sublime alpine lake with a fairy-tale island monastery
- View the magnificent scenery from **Nyingtri to Pomi** (p251), climbing from lush subtropical forest to alpine valleys and snowy passes
- Picnic by the stunning turquoise waters of **Rawok-tso** (p254), a mirror lake fringed with snow-capped peaks
- Peer up in awe at the towering statues of the remote **Riwoche Tsuglhakhang** (p261)
- Clamber up wooden ladders to cliff-top shrines at the amazing **Tsedru Monastery** (p262), Tibet's most spectacularly sited monastery
- Follow the pilgrims around the charming **Lamaling Temple** (p250), shaped like Guru Rinpoche's celestial paradise
- Join the monks in a debate at Chamdo's **Galden Jampaling Monastery** (p257), one of the largest monastic communities in Tibet



## History

The area around Chamdo was one of the first settled in Tibet, as attested to by the 5000-year-old Neolithic remains at nearby Karo. Fossilised millet hints at a 5000-year tradition of agriculture in the region.

Kham was the home of many early lamas, including the founders of the Drigungpa and Karmapa schools. In 1070, many Buddhists fled persecution in central Tibet to Kham, where they set up influential monasteries, later returning to central Tibet to spearhead the so-called second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet.

Lhasa's control over the region has waxed and waned over the centuries. Lhasa first gained control of Kham thanks to Mongol assistance, but the majority of the region has enjoyed de facto political independence. Until recently, much of Kham comprised many small fiefdoms ruled by kings (Derge), lamas (Litang) or hereditary chieftains (Batang). Relations with China were mostly restricted to the trade caravans, which carried bricks of Chinese tea in, and pastoral products out.

Chinese warlords such as Zhao Erfeng and Liu Wenhui swept through the eastern part of Kham (modern-day western Sichuan) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, eventually to set up the Chinese province of Xikang (western Kham). Khampa rebellions occurred frequently, notably in 1918, 1928 and 1932, though not all were against the Chinese; in 1933 the Khampas tried to shake off Lhasa's nominal rule.

In 1950 Chamdo fell to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and much of eastern Tibet came under Chinese control. In 1954 the eastern part of Kham east of the upper Yangzi River was merged into Sichuan province and a program of land reforms was introduced, including the collectivisation of monasteries. When in 1955 the Chinese tried to disarm the Khampas and settle the nomads, the Kangding Rebellion erupted and fighting spread to Litang, Zhongdian and Daocheng. When the PLA bombed monasteries in Daocheng and Litang, the rebels fled into Chamdo and later to India and Nepal, to organise armed resistance from Mustang (in Nepal) with CIA assistance.

Today eastern Tibet remains heavily Sinicised along the southern Sichuan-Tibet Hwy, where the controversial construction of new towns (with multicoloured roofs) is fast altering the face of the region. Off

the main highways, Khampa life remains culturally strong.

## Climate

Kham has a dramatically different climate from the rest of Tibet. The summer monsoon from Assam brings a lot of rain from early June to September, when much of the southern route is shrouded in mist and fog. Snowfall generally starts in October. Northern areas between Sok and Nagchu receive strong winds year-round and sudden blizzards even in summer. Nagchu is Tibet's coldest city; July temperatures range between 3°C and 15°C, with January temperatures bottoming out at minus 25°C. In March, while the northern road remains dry and bleak, southern farms around Pomi are already filled with verdant crops.

The best times to travel are from late March to early May, and from September to early November. At other months you can find the roads temporarily blocked for anything from a couple of hours to a few days.

## Permits

The eastern part of the TAR is officially closed to foreigners unless you have a guide, private transport (normally a Land Cruiser) and a fistful of permits, including a military permit (p323). Once on the road nervous guides will often want to register your group with every county-level PSB office along your route, which can be a real pain.

One irritation is that the Public Security Bureau (PSB) in Lhasa generally doesn't write monastery names on their permits, only towns. The occasional obstructive local PSB office in eastern Tibet may then deny you access to a monastery because only the local town is listed on your permit...

Even with all the requisite permits you will still encounter problems visiting Sok Tsanden Monastery and, to a lesser extent, the Riwoche Tsuglhakhang. To stand the best chance of gaining access you'll need to insist that the specific monastery (not just the local town name) is listed on your permits.

Places close to the disputed Indian border such as Namche Barwa and the Tsangpo gorges are very difficult to get permits for; your agency will need military connections for these.

If you decide to hitch through eastern Tibet without a permit, you will have to keep

a very low profile at all checkpoints and in larger towns and county capitals. If you're caught without a permit, you will most likely be fined between Y200 and Y500 and sent back in the direction from which you came. Hot spots that permitless travellers should avoid include Bayi, Markham and Chamdo. Generally speaking, it's easier to hitch out of the region than hitch in. See p337.

## Getting There & Around

Lhasa is the logical place from which to launch an expedition to Kham. It's the closest gate-

way city and permits are relatively hassle-free to acquire, as long as you are on an organised tour. The most popular routes are the loop route along the southern road to Chamdo and back along the northern road to Lhasa, and the one-way shot along the southern road between Lhasa and Zhongdian (and vice versa).

For a two-week loop of Kham (taking in Draksum-tso, Bayi, Pasho, Riwoche and Sok), Foreign Independent Traveller (FIT) in Lhasa charges around Y16,000 for transport, guides and permits. A shorter six-day loop from

### FOUR RIVERS, SIX RANGES: THE KHAMPA RESISTANCE

By the late 1950s thousands of Khampa warriors had begun to rebel against Chinese rule and reforms. News of the armed rebellion filtered through to central Tibet, but the Khampas' pleas for help fell on deaf ears. The Dalai Lama, keen to avoid conflict with the Chinese, asked the Khampas to disarm. Without organisation or cohesive leadership the rebellion was routed.

Yet a core of Khampa fighters managed to regroup in Lhoka, in southern Tibet, and in a rare moment of Khampa unity formed an organisation called Chizhi Gangdrung (Four Rivers, Six Ranges), the traditional local name for the Kham region. Soon 15,000 men were assembled, led by Gonbo Tashi, and a new flag was created.

The Khampas eventually attracted the attention of exiled Tibetan leaders in Kalimpong (India), as well as the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT or Nationalist Party); some Khampas were trained in Taiwan) and even the CIA, who liaised with the Tibetans through Thubten Norbu and later Gyalo Dhundup, both brothers of the Dalai Lama.

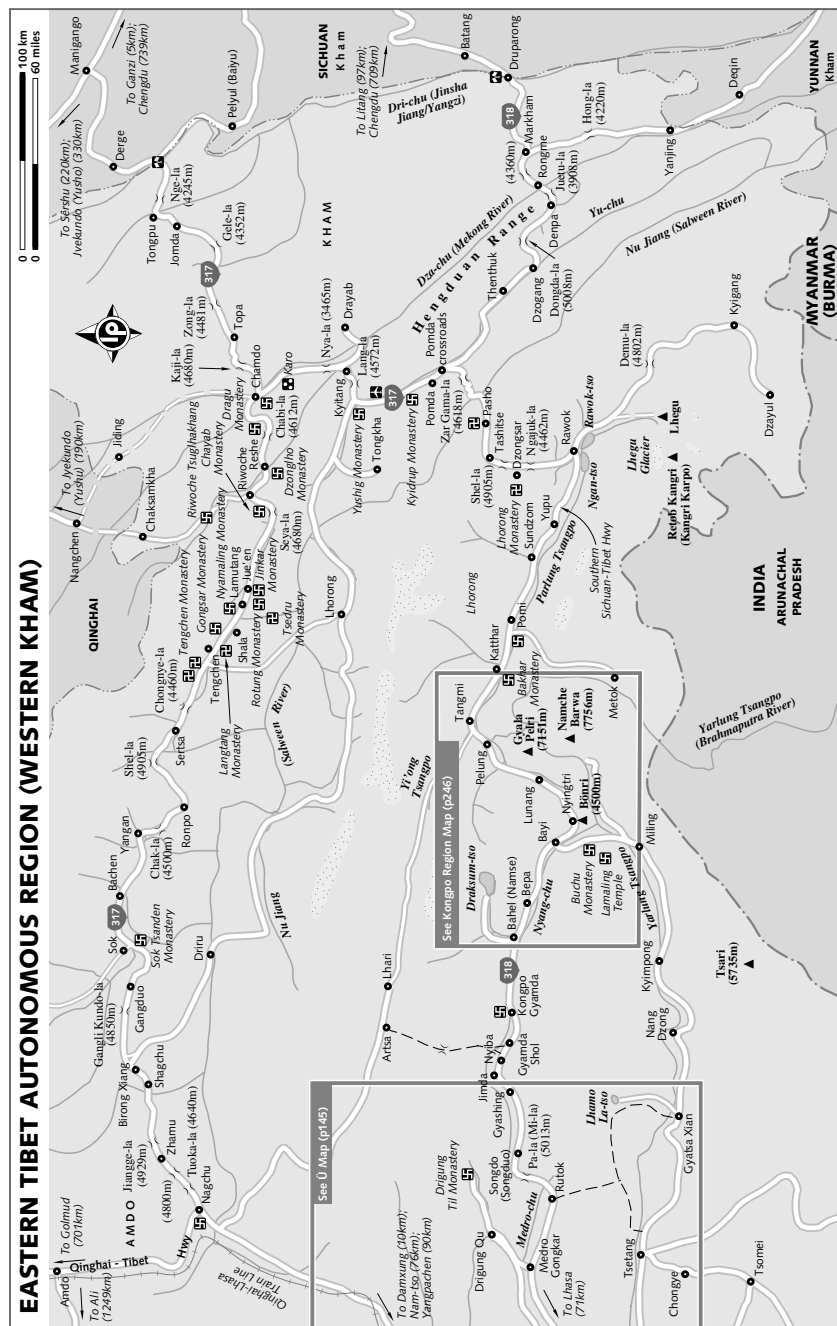
Before long, Tibetan leaders were liaising with CIA agents in Kolkata (Calcutta), arranging secret meetings through dead letter drops and secret messages. The first batch of six Khampa agents trekked over the border to Kalimpong, were driven to Bangladesh and then were flown to the Pacific island of Saipan, where they were trained to organise guerrilla groups. Agents were later parachuted behind enemy lines into Samye and Litang.

In 1957, guerrilla attacks were made on Chinese garrisons and road camps, and in 1958, 700 Chinese soldiers were killed by guerrillas near Nyemo. The movement met with the Dalai Lama in southern Tibet when he fled Lhasa in 1959 as the CIA readied three plane loads of arms – enough for 2000 people.

The flight of the Dalai Lama to India marked a setback for the resistance and the focus switched to a base in Mustang, an ethnically Tibetan area in Nepal, where initially at least the Nepalis turned a blind eye to the movement. Between 1960 and 1962 over 150 Tibetans were sent to Colorado for training.

Yet the resistance was living on borrowed time. The Americans never had much confidence in the Tibetans and by the mid-1960s CIA funding had dried up. By 1972 the international political climate had changed; US president Richard Nixon's visit to China and the coronation of Nepal's pro-Chinese king had left the Khampas out on a limb. Moreover, the resistance was riddled with feuds – most of the Khampa rebels had always been fighting more for their local valley and monastery than for any national ideal. In 1973 the Nepalis demanded the closure of the Mustang base and the Dalai Lama asked the rebels to surrender. It was the end of the Khampa rebellion and the end of Tibetan armed resistance to the Chinese.

For more on the CIA's funding of Tibetan resistance guerrillas and the diplomatic behind-the-scenes wrangling, read *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Freedom* by John Kenneth Knaus. Knaus, a 44-year veteran of the CIA, was personally involved in training Tibetan agents in Colorado. For a Tibetan perspective, try *Warriors of Tibet* by Jamyang Norbu, a slim volume recalling the Khampa rebellion in Nyarong (western Sichuan).



### WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Warmer, wetter and more forested than anywhere else in Tibet, Kham's wide vertical range hides Tibet's largest concentration of rare animal and plant species. Takins, red pandas, musk deer, goral, long-tailed leaf monkeys, Himalayan tahrs, tragopans, pheasants and Himalayan monals all live in the tropical and subtropical regions of Tibet's southeastern borderlands.

Eastern Tibet is also a botanical powerhouse and early on attracted the attention of intrepid 19th- and 20th-century British plant hunters. From May onwards the region is a riot of wildflowers, bursting with 190 species of rhododendrons, 110 types of gentians and 120 species of primula, not to mention such rare flowers as the blue poppy, discovered by the explorer/spy FM Bailey in the Rong-chu Valley in 1913. Many of the rhododendrons and azaleas found in the West descend from samples taken from eastern Tibet and neighbouring Yunnan, and many of the expeditions were actually funded by foreign seed companies.

Overlogging is a serious problem in the temperate forests of eastern Tibet, though logging was formally banned in the Tibetan areas of Sichuan and Yunnan in 1998 after a series of devastating floods downstream in lowland China. Pockets of ancient cypresses up to 2500 years old continue to hang on in the Nyingtri region.

Lhasa to Bayi and back, taking in Draksum-tso, Bayi, Miling, Gyatsa Xian, Tsetang and Samye, costs around Y6000. Finding others to share the cost of the car can be the hardest part of organising these fairly unusual trips. When arranging an itinerary with an agency it's important to specify in advance any detours off the main road, for example to Tsedru Monastery (p262) and Lhegu Glacier (p254).

For details of the trip from Lhasa to Zhongdian in Yunnan, see p337. For details of the routes into the region from Chengdu (Sichuan), via either Derge or Batang, see the Overland Routes From Sichuan chapter (p267).

The most remote and least travelled route into the region is the northeastern route from Qinghai to Riwoche, via the towns of Yushu (Jyekundo) and Nangchen. For details, see p337.

Long-distance buses travel the northern route and southern route, from Lhasa to Chamdo, Bayi (Y100), Markham (Y340) and Zhongdian (Y500), and local buses and private minibuses travel between many of the main towns, but unless the permit situation changes (see p242) you'll be lucky to be allowed on these buses.

A surprising number of cyclists without permits, but self-sufficient with tent and food, make it through the region.

### MEDRO GONGKAR TO KONGO GYAMDA (203KM)

The first major stop after the turn-off to Drigung Til (see p162) is **Rutok**, in the upper

Medro-chu Valley, which has a monastery on the hillside north of town and several Tibetan teahouses. It is also the trailhead for the six-day trek to Lhamo La-tso (p179).

From Rutok the road climbs to impressive views from the high Pa-la (5013m; Mi-la), before winding down to Songdo (Songduo). About 65km after the pass, just before the village of Nyiba, a rickety bridge offers a worthwhile five-minute excursion up to a hillside **rock carving** of Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa).

A further 13km downstream brings you to a huge, photogenic boulder stuck in the middle of Nyang-chu, covered with prayer flags and topped with a rhododendron bush. Locals consider it the seat of the local protector deity Kongtsun Demo.

Five kilometres further, the village of Gyamda Shol was once an important stop on the old Lhasa-Chamdo caravan trail, which branches north from here over the mountains into the Yi'ong Tsangpo Valley. From here it's 13km to Kongo Gyamda.

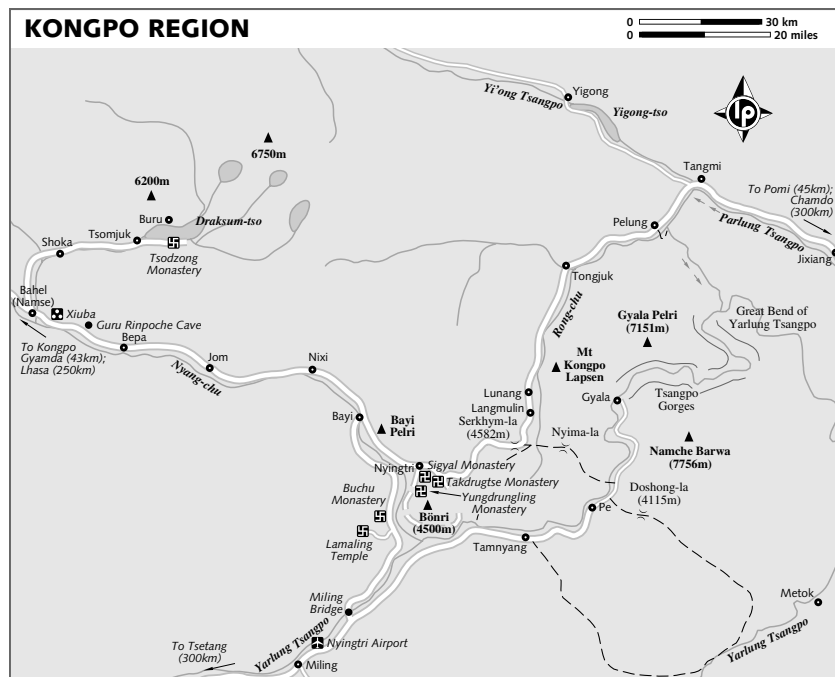
### KONGO GYAMDA ཀོང་པོ་རྒྱལ་དཀར་

工布江达

☎ 0894 / pop 4500 / elev 3400m

There's little reason to stop in this modern town, unless you get a late start from Lhasa and need to spend the night. The town has a decent range of accommodation.

The **Kathok Nunnery**, located in the hills to the north of town, has eight nuns and a small chapel housing an image of Guru Rinpoche and King Trisong Detsen. Like most nunneries it's well tended. A path (a 30-minute



walk) leads up to the nunnery from the plaza just to the north of the Grain Department Guesthouse, climbing some steps and weaving through the old quarter to offer fine views.

The nunnery is backed by a cleft in the forested Baripo Mountain, which has a small **hermitage** marked by fluttering prayer flags; it takes 45 minutes to walk there from the nunnery.

You can get online at the **Xinhua Wangba** (心话网吧; per hr ¥3; ☎ 24hr), a block north of the Grain Department Guesthouse.

The PSB office is at the eastern end of town.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Grain Department Guesthouse** (粮食局新招待所; Liangshijiu Xin Zhaodaisuo; ☎ 136-2894 9804; dm ¥20) This is probably the best budget option, with decent dorm beds in rooms that come with an attached squat toilet. Rooms are cleaned infrequently, if at all, so expect piles of cigarette ash (and worse) in the corners of the rooms. This is the 'new' grain guesthouse, down a small side street; the old one on the main street isn't as good. The Qingquan Bathhouse (清泉淋

浴; Qingquan Linyu) across the road offers hot showers for ¥6.

**Yinye Zhaodaisuo** (银叶招待所; ☎ 541 2541; d ¥30-60) Rooms on the 3rd floor are clean with good quality beds but there's no shower and the shared toilet at the end of the hall is seriously nasty. It's in a courtyard in front of a bank.

**Huating Kangsha Dajudian** (华庭康厦大酒店; ☎ 541 3111; d ¥380, discounted to ¥130; ☎) This plush place opened in 2006 as the best in town, with soft carpets, Western-style bathrooms and hot water in the evenings. It's down a side street towards the government offices.

The main street is lined with Sichuanese restaurants. There's a good Tibetan teahouse below the Grain Department Guesthouse.

### Getting There & Away

Kongpo Gyamda is 277km from Lhasa. A bus (¥60, four hours, 8am) departs daily from Lhasa's Eastern Bus Station.

Buses to Lhasa (¥50 to ¥80) leave at about 8am from Kongpo Gyamda's main street. Minibuses depart for Bayi (¥30) when full from the east of town.

## KONGPO REGION

The Kongpo region is culturally, ecologically and linguistically quite distinct from the rest of Tibet. A former kingdom of the early Yarlung kings and rival to Lhasa, Kongpo has for centuries been vilified by central Tibetan rulers as a land of incest and poison, whose inhabitants would routinely drug unsuspecting strangers to steal their souls.

The distinctive traditional Kongpo dress features a round hat with an upturned rim of golden brocade for men (known as a *gyasha*) and a pretty pillbox hat with winged edges (known as a *dieu*) for women. Men and women wear brown woollen tunics, belted around the waist.

Kongpo is now the scene of a large-scale resettlement and rebuilding program. In 2006 alone over 290,000 people – 10% of Tibet's population – were moved into new homes across Tibet. Some of these new villages were built to settle newcomers from the eastern borderlands, moved here by the Chinese to protect ecosystems at the upper reaches of the Yangzi. The plan has some precedent. Forty years ago, during the Cultural Revolution, Kongpo was home to a vast network of prisons and gulags, some of which are still in use.

## DRAKSUM-TSO གྲམ་མཚོ་པ་སྐྱོ་མཚོ་ 巴松措 elev 3470m

This beautiful alpine lake, known variously as Draksum-tso, Bagsum-tso and Pasum-tso, depending on the dialect (Basongcuo in Chinese), is a long day's drive from Lhasa and a 41km one-way detour off the Sichuan-Tibet Hwy. Apart from the sheer beauty of the lake and its surrounding 6000m peaks, the site has strong connections to Gesar of Ling, the semimythical ruler of eastern Tibet, and Guru Rinpoche, the Indian sage, both of whom are said to have resided at the lake.

A ¥50 entrance fee to the area is payable at a toll gate 33km past the turn-off at Bahel, and 4km before of the lake. PSB officers here and at the hotel by the lake will want to see your travel permits.

The highlight of the lake is the charming **Tsodzong Monastery** (The Fortress in the Lake), a small Nyingmapa chapel sited on a photogenic island just off the southern shore. The island is an organic fusion of dozens of types of flora and a sprinkle of holy sights.

The monastery was founded by Sangye Lingpa in the 14th century. The main chapel has statues of a wrathful and peaceful Guru Rinpoche and smaller statues of Sakyamuni, Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) and Kongtsun Demo, a local protector, on horseback. The statues were actually shot and then burned by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, before being restored by the famous local lama Dudjom Rinpoche and his son Chuni Rinpoche (now resident at Lamaling Monastery near Bayi – see p250). In the corner of the monastery is what is said to be a stone hoofprint of Gesar's horse. The steps to the

monastery are flanked by ancient-looking male and female fertility symbols.

A small kora (ritual circumambulation circuit) around the monastery passes many hard-to-discern holy sites, including a tree said to resemble a conch horn, a sky-burial site, a 'body print' of Gesar, an underground treasury of the Karmapa, a tiger print and a tree whose leaves bear magical symbols.

Just to the west of the lake by a small pass, wooden boardwalks climb up to a fine viewpoint over the lake. There's plenty of scope for hikes around the lake and up side valleys, though permit hassles generally impede much independent exploration. You could walk a couple of hours east along the south shore or even further to Tsongo village for the best views of the mountains to the north. A two-day **kora** rings the lake. A motorboat trip around the island is ¥25 per person or you can hire the boat for a one-hour lake tour (¥400).

Massive development is underway in the valley, spurred on by a new hydroelectric power station, that will doubtless take away some of the charm of the lower valley. Draksum-tso is very popular with busloads of mainland Chinese tourists and preparations are underway for more hotels and tourist facilities.

About 12km from the junction, the road up to the lake passes three tall 12-sided stone towers, which can be reached with a bit of scrambling. No-one quite knows for what purpose the enigmatic towers were built – they stand empty and entryless. Locals refer to them as *dudkhang* (demons' houses) and recite legends connecting them to Gesar of Ling.





There are several other small **Tibetan teahouses** (Dailing Lu), across from the Kangfuyuan Dajiudian.

### Entertainment

**Shangri-la Nongma** (☎ 582 8878; Shuangyong Lu; ☎ 9pm-4am) Enjoy some innocent *nangma* (entertainment club) fun with comedy acts, song-and-dance routines and stone-faced, waltzing locals.

### Shopping

Xianggang Lu is the main shopping drag. The main produce market is south of the canal.

**Toread** (Tanluzhe; ☎ 582 4401; Xianggang Lu) Tents, sleeping bags and outdoor gear

**Kodak Express** (☎ 582 3276; Xiamen Square) For film and batteries

**Lebailong Department Store** (Xiamen Square; ☎ 9.30am-10pm) There's a good supermarket on the 2nd floor

### Getting There & Away

Buses to Bayi (Y80 to Y100, seven hours) depart frequently from Lhasa's East Bus Station, though foreigners might have troubles buying a ticket.

Buses back to Lhasa (Y60 to Y80, hourly until 3pm) depart from **Bayi Bus Station** (Xiamen Lu), in the southwest of town. There are also buses every other day to Chamdo (Y240, two days), Chengdu (Y510) and Markham (Y340). One bus a day runs to Nang Dzong (Lang Xian; Y105, 7.30am), via Miling.

Private minibuses leave when full from in front of the Kangfuyuan Dajiudian for Kongpo Gyamda (Y30, 130km) and Miling (Y25). Private minibuses to Pe (Y50), Lamaling (Y10) and Miling (Y25) depart from beside the Post Hotel.

A car park near the New Century Hotel has frequent minibuses to Nyingtri (Y7) and Lunang (Y30), and daily Land Cruisers to Pomi (Y80 to Y100, five hours).

The new Nyingtri (Linzhi) airport, south of Bayi near Miling, has a weekly flight to Chengdu (Y1510), but it's rarely used by foreigners.

A taxi anywhere in town costs Y10.

### AROUND BAYI

#### Buchu Monastery བོན་ཚེ་ལ་དགོན་པ་ 布久寺

Some 28km south of Bayi is the small but ancient Gelugpa monastery of Buchu (Bujiu

Si). The original dates from the 7th century, when it was built at the command of King Songtsen Gampo as one of the demoness-subduing temples (p105); it pins the demoness' right elbow. The monastery is recognisable by its striking golden roof.

The entrance to the main chapel is flanked by unusual murals of several protector gods, including the Kongpo deity Kongsun Demo (in the far right on horseback, next to the wheel of life). The main hall has statues of the standing form of Guru Rinpoche (right) and a large Jampa (Maitreya), and there are two small statues of the protectors Dorje Lekpa and Kongsun Demo in the left corner.

The inner sanctum houses statues of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), with Songtsen Gampo in the left corner. Behind these is the trinity of Guru Rinpoche, the Indian translator Shantarakshita and King Trisong Detsen. Upstairs is a cheesy, modern 3-D mandala, which depicts the sacred mountains of Namche Barwa, Kailash, Tsari and Kawa Karpo on each corner. A lovely kora path surrounds the timeless monastery.

#### Lamaling Temple ལ་མཚོ་ལྷིང་དགོན་པ་ 喇嘛宁寺

About 1.5km south of Buchu a paved road branches 4km west off the main road to the stunning Lamaling Temple (Lamaning Si). The monastery was the seat of the exiled Dudjom Rinpoche (1904-87), the former head of the Nyingma order. It is now looked after by his son-in-law Chuni Rinpoche and has over 100 monks and nuns.

The octagonal main Zangtok Pelri temple has been wonderfully restored (reconstruction began in 1989) and rises through four storeys, bringing to mind the Ütse of Samye Monastery. The building is draped in long strands of cannonball-sized wooden prayer beads. The grassy courtyard in front is home to a few doleful mountain goats brought here from Tsodzung Monastery at Draksum-tso. Don't get too close: they buck.

Take your shoes off before entering the temple. The ground floor has a statue of Guru Rinpoche, with two stone footprints of the guru on the altar (curiously, both the right foot!) and puppet-like images of the protector Tseumar to the left. A passageway behind the altar leads up to a mezzanine level with four protector chapels in each corner. The chapel above this houses statues

of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), flanked by Jampelyang (Manjushri) and Chana Dorje (Vajrapani). The top-floor chapel contains a statue of Öpagme.

The other main building, to the right, is the assembly hall, where most religious services are held, on the 10th, 15th and 25th days of each lunar month. The hall is dominated by a huge statue of Sakyamuni and more images of Dudjom Rinpoche wearing his characteristic sunglasses. Pilgrims circumambulate both this building and the main temple.

If you want to stretch your legs, a trail leads off from the corner of the car park to an atmospheric prayer-flag-draped chörten and then winds up the hillside for about 40 minutes (follow the prayer flags) to Norbu Ri, where the original Lamaling Temple stood before it was destroyed in 1930 in an earthquake. Look out for the Sakyamuni footprint on a cloth above the door.

#### Nyingtri ཉིང་ཁྱི ལིན་མི་ 林芝

☎ 0894 / pop 3100 / elev 2900m

This two-street town (Linzhi in Chinese) is much smaller than Bayi, 18km away, but is actually the county capital.

**Neche Goshog Monastery** (尼池寺; Nichi Si; admission Y5) is a small Bön monastery 1km southwest of Nyingtri. Turn right at the new wooden sign that says 'Classical Elegance of Nichi'. The small monastery, home to 50 monks, is famous for its 2000-year-old juniper tree that is sacred to Bönpos. The manicured courtyard includes a small side shrine dedicated to the Bön founder Tonpa Shenrab. Remember to visit the monastery in an anticlockwise direction.

En route between Bayi and Nyingtri look out for a group of 2500-year-old **cypress trees** (admission Y20) just north of the highway near Panyi (Bajie) village.

The rooms at the **Telecom Guesthouse** (Dianxin Zhaodaisuo; ☎ 589 2340; dm Y20) are dark, damp and miserable; you are better off staying in Bayi. When we asked where the bathroom, was the caretaker swept her arm across the horizon. Permitless travellers should know that it's next to the PSB office.

#### Bönri བོན་རི་

Bönri is the Bön (p70) religion's most sacred mountain, a sprawling massif where Bön founder Tonpa Shenrab fought and de-

feated his arch-rival Khyabpa Lagring. Bönpo pilgrims come from all over Tibet to circumambulate the mountain in an anticlockwise direction.

The full 60km kora takes two or three days, climbing to the 4500m Bönri-la on the second day. The kora passes many sites connected to Tonpa Shenrab, as well as an ancient burial tumulus, a 9th-century stele and a cemetery for babies.

The most easily visited of the kora's Bön monasteries is **Taktse Yungdrungling Monastery**, 7km south of Nyingtri along a motorable road (take the left fork early on) and then another 1.5km up a side valley. The main monastery has a series of gods that will be unfamiliar even to visitors who are *au fait* with Buddhist iconography (was it us or is one deity holding a Rubik's cube?). The ruins behind the monastery hide some lovely ruined chörtens and water-driven prayer wheels.

The other accessible Bön site here is **Sigyal Monastery**, a two-hour hike from Nyingtri (alternatively, you can drive part of the way down the road to Yungdrungling Monastery and then hike an hour from there). Take a guide or ask villagers for directions. It's possible to hike from Nyingtri to Sigyal and then continue down to Yungdrungling, visiting both of the monasteries on a nice day trip.

### NYINGTRI TO POMI (220KM)

From Nyingtri the road heads east and climbs through forest in the shadow of Bönri. A few kilometres out of town a side road turns right into a village from where it is a 3km uphill walk (along a motorable road) to **Takdrugtse Monastery**, another Bön pilgrimage site. The sanctuary contains a large central stone with 'tiger paw prints' on it. Long ago, legend says, monks decided to build a temple here after seeing an auspicious tiger *tak* (tiger) crouching on the rock.

The main road towards Pomi switchbacks up the forested hillside, past the final sections of the Bönri kora (prayer flags mark the end of the kora) and up to the 4582m **Serkhym-la** (Seji La). On a clear day there are dramatic views of shark-toothed Mt Namche Barwa (7756m) and Gyala Pelri (7151m).

About 7km past the pass, a short walkway (admission Y10) leads to fine views over the forested valley below. Get the same views 1km later, but without the tour groups or the admission fee.

**Lunang** ལུང་ལྷོང་ 鲁郎

☎ 0894 / pop 3000 / elev 3400m

From the Serkhyim-la the road descends past gorgeous alpine valleys lined with rhododendron bushes into the Rong-chu Valley and the logging town of **Lunang** (Lulang). The valley's lovely villages sport traditional wooden roofs held in place with stones, similar to those found in neighbouring Bhutan. There are fine views of Mt Kongpo Lapsen to the north. The surrounding valley is perfect for camping.

Lunang has a PSB office, a next-door bathroom (open weekends only) and several Han Chinese restaurants, which serve up the pricey Sichuanese speciality *shiguoji* (石锅鸡; stone-pot chicken; Y80 to Y160). The local Tibetan community seems totally marginalised in Lunang.

**Lulang Binguan** (鲁郎宾馆; ☎ 589 9108; dm Y20-25, d Y140) The best place to stay is at the northern end of the main street, diagonally across from the PSB office. The plumbing is a bit iffy but rooms are comfortable and clean (avoid the ground-floor rooms).

**Lulang Tese Shaguo** (鲁郎特色砂锅; ☎ 589 3018; dm Y25) Beds in simple triple rooms are also available above this restaurant opposite the Lulang Binguan.

**Lunang to Pomi**

From Lunang the road descends to the riverside and after 40km passes a photogenic suspension bridge. When the tarmac ends the main landslide area begins. From here the air gets warmer, the insects get louder and you

have to crane your head to see the sky between the towering cliffsides.

The next 17km to Tangmi, and the 10km after Tangmi, are loaded with treacherous bends and sheer drops. The hillsides are scarred by numerous landslides and are often hidden in subtropical fog. The plentiful hot springs around here are testament to the region's geological instability. Road washouts are common during the rainy season, so it's best to check conditions in Lunang before setting off.

Around 56km from Lunang, just past the Monpa community of **Pelung**, a prominent suspension bridge marks the start of the 40km (one-way) trek downriver to the **Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo** (雅鲁藏布大拐弯; Yaluzangbu Daguaiwan). Trekkers need to pay up Y80 for an entry fee, Y400 as a refundable deposit and Y100 per day for a mandatory Monpa guide. Dormitory accommodation (Y20 to Y30) is available 30km down the track at Yumei Bridge and near the bend at Zhaqu (check with the ticket seller). Few foreigners have made this trek, though it's increasingly popular with adventurous Chinese backpackers.

If you don't have time for the three- or four-day trek, it's still worth following the trail for 40 minutes down to the foaming junction of the Rong-chu and Parlung Tsangpo Rivers. This marks the lowest part of the Sichuan-Tibet Hwy (at around 2000m) and is a fine place for a picnic.

The main highway swings north above the river junction and passes a drainpipe-straight waterfall before crossing a bridge at the spot

where the Yi'ong Tsangpo joins the valley. A poor-quality side road heads 23km northwest up to the **Yigong-tso** (elevation 2150m), a stunning but hard-to-reach lake that was created by a landslide in 1900. Tea is produced in this area.

Just 3km past the junction, **Tangmi** (通麦; Tongmai) has a couple of simple but decent guesthouse-restaurants, including the **Guanghui Jiudian** (光辉酒店; ☎ 0894-542 3320; dm Y20-25). As you enter town from the west look for the **monument** dedicated to a group of road builders who were trapped in a mudslide in August 1969 – 10 died trying to drag their truck from the mire.

As the tarmac main road heads up the Parlung Tsangpo Valley, pine trees and settlements return and the scenery becomes increasingly spectacular. Princess Wencheng is said to have stayed in the district, known as Powo, during her journey to Lhasa in the 7th century to meet her new husband King Songtsen Gampo.

Some 64km from Tangmi is the 800-year-old **Bakhar Monastery** (also called Orgyen Sanga Chöling; 2680m), stunningly located on a grassy knoll above the river, overlooked by the spiky Kangmi mountain range. There is no guesthouse here, but if you have a tent the monks will point out a decent camping site. There's also excellent riverside camping 8km west of the monastery, at the foot of a forested knoll.

From the monastery it's just 35km along a good-condition road to Pomi, so there is no need to rush out of here. If you are on a hired Land Cruiser tour of Kham, this is one place to abandon the car for a while and explore the surrounds on foot.

From Lunang to Pomi is 160km.

**POMI** ཕོ་མི་

☎ 0894 / pop 11,000 / elev 2740m

Formerly called Tramo, this bustling county capital has well-stocked shops and several hotels and restaurants, making it the logical place to spend the night. The town itself is an eyesore but the surrounding scenery is stupendous and there is plenty of scope for exploring the nearby valleys, if you have enough time.

**Information****Yuanatou Linyu** (袁大头淋浴; shower Y5;

☎ 8am-midnight) Bathhouse next to the Jiaotong Lüguan.

**Kuaile Wangba** (快乐网吧; per hr Y5; ☎ 24hr)

Internet café in a courtyard by the Xinhua Bookstore, near the central square.

**Sights**

Around 6km west of Pomi, on the opposite bank of the river, is the tranquil **Dodung Monastery**, set on a pine-clad hill overlooking the valley. The main prayer hall includes, to the right, a collection of *cham* (dance) masks and a flaccid snake (it's a fake). Upstairs are murals depicting the life story of two forms of Gesar, as well as Guru Rinpoche and Tsepame (Amityayus). The monastery is a branch of Chayab Monastery (see p262) and so there are some photos of the sixth Taksam Rinpoche. Several lovely mani *lhakhangs* (buildings holding prayer wheels) make up the rest of the lovely complex.

To reach the monastery from Pomi, cross the road bridge over the Parlung Tsangpo, opposite the Jiaotong Lüguan and take the right fork. A dirt road continues up the back of the hill into the monastery compound. A three-wheel rickshaw from Pomi costs around Y10.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Jiaotong Lüguan** (交通旅馆; ☎ 542 2798; dm Y20, s/d without bathroom Y30/40, d with bathroom Y80-128) Not to be confused with the larger nearby hotel of the same name, this recently renovated place has a wide range of rooms and will often let you pay per bed in the rooms with bathroom, which is a good deal. It is above some shops opposite the bridge.

**Jiaotong Dajiudian** (交通大酒店; Traffic Hotel; ☎ 542 3040; d Y60-80, tr Y80, d with bathroom Y280, discounted to Y120) A decent option, the rooms with private bathrooms have hot water in the evenings. It is located at the west end of town, close to the bridge to Dodung Monastery.

**Zhongxing Binguan** (众兴宾馆; ☎ 542 3338; Zhamucun Lu; d/tr Y288/368, discounted to Y200/260; ☎) Amazingly plush considering where you are, the spacious rooms are carpeted and have hot-water Western-style bathrooms. It's up the side street that branches north in the centre of town.

There are a couple of well-stocked supermarkets in the centre of town, as well as dozens of simple Sichuanese restaurants.

**Getting There & Away**

The bus station at the western end of town has buses every other day to Chamdo (Y160)

**THE TSANGPO GORGES**

Hidden deep behind the mountains south and east of the Sichuan-Tibet Hwy, the swollen Yarlung Tsangpo makes a dramatic U-turn and crashes over a series of spectacular falls, through what Chinese scientists claim is the world's deepest gorge. With 7756m Namche Barwa and 7151m Gyala Pelri towering over either side of the gorge, only 27km apart, the gorge records a depth of 5382m (almost three times the depth of the Grand Canyon), with a length of 496km. At one point the river narrows to a mere 20m, before bursting out into the Assamese plain as the vast Brahmaputra River.

The region remains one of the world's least explored areas, and is home to king cobras, leopards, red pandas, musk deer, monkeys, tigers and virgin forests.

A few Western explorers have trekked through the region (see p16), but the strategic border area is tightly monitored by the PLA and getting permits is very difficult. Chinese tour groups are allowed to trek between Pe and Gyala; the other main access point is the hike to the Big Bend from the bridge near Pelung (see above).

You may need to hurry. While the Chinese government publicly insists otherwise, Beijing reportedly has plans to build a huge hydroelectric station on the river, a move that would have significant environmental, social and political consequences for Tibet, China, India and Bangladesh.



### TIBET'S HIDDEN LANDS

The lotus-shaped Pemako region south of Pomi is a *beyul* (or *peylul*), one of 16 'hidden lands' scattered throughout the Himalaya that were rendered invisible by Guru Rinpoche to provide hidden retreats in times of danger. Guidebooks on how to get to the hidden lands were written by Guru Rinpoche as *terma* (concealed teachings), to be rediscovered at a suitable time (in this case it was the 17th century) by *terton* (treasure seekers).

Spiritual realisation is said to be easily attained in such places, and, in some cases, the *beyul* also act as sanctuaries providing protection in times of war, religious persecution or famine. Many Khampas fled to Pemako when the Chinese invaded eastern Tibet in the 1950s.

or Chengdu (Y450). A ride to Pasho on the former costs Y80. Share jeeps parked by the main square run to Yigong (per seat Y100, 9am) and Bayi (per seat Y100), but can be chartered for other destinations.

### POMI TO RAWOK (131KM)

From Pomi the road winds through pine forests in the shadow of craggy peaks until emerging at the spectacular Sundzom Valley, surrounded by snow-covered mountains. The valley's centrepiece is the small Sundzom Temple (43km east of Pomi), a 15th-century monastery that was home to 200 monks before the Cultural Revolution.

The condition of the road deteriorates as it climbs from Sundzom up the Parlung Tsangpo Valley. There are several stunning side valleys on this high alpine route, whose glaciers tumble down almost to the roadside. You soon get your first magical views of the blue waters and sandy beaches of Ngan-tso (both Rawok-tso and Ngan-tso are commonly referred to as Rawok-tso). There are wonderful camping and picnicking spots by the lake.

### RAWOK རའོག་ རའུག་

☎ 0895 / pop 2900 / elev 3880m

Rawok has the ramshackle and temporary feel of a frontier outpost, but without the charm. The short main drag is strewn with guesthouses and noodle joints, not to mention the occasional body part (we found a human skull

lying ignored in the gutter a few years back). Still, the surrounding scenery is spectacular and there are opportunities for walking to the nearby lakes. Rawok is an increasingly popular stopover with Chinese overlayers, so get here early to score a hotel bed.

The old town is worth a wander. A road leads into the warren from the north end of the Rawok strip. From here you can work your way through to the large chörten, mani wall and small temple overlooking the lake in the southeast of town. The surrounding fields are full of wooden platforms for drying barley.

Even if you're not bound for Lhegu Glacier (see below), it's worth heading north of town and taking the side road southeast for around 6km to the second lake, Rawok-tso. The views here are excellent and it's a great place for a picnic. It's a popular location for Chinese tourists, who come to watch the sunrise.

### Sleeping & Eating

Rawok is the logical place to stay en route between Pomi and Pasho. If the weather is clear, the best option is to camp around either of the two lakes. Apart from the places mentioned here, most of the restaurants offer basic plywood rooms upstairs.

**Government Guesthouse** (政府宾馆; Zhengfu Binguang; ☎ 456 2666; d Y80, tr without bathroom Y50; 𠄎) The pricier rooms here come with a bathroom but no shower. It's the only place in town with internet access.

**Ranwu Binguang** (然乌宾馆; r Y160; 𠄎) Wooden floors, decent beds and electric blankets here, but it's still overpriced, especially as the shared squat toilets are filthy.

Rawok has lots of simple places to eat. A form of culinary apartheid exists, with the Chinese restaurants on the left-hand side of the road and the Tibetan restaurants on the right.

### Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to Rawok, so if you haven't organised a tour you'll have to hitch. Traffic is meagre at best.

Rawok is 131km from Pomi and 92km from Pasho.

### AROUND RAWOK

The most popular excursion from Rawok is to the **Lhegu Glacier** (来古冰川; Laigu Binchuan; admission Y20, parking Y10), 31km from Rawok. It's so popular, in fact, that you might find your-

self racing a convoy of Beijing tourists. The main draw is the stunning scenery, some of the best along the entire southern road. The glacier itself is impressive, especially because it tumbles into a picturesque lake, but most of the ice flow is hidden by the mountain to the north, Retob Kangri (Kangri Karpo). To get full views you'll have to cross a stream and hike along the moraine for an hour or so.

To get to the glacier from Rawok, follow the road east to Rawok-tso, take the right fork 16km from Rawok and follow this rough dirt road for another 15km. From the car park it's a 20-minute walk up to views of the glacier, or ride a horse for Y20. With an early start it's possible to visit the glacier and then continue on to Pasho in the afternoon.

The left branch continues into the border region of Dzayul (Zayu), just 20km from Myanmar (Burma). Foreigners are not allowed on this road.

### RAWOK TO PASHO (90KM)

From Rawok the road climbs north past nomads' camps and a small azure lake to the Ngajuk-la (Anju-la; 4462m), which marks a dramatic step up from the subtropical Parlung Tsangpo Valley onto the arid high plateau. The pass also marks the watershed between the waters of the Brahmaputra, flowing into India, and the Salween, flowing into Southeast Asia.

Around 13km from the pass it's worth detouring 2km west to the lovely village of Dzongsar, which has the small Sangha Lhakhang (recognisable by the stuffed sheep outside) and the fort-like ruins of Ramo Monastery. This is a very friendly village and you'll need to allocate extra time for yak-butter tea breaks with the locals. A 20-minute walk to the west leads to the active Lhorong Monastery. Be on the look out for dogs here. On the hillside further west is the ruined Yarlo Monastery.

Back on the main road, some 26km later look for the ruined *dzong* (fort) above the village of Tashitse. The traditional whitewashed villages along this section are particularly charming. As the road descends, the landscape changes colour from arid khakis to rocky purples and reds, reminiscent of Utah or Arizona.

### PASHO དཔལ་འཛོལ་ མའུ་བུ་

☎ 0895 / pop 3700 / elev 3270m

Pasho (Basu), formerly known as Pema (Baima), is a pleasant modern town that makes for a good overnight stop.

### Information

**Wangyuan Wangba** (网缘网吧; per hr Y3; 𠄎 24 hr) Internet café down a side street opposite the Government Hotel.

### Sights & Activities

On the northwestern outskirts of the town is **Neru Monastery**, a Gelugpa monastery that's worth a visit if you have a couple of spare hours. The renovated central chapel holds the throne of the Pakhpala, a religious leader based in Chamdo, whose current incarnation is a government minister. It was the current Pakhpala who paid for the restoration of Neru Monastery. To the right of the main chapel is the funeral chörten of the monastery's last *trulku* (reincarnated lama) and the back room has a large seated Jampa (Maitreya) statue made by craftsmen from Chamdo. The top floor contains a *gönkhang* (protector chapel) loaded with old Khampa weaponry. The monastery is a 25-minute walk from the centre of town, across a pedestrian bridge, or you can drive here via the sturdier bridge west of town.

About 4km east of town, beside the main highway, is **Dola Monastery**. The older lower chapel is surrounded by chörtens and ancient yak-hide prayer wheels and is a great place to meet local pilgrims. A kora leads up the mountainside to a plateau and then descends west to Pasho town, with fine views of the arid valley. The leisurely half-day kora is chock-a-block with jovial pilgrims during the Saga Dawa festival (p319).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Fukang Lüguan** (富康旅馆; ☎ 456 2581; dm Y15-20, d Y50) The choice here is between ground-floor quads or quieter upper-floor doubles that come with carpet and sofa. Either way this is the best budget bet. The Tibetan matriarch that runs the place is helpful and there's a public shower block in the front courtyard (Y5; open 8.30am to 11pm). The shared toilets are fukang awful.

**Jiaotong Binguang** (交通宾馆; Traffic Hotel; ☎ 465 2235; dm Y20-30, s Y40, d with bathroom Y160) There's a wide range of reasonably clean rooms on offer here at the bus station hotel in the western end of town. It's not the quietest option but it's fine if you arrive late or depart early on the bus. There's a public shower (Y5) out on the main street; turn right as you leave the hotel.



There are plenty of restaurants – try the decent **Piaoxiang Fandian** (飘香饭店), opposite the Jiaotong Binguan.

**Huashun Supermarket** (化顺连锁超市; ☎ 8.30am-midnight) In between the two main hotels, this supermarket has the best range of goods, from muffins to M&Ms.

### Getting There & Away

The bus station has daily buses to Chamdo (Y80) at 8am. Buses headed to Markham (Y160 to Y180), Zhongdian (Y300) and Lhasa (Y240) from elsewhere in Tibet overnight in Pasho and may have empty seats. Private minibuses run to Pomi (Y100 per seat) when full from outside the bus station. A one-way charter to Rawok costs around Y150.

### PASHO TO CHAMDO (270KM)

From Pasho the road east passes picturesque villages and chörstens reminiscent of those in Ladakh. The stretch of road 32km from Pasho is particularly susceptible to landslides, so check on road conditions before setting off. From here a bridge leads across the Ngul-chu (Nu Jiang, or Salween River) and disappears into a short tunnel (look for the ancient pilgrim track on the other side of the river as you exit). The road leaves the Salween Valley and starts an epic series of 72 switchbacks up to the 4618m **Zar Gama-la** (Yala Shankou), making this the highest single altitude gain of any motorable pass in Tibet.

From the pass the now paved road descends 13km to the Pomda crossroads (邦达; Bangda; elevation 4390m), where the southern Sichuan-Tibet Hwy branches off to Markham (p279). There are several good restaurants and good guesthouses here, including the **Bangda Xueyue Dajiu Dian** (邦达雪越大酒店; ☎ 0895-462 2416; dm Y30-35, s/d Y50/80) and **High Plateau Snowlion Hotel** (高原雪狮宾馆; Gaoyuan Xueshi Binguan; ☎ 0895-499 6166; d/tr Y50/60). Buses to Markham, Pasho, Bayi and Chamdo pass through here between 11am and noon. The distance between Pasho and Pomda is 97km.

Five kilometres from the crossroads lies the lovely village and monastery of Pomda, set at the edge of a wide valley. **Pomda Monastery** dates back 360 years but was destroyed in 1959 and rebuilt between 1984 and 1988. It is now home to 90 monks. The main entry hallway of the assembly hall has excellent murals depicting monastic dress codes and the *gelong* examina-

tion that all monks must pass. There is also a protector chapel and a debating courtyard, as well as a huge mani wall and mani *lhakhang* (prayer-wheel chapel).

Another 12km brings you to **Kyidrup Monastery**, home to seven monks and two nuns. A further 10km from here a bridge gives access to the yellow-painted and rather derelict Shongba Guen Tashi Chöling Monastery. It is visible from the highway, across a glorious grassy plain; a pleasant walk there takes about 25 minutes.

Chamdo airport is another 20km further north, from where it's still 130km to Chamdo town. There's a hotel at the airport (see p260). At over 4300m, this is reckoned to be world's highest civilian airport.

Around 6km north of the airport is a turn-off onto a dirt road that heads 7km to the remote and welcoming **Yushig Monastery**, home to 50 Kagyupa monks, and three *trulkus* (reincarnated lamas), one of whom is considered a manifestation of Rechungpa, a disciple of Milarepa (see p176). The main hall contains images of Sakyamuni, Marpa and Milarepa. The spirited debating that takes place here in the afternoons sounds more like a pub brawl than a theological discussion! The turn-off for the monastery is to the left (west) about 100m before the bridge. The wide plain here supports large herds of grazing yaks.

Some 16km north of the airport is the turn-off west for Lhorong (Luolong). This road follows the former caravan trail to Lhasa. Soon the main road rises to the 4572m Lang-la, the watershed between the Salween and Mekong drainages, and then descends dramatically 29km, past a hot-springs complex, to **Kyitang** (吉塘; Jitang) village. **Tra'e Monastery**, on the southeastern edge of the village, is worth a look. The kora around the ancient-feeling old chapel is lined with animal skulls. A new assembly hall is under construction next door. The turn-off for the 10-minute walk to the monastery is marked by a huge new white chörten. The barracks-style **Jixiang Binguan** (吉祥宾馆; dm Y15) at the north end of town offers basic rooms and pit toilets in an emergency. The Tibetan-style restaurant opposite is worth a look, if only for its interesting architecture. Kyitang is 65km from Chamdo.

Travelling north from Kyitang, you cross a ridge over the 3465m Nya-la to be met with views of the chocolate-coloured Dza-chu

(Lancang Jiang), or Mekong River. The road now parallels the Mekong, passing a Willy Wonka-esque landscape of spearmint green fields, raspberry purple hills and chocolate streams. Around 7km after the pass is a turn-off leading 42km southeast along a dirt track to **Drayab** (察雅; Chaya) and the **Endun Monastery**. The approach to Chamdo is marked by the mirage-like appearance of the Snow Beer brewery, 2km before town.

### CHAMDO ཆམ་བོ་དོ་ ཇམ་དུ་

☎ 0895 / pop 80,000 / elev 3300m

Chamdo (literally meaning 'river confluence'; Changdu in Chinese), at the strategic river junction of the Dza-chu and the Ngong-chu, is a surprisingly pleasant town. It is dominated by the hilltop Galden Jampaling Monastery, below which huddles the tiny Tibetan old town and a much larger, sprawling Chinese new town. Over 1000km from Lhasa and 1250km from Chengdu, the town is the major transport, administrative and trade centre of the Kham region. If you are on a long loop of eastern Tibet, this is the logical place to take a day off from the constant travel.

Chamdo has had a troubled relationship with nearby China. The Chinese warlord Zhao Erfeng (the 'Butcher of Kham') captured Chamdo in 1909 and ruled the region

until the Tibetans recaptured it in 1917. Chamdo fell to communist troops in 1950 (see below).

### Information

There is nowhere to change money in Chamdo.

**Bentang Wangba** (per hr Y3.5; ☎ 24hr) One of two internet bars across from each other in heart of the pedestrian market.

**China Post** (Zhongguo Youzheng; Zhong Lu; ☎ 9am-7.30pm)

**China Telecom** (Zhongguo Dianxin; Changdu Xilu;

☎ 10am-9pm) Sells phonecards.

**Jihua Wangluo** (per hr Y3.5; ☎ 24hr) Internet café near the Jinchuan Binguan.

**Laundry** (Jiejieshi Ganxidian; ☎ 9.30am-10.30pm) Dry cleaners in the pedestrian market that will wash clothes for Y3 Y4 per piece.

**PSB** (Gong'anju; ☎ 482 4794; Changdu Xilu; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Thirty-day visa extensions are possible, provided you have travel permits to be in Chamdo.

**Shengjie Bathhouse** (Shengjie Linshi; Binjiang Lu; shower Y5, bath Y20; ☎ 9am-midnight)

### Sights

#### GALDEN JAMPALING MONASTERY

དགལ་འཇུག་བླ་མ་གྲུབ་ལྷན་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་ ཇམ་བོ་དོ་ ཇམ་ལུ་

强巴林寺  
This active hilltop monastery (Qiangbalin Si) of around 1000 monks dominates Chamdo.

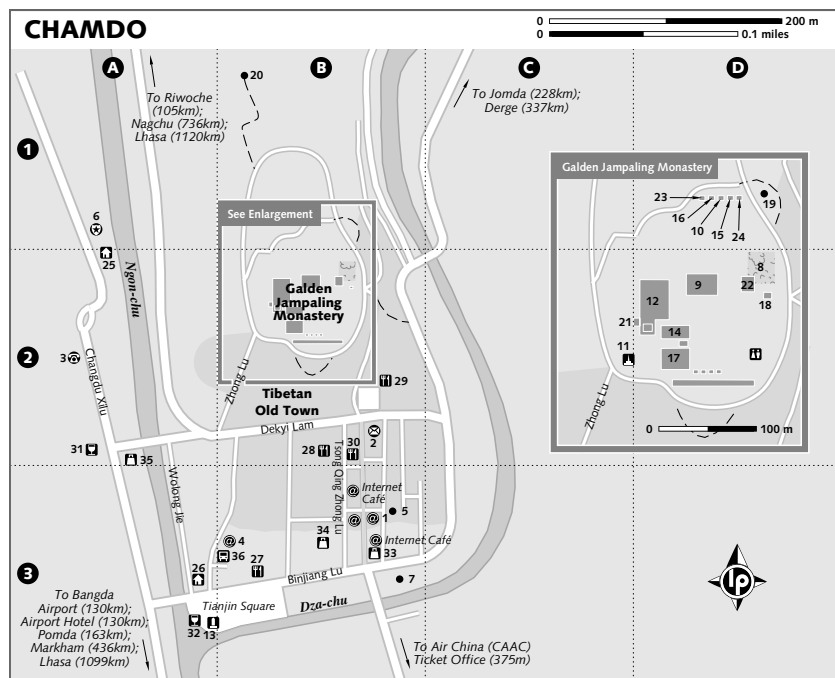
### THE FALL OF CHAMDO

In spring 1950, Chamdo was in real trouble. Although there were still pockets of resistance at Derge and Markham, the communist Chinese had taken control of most of Kham without even a fight. Chinese armies were moving in on Tibet from Xinjiang and Xikang (now Sichuan) provinces in a strategy masterminded by, among others, Deng Xiaoping.

The first skirmish between Chinese and Tibetan troops took place in May 1950 when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) attacked Dengo on the Dri-chu (Yangzi River). Then on 7 October 1950 the PLA moved in earnest, as 40,000 troops crossed the Dri-chu and attacked Chamdo from three directions: Jyekundo to the north, Derge to the east and Markham to the south.

As panic swept through Chamdo, the city responded to the military threat in characteristic Tibetan fashion – a frenzy of prayer and religious ritual. When the local Tibetan leader radioed the Tibetan government in Lhasa to warn of the Chinese invasion, he was coolly told that the government members couldn't be disturbed because they were 'on a picnic'. To this the Chamdo radio operator is said to have replied '*skyag pa'i gling kha!*', or 'shit the picnic!'. It was to be the last ever communication between the Chamdo and Lhasa branches of the Tibetan government.

The city was evacuated (with the Chamdo government commandeering most of the town's horses) but the PLA was one step ahead. Chinese leaders know that speed is of the essence (the Chinese described the military operation as 'like a tiger trying to catch a fly') and had already cut the Tibetans off by taking Riwoche. The Tibetans surrendered without a shot on 19 October. The Tibetan troops were disarmed, given lectures on the benefits of socialism, and then given money and sent home. It was the beginning of the end of an independent Tibet.



The monastery was founded in 1444 by Jangsem Sherab Zangpo, a disciple of Tsongkhapa. It was destroyed in 1912 and then rebuilt in 1917, after the Tibetan army retook Chamdo.

Pilgrims circumambulate the exterior of the walled compound in the mornings and it's worth following them on at least one circuit. Behind the monastery, to the north of town, trails lead up to a sky-burial site and views over the city. The steep paved road up to the east gate is one of the town's most interesting, lined with Tibetan teahouses, tailors and prayer-wheel repair workshops.

The first building on the right is the impressive **Tsenyi Lhakhang** (Dialectic College), behind which is a debating courtyard. Just to the left of the college is a side entrance; go in here, take an immediate left up the stairs and then turn right at the top. This leads to a *gönkhang* (protector chapel) packed with guns, knives and pistols – echoes of the region's warrior past.

Back outside, the monastery's enormous **kitchen** is well worth a look, but only men can enter.

The main **dukhang** (assembly hall) is particularly impressive, especially when it is packed with hundreds of murmuring monks. This is probably the largest assembly of monks you will see in Tibet these days, outside festival times. The glorious inner sanctum is dominated by Sakyamuni, Tsongkhapa and Atisha. The statue second to the left is the Pakhpala, the line of religious leaders that head the monastery. The bearded statue in the far right is of the monastery's founder.

In the main monastery courtyard is the *gönkhang*, lined with fantastic murals and statues of protector gods, along with lots of old armour. The Jamkhang to the south holds a large new statue of Jampa (Maitreya).

Behind the *gönkhang* is the **former residence of the Pakhpala**, whose 11th reincarnation currently works for the Tibetan government in Lhasa. The exit in the southwest corner leads to the **Tsenkhang** (earth spirit house), hidden around the back of the interior courtyard, with a fantastic collection of protectors strung up on a series of pillars like a crack squad of gravity-defying martial arts warriors. Look also for the skeleton and monkey outfits worn

INFORMATION		Guhyasamaja Tratsang.....15 D1		Shaguo Stalls	
Bentang Wangba 奔腾网吧.....1 B3	Hevajra Tratsang.....16 D1	Saoguo 小吃店.....29 B2			
China Post 中国邮政.....2 B2	Jamkhang.....17 D2	Vegetable Market			
China Telecom 中国电信.....3 A2	Kitchen.....18 D2	中路菜市场.....30 B2			
Jihua Wangluo 嘉华网络.....4 B3	Prayer Flags.....19 D1				
Laundry 佳洁士干洗店.....5 B3	Sky Burial Site.....20 B1				
PSB 公安局.....6 A1	Tsenkhang.....21 C2	<b>DRINKING</b>			
Shengjie Bathhouse 圣洁浴室.....7 B3	Tsenyi Lhakhang.....22 D2	Come In Bar 来吧.....31 A2			
	Vairocana (Name) Tratsang.....23 D1	Friendship Food Plaza			
	Yamantaka Tratsang.....24 D1	友谊美食广场.....32 A3			
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		SLEEPING		SHOPPING	
Debating Courtyard.....8 D2	Dukhang (Assembly Hall).....9 D2	Chamdo Hotel 昌都饭店.....25 A2		Kodak Express	
Dukhor (Kalachakra)	Tratsang.....10 D1	Jinchuan Binguan		柯达快速彩色.....33 B3	
Eight Chörtens.....11 C2	金川宾馆.....26 A3	极地户外用品.....34 B3		Supermarket.....(see 26)	
Former Residence of the	Post Hotel 邮政宾馆.....(see 2)	Toread 探路者.....35 A2			
Phakhpala.....12 D2					
Golden Eagle Statue.....13 A3					
Gönkhang (Protector		<b>EATING</b>			
Chapel).....14 D2		Chinese Restaurants.....27 B3			
		Fruit Stalls.....28 B2			
				<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
				Bus Station 客运站.....36 B3	

during cham dances, as well as a stuffed bear. Around the back is a small *tsampa* (roasted barley) mill.

## Sleeping

Chamdo has lots of cheap hostels, but the PSB doesn't allow foreigners to stay in them.

**Post Hotel** (Youzheng Binguan; ☎ 484 4777; Changqing Jie; d Y50, d with bathroom Y80-120) This place, smack in the centre of town, offers cheap rooms with hot-water bathrooms but you'll pay for your cheap rates with broken fixtures and endlessly flushing toilets. The double rooms with toilet but no shower (Y50) are perhaps the best value.

**Jinchuan Binguan** (☎ 484 4998; Wolong Jie; d/q Y280/480, discounted to Y196/294) The four-bed interconnected rooms (联通房; *liantongfang*) here are a particularly good deal for Land Cruiser groups and come with two hot-water bathrooms. Rooms are arranged around a smoke-filled mahjong hall but it closes at 9pm. The carpets are a mosaic of cigarette burns.

**Chamdo Hotel** (Changdu Fandian; ☎ 482 5998; 22 Changdu Xilu; d Y380-480, discounted to Y300-380) Rooms at this three-star place are overpriced though comfortable. The cheaper rooms are small but have cave-like bathrooms. Hot water is available 24 hours.

## Eating

There are several good cheap Chinese restaurants 70m east of the Jinchuan Binguan, and there's a collection of tasty shaguo stalls on the north side of the square in front of the Post Hotel (a *shaguo* is a boiling claypot soup or noodle dish).

There are good fruit stalls near the entrance to the large covered vegetable market, opposite the post office.

## Drinking

**Friendship Food Plaza** (Youyi Meishi Guangchang; beer Y6-15, mains Y20-58) The open-air riverside seating here is very pleasant and it's a great place to people watch over a beer, though the Western food in particular is disappointing.

**Come In Bar** (Laiba; Changdu Xilu; ☎ 1pm-5am) A cosy place for a beer, either by the window or in the nooks upstairs. It's quiet in the afternoon and open late.

## Shopping

The well-stocked **supermarket** (Wolong Jie) on the ground floor of the Jinchuan Binguan has items such as batteries, and normal foodstuffs.

Outdoor shops like **One Polar Outdoor Shop** (Jidi Huwai Yongpin; Pedestrian Market) and **Toread** (Tan-luzhe; Changdu Xilu) offer down vests, camping gas canisters, sleeping bags and the like.

**Kodak Express** (Binjiang Lu; ☎ 10am-10pm) Burns digital photos onto a CD for Y10.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Air China operates a weekly flight (currently Monday) to Lhasa (Y930) and four flights a week to Chengdu (Y930). All are morning flights. The **ticket office** (中国民航售票处; Zhongguo Minhang Shoupiachou; ☎ 482 1004; ☎ 9.30-11.30am) is 500m south of the Dza-chu River. Staff will sell you a ticket without checking for permits but you might still be asked for them at the airport when you check in.

Bangda (Pomda) airport is 130km south of Chamdo. Airport buses (Y40) depart from opposite the CAAC office at 3pm the day before flights, requiring an overnight stay at the extremely crummy **Airport Hotel** (邦达机场宾馆; Bangda Jichang Binguan; ☎ 0895-482 8228; dm/d/ste Y40/160/360). A taxi from Chamdo costs around Y200 and takes two hours.

## BUS

Purchasing bus tickets at the **Chamdo Bus Station** (☎ 4827351) is straightforward, though the staff may rat you up to the PSB if you don't have a permit. There are daily buses to Lhasa (Y310), overnighiting in Pasho and Bayi en route. Buses to Bayi (Y220, two days) run every other day. There are also daily buses to Markham (Y130), Dzogang (Y65), Pasho (Y90), Jomda (Y70), Tengchen (Y100) and Riwoche (Y50). Buses to Nagchu (Y240, three days) run on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, overnighiting in Tengchen and Sok en route.

Sleeper buses operate nonstop to Chengdu (Y450, 60 hours) every other day. Buses to Zhongdian (Y316, via Deqin) are more infrequent.

## Getting Around

Taxis cost a flat Y5 to anywhere in town.

## CHAMDO TO RIWOCHÉ (110KM)

The northern highway to Nagchu passes a weir 6km outside Chamdo and then crosses the river near a series of chörtens and a large mani *lhakhang*. Kiss the tarmac a fond farewell here. Soon the road leaves the Dza-chu (Mekong River) and swings south, eventually climbing past the stunningly located **Dragu (or Trugu) Monastery** (朱吉寺; Zhuji Si) perched on a grassy plateau at around 4200m and

backed by granite bluffs and snow-capped peaks. The 50 or so monks are friendly and will point out the tiger and snow leopard pelts in the upper protector chapel. A huge thangka is unfurled on a platform outside the monastery gate during the Losar festival.

To drive to the monastery, take the steep 3km dirt road to the right just after some houses, before kilometre marker 1331, and about 38km past Chamdo. The best views of the monastery are actually from the main road.

The main road continues to climb for 17km through sections of 1500-year-old juniper forest to cross the 4612m Chabi-la (Zhutong-la), before making a long descent past herders' huts into a lovely alpine valley. About 88km past Chamdo, next to the road near Reshe village, is the restored **Dzonglho Monastery** (宗洛兴旺林寺; Zongluo Xingwanglin Si) If you fancy a walk, a suspension bridge leads across the river to the ruins of the original monastery, at the base of a bluff with the ruins of the old *dzong* atop it.

From Reshe, the road leads past several lovely chörtens and newly constructed villages for 22km to Riwoche town.

## RIWOCHÉ རི་ལོ་ཅེ་ 类乌齐县

☎ 0895 / pop 2800 / elev 3800m

It's important to realise early on that there are two places called Riwoche: Riwoche town (also known as Ratsaka and Leiwuqi), which is the *xian* (country capital) on the main highway, and the *zhen* (village) of Riwoche 26km northwest, which is home to the *tsughlakhang* (literally 'grand temple'). Riwoche town is of little interest, but makes a decent base from which to visit the Riwoche Tsughlakhang.

## FLORA OR FAUNA?

In early summer (May and June) you will see nomads and entrepreneurs camped in the high passes of eastern Tibet, digging for a strange root known as *yartsa gunbu* (*Cordyceps sinensis*) that locals say is half-vegetable, half-caterpillar. It is actually a fusion of a caterpillar and the parasitic fungus that mummifies it. The Chinese name for the root is *dongchong xicao* (冬虫夏草; 'winter-worm, summer-grass'), a direct translation of the Tibet name. The root is used in Tibetan and Chinese medicine as an aphrodisiac and tonic similar to ginseng and fetches anywhere from Y3000 to Y40,000 per kilo, making it one of the most expensive commodities in Tibet. The business is most lucrative in Tengchen county, where amazingly it accounts for more than 60% of the local GDP. Entire tent villages spring up on the grasslands during harvest time, equipped with restaurants and shops, and it's not unusual for fights to erupt between the local communities and outside speculators.

An interesting **nunnery workshop** in the southeastern suburbs manufactures prayer wheels and chörtens spires. It's connected to the large Kaji Nunnery, 15km from Riwoche, some of whose 600 nuns you'll see wandering around town. The workshop is near the faux-Tibetan style 'cultural activities centre'.

## Information

**Feixiang Internet bar** (飞翔网吧; Feixiang wangba; per hr Y4; ☎ 9am-midnight) In the square behind the Sunshine Hotel.

**Meijie Yushi** (美洁浴室; ☎ 9am-10pm, shower Y5) Public bathroom in the same square

## Sleeping

**Zigong Binguan** (自贡宾馆; s/d/tr Y40/40/54) This simple but clean place in the centre of town is the best of several cheapies. Rooms are small but clean, though the windowless single rooms are worth avoiding.

**Dashan Binguan** (大山宾馆; ☎ 450 4433; d/ste Y188/380, discounts of 30%) Spacious rooms, wooden floors, electric blankets and a hot shower here, but don't drop the soap in the squat toilet directly below it. It's clean and quiet, opposite the central government offices.

**Sunshine Hotel** (阳光酒店; Yangguang Jiudian; ☎ 450 9004; ☺) This will be the best hotel in town when the current round of renovations finish.

## Getting There & Away

One bus leaves Riwoche daily around 8am for Chamdo (Y50). There's no public transport between Riwoche town and the *tsughlakhang* (great temple, 26km, 40 minutes).

Land Cruisers leave when full from Riwoche for the six-hour drive north to the former Tibetan kingdom of Nangchen (per seat Y100; 200km), across the border in Qinghai province, from where you can continue to Jyekundo (Yushu). The second half of the journey is unpaved and can be treacherous after heavy rain. It's an adventurous trip and well worth a try if you're properly prepared, but it would be wise to come with a back-up plan. See p337 for more on this route.

## RIWOCHÉ TSUGHLAKHANG

རི་ལོ་ཅེ་གུ་ལུ་གཡག་ཁང་ 类乌齐寺

From the western edge of Riwoche town a road branches northwest off the main highway, crosses the river and follows a wonderful new paved road north. A couple of kilometres

before Riwoche village the road crests a ridge and you get your first views of the amazing golden-roofed *tsughlakhang*.

Founded in 1276 by Sangye On, who relocated to Kham after the death of his master Sangye Yarjon (1203–72), the third leader of the Talung order, Riwoche started as an offshoot of Talung Monastery in Ü. Eventually it grew to eclipse its parent monastery and it now ranks as one of Tibet's most impressive monasteries. It is still the more vibrant of the two, retains the characteristic red, white and black vertical stripes of the Talung school, and is home to 305 monks.

## Information

To be allowed into the main ground-floor hall you must first get permission from the village leader (乡政府领导; Xiang Zhengfu Lingdao) at the government compound, 300m south of the Tsughlakhang. To see all three main floors you need to track down three different keys, from three different monks, which can take some time. It helps to have Riwoche Tsughlakhang or at least Riwoche Zhen on your permit, rather than just 'Riwoche'.

## The Temple

The huge *tsughlakhang* towers over Riwoche village, dwarfing the medieval-looking pilgrims who circumambulate the massive structure. You enter through huge 20m doors into a breathtaking open inner courtyard. Photos are not allowed in the chapels.

The eye is immediately drawn to the huge statues that tower out of the half-light. The entry is flanked on the left by Jampa (Maitreya) and eight chörtens, and on the right by two dramatic protector masks that peer down at you from a high pillar. The left wall has statues of Tsepame (Amityayus), Guru Rinpoche (one peaceful and one smaller wrathful variety with a scorpion in his hand) and Sakyamuni. The west wall has the funerary chörtens of a local rinpoche, three Sakyamunis, two abbots and the two early Talung lamas – Sangye Yarjon on the right and Sangye On to the left. The altars are fronted by elephant tusks and long banners made of petals. Along the right wall is a white statue of Namse (Vairocana) in front of a mandala, a gold chörtens, a seated Jampa (Maitreya), Matrö Bodhisattva, Sakyamuni Buddha and finally two 1000-armed statues of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara).



The middle floor is bare but has some fine murals and statues of Guru Rinpoche, a 1000-armed Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) and Sakyamuni.

The top floor is where the real gems are kept. The most precious items are behind a locked grill, and include some beautiful antique statues and ancient saddles that the caretaker claims belonged to Gesar of Ling and his general. Look for the very old statue of Dorje Chang (Vajradhara), with the slender waist. The room is locked for security reasons, so you'll have to ask nicely to get in.

Monks' quarters lie to the north. It's worth walking up the hillside a little to get overviews of the site.

### RIWOCHÉ TO TENGCHEN (148KM)

Back at Riwoche town the main highway west swings to the south and starts to climb, reaching **Chayab (Taksam or Dashang) Monastery** after 17km. This small but very charming Nyingma-school monastery is surrounded by over 100 chörtens, thousands of mani stones and a short kora. The design of the main chapel is similar to that of Lamaling Temple (p250) but on a much smaller scale. Look for a photo of the current Taksam Rinpoche, the reincarnation of Taksam Nuden Dorje, an 18th-century *terton* (treasure finder) who founded the monastery (and whose portrait is painted in the right-hand corner of the chapel). There are good camping sites nearby.

A further 8km along the highway, past the village of Pakhsa (Kamaduo), look for the ruins of Sibta Dzong to the left, above the village of Mardo. After another 4km, the road passes a striking white marble mountain before it crests the 4680m Seya-la (also known as the Chonyi-la or Dzekri-la). During the summer many nomads camp around here, employed in the lucrative search for medicinal roots (see p260).

The road descends through a series of red-rock gorges until, 95km from Riwoche, you reach **Jinkar Monastery** (金卡寺; Jinka Si), a small Gelugpa monastery of about 30 monks. To visit the monastery take the road to the left, just before the bridge. The kitchen and metal workshop to the side of the main assembly hall are particularly worth visiting.

From the western end of the monastery a path leads for about five minutes past a chörtén and through barley fields, down to the remarkable **Rotung Monastery**, a tiny

monastery of 40 monks surrounded by tens of thousands of votive-carved mani stones. Pilgrims circle the monastery from dawn to dusk.

About 13km past Rotung, easily visible above the road to the west, is **Nyamaling Monastery**. The short walk to this Gelugpa monastery affords excellent views of the valley.

If you've got time, one of the most amazing sites in the area is **Tsedru Monastery** (救珠寺; Zizhu Si; 4474m), considered to be Tibet's largest and oldest Bön monastery. The monastery location, strung out along a ridgeline below a series of natural cliffs and caves is one of the most fantastical you can imagine. Once you've visited the main chapels (there's debating in the afternoon), walk up to the large natural arch to the left, where ancient wooden ladders lead up the cliff-face to a precarious ridgetop shrine that features a stone footprint of the monastery's founder inlaid in the floor. If you have time, it's also worth walking clockwise around the base of Ngon Ri, the mountain to the east. When you reach a small chapel on the south side climb the kora path to the peak for amazing views. The skies around the cliffs are full of soaring eagles and vultures, attracted by the sky-burial site in the valley below.

To get to Tsedru, take the turn-off by a village 6km past the village of Lamutang, cross the bridge, enter a gorge and take the dirt road that branches left. The incredible road switchbacks for 10km, gaining almost 1000m. You might not make it if it's been raining recently. All told, it's a half-day, 25km detour from the main road.

Back on the main road, keep your eyes open for more monasteries dotted along the next 30km stretch, including the hillside **Gongsar Monastery**, **Lharu Monastery**, and the impressive-looking Bön-sect **Langtang Gompa**, 7km before Tengchen.

The distance between Riwoche town and Tengchen is 148km.

### TENGCHEN བས་ཆེན་ 丁青

☎ 0895 / pop 8000 / elev 3820m

The largely Tibetan town of Tengchen (Dingqing) is a forlorn outpost of crumbling concrete blocks and half-broken facilities. The main source of income is the curious 'caterpillar fungus' (p260). Both Tengchen and the surrounding area of Khyungpo are strong centres of the Bön religion.

### Information

**Ewang Qingsheng Wangba** (E网情深网吧; per hr ¥4; ☎ 10am-midnight) Internet café down an alley to the side of the Dingqing Biquan.

**Qiongbu Linshi** (琼布淋室; shower ¥10) Public bathhouse in the Qiongbu Hotel, across from the Dingqing Biquan.

### Sights & Activities

The main reason to stop here is to visit the **Tengchen Monastery**, on a hillside 4km west of town. This interesting Bön monastery is actually made up of two separate institutions. The main building, founded in 1110, has an impressive assembly hall and upper-floor chapel. Bön deities here include Tonpa Shenrab and an amazing Palpa Phurbu, whose lower half consists of a ritual dagger.

To the east is the Ritro Lhakhang, built in 1180. The main chapel, the Serdung, contains three funerary chörtens, another many-armed Palpa Phurbu and a statue of Monlam Tai, the founder of the monastery. Another chapel displays a row of six Bön gods on a variety of mounts. There are fine views from the roof.

There are said to be **hot springs** in the valley that leads north of Tengchen, between the town and monastery.

### Sleeping

**Gonglu Biquan** (公路宾馆; ☎ 459 3389; dm ¥25-30) Simple but spacious rooms above the closest thing the town has to a bus station. There are no showers but you can wash with a basin and thermos of hot water. The beds aren't brilliant, but all in all this is the best value in town.

**Dingqing Biquan** (丁青宾馆; ¥80-128) This place on the main junction has the edge over the competition because if you search long enough, you should find a room with both hot running water and electricity – score! Rooms off the main road are quieter. Check out the fantastic Chairman Mao statue in the lobby.

**Government Guesthouse** (迎宾宾馆; Yingbin Biquan; d ¥160) The rooms at this remodelled place are comfortable, but way overpriced considering there's not even any running water. The overwhelming police presence makes a visit here feel like walking into the lion's den.

### Getting There & Away

Buses to Chamdo (Y100) depart at 8am. Buses from Chamdo to Nagchu (Y180) overnight in

Tengchen before continuing via Sok (Y130). Enquire and buy tickets at the Gonglu Biquan.

### TENGCHEN TO SOK (270KM)

The 33km from Tengchen to the Chongnye-la (Chuni-la or Tsuni-la) launches you up into the highlands of northeastern Tibet, offering fabulous views across nomad camps and yak herds to the huge range of snowy peaks to the south. The 4460m pass itself gives views westward to the Nyenchen Tanglha (Tangula) range. The road then descends for 9km to the lovely village of Bajung, where you can explore the clifftop Bön-sect Yongdzong Monastery and the Gelugpa-sect Tashiling Monastery.

Just below Bajung, and 44km from Tengchen, is the modern town of **Sertsa** (色扎; Khardong), which offers restaurants, a couple of simple guesthouses and a large collection of mani stones in the southwest corner. About 14km from Sertsa keep an eye out for the Bön sect **Targye Monastery** perched dramatically across the valley on the face of a high ridge. Some 66km past Tengchen the unremarkable town of Choedo has some shops and another guesthouse.

Here the road swings north and starts to climb up to the stunning 4905m **Shel-la**, 102km past Tengchen and the highest and most dramatic pass along the northern route. Some 40km past the Shel-la brings you to **Ronpo** (荣布; Rongbu), a small crossroads that offers food and basic accommodation at the atmospheric **Changsheng Zangcan** (昌盛藏餐; ☎ 0896-391 0522; dm ¥15-20). There is a large mani wall at the western end of town. The Gelugpa-school Rabde Monastery (热登寺; Redeng Si) is a 13km detour to the south.

The road climbs yet again to the 4500m Chak-la, where you turn a corner for a dramatic view of one of the Salween's many tributaries. The road then makes a long descent past scattered nomad camps and a chörtén to **Yangan** (Ya'an) village, where there is a collection of basic teahouses.

From here it's another 48km to **Bachen** (巴青; Baqing), a dull country town bypassed by the main road. If it's late, you can stay at the **Da'ertang Xinyuan Biquan** (达尔塘信苑宾馆; ☎ 0896-361 2222; dm ¥58), which has clean rooms but distant toilets. Bus passengers overnight at the aircraft hanger-like **Jiaotong Biquan** (交通宾馆; Traffic Hotel; ☎ 0896-398 6065; d ¥100-160, tr ¥120). There is a Bön monastery on

Bachen's western fringe. From Bachen it's 33km to Sok.

## SOK སོག་ སུག་

☎ 0896 / pop 4500 / elev 4000m

Sok's claim to fame is the impressive **Sok Tsanden Monastery**, perched on an outcrop in the southern suburbs. The monastery of 270 monks, founded by the Mongol leader Gushri Khan, looks like a miniature version of the Potala. The best views of the building are from the south, as you leave town.

The monastery was made off limits to foreigners in 2001 after tourists smuggled out a letter from the monks of Sok to the Dalai Lama. Local authorities remain very suspicious of foreign visitors and threaten a Y20,000 fine for anyone trying to sneak into the monastery! If you want to try to get permission to visit the monastery, make sure that Sok Monastery (not just the town) is specifically written on your travel permits. Even this is no guarantee of entry as police will contend that the matter is in local hands.

The Repung Nunnery to the northeast of town is also technically off limits.

## Information

**PSB** (公安局; Gong'anju; ☎ 10am-5pm) Inside a compound in the north of town, not far from the main crossroads.

**Xinji Linyu Bathhouse** (新纪淋浴; Xinji Linyu; shower Y8) Just south of the central crossroads.

**Xinshiji Wangba** (新世纪网吧; per hr Y5;

☎ 24hr) Internet access below the Electricity Hotel.

## Sleeping

None of Sok's hotels have running water.

**Yala Xinyuan Jiudian/Telecom Hotel** (亚拉信苑酒店/电信宾馆; ☎ 370 3000; dm Y30, d/Y150-200; 📶) Easily the best choice, this place is located behind the China Telecom office on the west side of town and is also known as the Dianxin Binyuan. The four-bed economy rooms are perfect for accommodating Land Cruiser groups. The doubles with TV and air-con are a bit overpriced considering all rooms use the same shared squat toilets. Guests can use the washing machine in the shared bathroom.

**Electricity Hotel** (电力宾馆; Dianli Binyuan; ☎ 370 2694; dm Y35-50) The breathtakingly filthy corridors here hide surprisingly decent rooms.

The rooms come with a private bathroom but you are not allowed to use it since there's no running water!

**Dongpo Jiulou** (东坡酒楼; mains Y18-38) The best restaurant in town is this relatively pricey option by the main junction.

**Snowland Happy Tibet Restaurant** (雪域幸福藏餐馆; Xueyu Xingfu Zangcanguan) The tea and *thugba* comes Tibetan-style at this place with a pleasant traditional interior.

## Getting There & Away

Buses depart at 8am for Nagchu (Y75). Buses to Tengchen pass through at around 6pm, before overnighing in Bachen.

## SOK TO NAGCHU (237KM)

South from Sok the road passes two monasteries and a picturesque roadside chörten before ascending gradually to the 4850m Gangli Kundo-la (Gangla Shankou). The road then descends 36km past a turn-off left to the county capital of Driru (Biru).

There's a restaurant at Birong Xiang, 2km further, but you get a better choice of restaurants 22km later at **Shagchu**, 135km from Sok. From here it's 100km of high plateau grassland, over a couple of gentle passes and past herds of yaks and black herders' tents, all the time staying above 4500m. You are now well and truly in the grasslands of northern Tibet.

At the final pass, just 4km before Nagchu, you crest the gateway of the 4640m Tuoka-la to see the city of Nagchu sprawling below you.

## NAGCHU ལག་ཆུ་ སུག་

☎ 0896 / pop 70,000 / elev 4500m

Nagchu (Naqu) is one of the highest, coldest and most windswept towns in Tibet. Perched on the edge of the Changtang (northern plateau), it is an often dismal town of mud and concrete, but is still an important stop on both the road and railway line between Qinghai and Tibet. It's a literally breathtaking place: oxygen levels here are only 60% of those at sea level, so be prepared for headaches and watch for the symptoms of altitude sickness (AMS). Bring warm clothes, even in summer.

Nagchu has a **horse-racing festival** from 10 to 16 August, when the town swells with up to 10,000 nomads and their tents from all over

the Changtang. Accommodation can be very tight at this time.

On the western outskirts of the town is the surprisingly large **Shabten Monastery** (founded 1814), a branch of Lhasa's Sera Monastery, with 130 monks. The small Tsenkhang chapel is just across the canal. The **Samtenling Nunnery** is a 30-minute walk northwest of here above the Qinghai-Tibet Hwy. You might see the occasional northern nomad in the bazaars, trading fleeces for pots and pans and other goods.

## Information

**China Post** (中国邮局; Zhongguo Youzheng; cnr Zhejiang Lu & Liaoning Lu; ☎ 9.30am-7pm)

**China Telecom** (中国电信; Zhongguo Dianxin; 14 Zhejiang Lu; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 4-7pm) Situated 1½ blocks west of the Naqu Hotel.

**Jishen Linyu** (洁神淋浴; ☎ 10am-midnight; shower Y7) Bathhouse diagonally across from China Telecom.

**Kangda Wangluo Shijie** (康达网络世界; cnr Zhejiang & Chaodan Lu; per hr Y3-4, ☎ 24hr) Fast internet access.

## Sleeping

Nagchu has several decent budget hotels on the main drag, though few accept foreigners.

**Post Hotel** (邮苑宾馆; Youyuan Fandian Binyuan; ☎ 382 0999; cnr Zhejiang Lu & Liaoning Lu; d/tr Y120/150, d with bathroom Y288-388; 📶) Next to the post office, the rooms with private bathroom are often discounted to Y200, or even Y120, which is a good deal. The manager had to fix the hot-water boiler, lights, shower head and entire electrical supply in our room; after that it was just fine! The cheaper rooms are darker and share a grim bathroom. Check everything works before you commit to a room.

**Naqu Hotel** (那曲饭店; Naqu Fandian; ☎ 382 2424; fax 382 1898; 262 Zhejiang Donglu; d Y238, d with Western-style toilets Y328-368, discounts of 25%; 📶) This place is often booked out with groups, both local and foreign. The ordinary doubles are tired, with squat toilets, grubby carpets and a hot-water shower. The deluxe rooms (the higher end of the price range) are similar, but with nicer décor.

**China Tibet Grassland Telecom Hotel** (信苑酒店; Xinyuan Jiudian; ☎ 382 8888; cnr Zhejiang & Chaodan Lu) This is the town's best hotel, but is currently under renovation.

**Erjie Baozidian** (二姐包子店; Liaoning Lu) The *baozis* (dumplings) are the speciality in this clean and friendly restaurant place, but regular dishes are also available. It's 100m south of the Post Hotel.

**Lhasa Nola Bozee** (拉萨财神藏餐; Lasa Caishen Zangcan; Liaoning Lu; snacks Y7, mains Y15-25) Nearby is this cosy and clean Tibetan teahouse, with traditional-style seating and a menu that stretches to *shemdre* (yak curry) and *shomdre* (yoghurt and rice).

**Changsheng Chaoshi** (昌盛超市; Liaoning Lu) Located 50m south of the Post Hotel, this is the best supermarket in town.

## Getting There & Away

The **main bus station** (☎ 382 2159) is in the south of town. A taxi from the town centre costs Y10. Buses run to Lhasa (Y55 to Y80, seven hours) until noon, and there are departures around 8am for Driru (Y75), Sok (Y70) and Lhari (Y75). Buses run to Chamdo (Y260) via Tengchen (Y180) every couple of days. Private cars run to Lhasa for about Y100 per seat.

The train station is 8km south of town. There are four trains to Lhasa (Y51 hard seat, 4½ hours) between noon and 5.30pm. There are also morning trains to Golmud (hard sleeper Y279) and beyond. The ticket office is open from 8am; get here early to buy tickets. A taxi here costs Y20.

## NAGCHU TO LHASA (328KM)

The road south of Nagchu is the Qinghai-Tibet Hwy (Tso-Bö Lam), the busiest and most strategic highway in Tibet. The highland scenery along the road swings from completely dismal in bad weather to breathtakingly beautiful in good light.

One recommended place to break the trip and try some local yoghurt is the signposted Nakchu Dairy Cooperative in Guluk township, 100km from Nagchu (kilometre marker 3658). Further 5km south, on the west side of road is the **Drölma Valley** (admission Y50), a recently established ecotourism cooperative, whose profits are distributed among nomad families. The valley has a monastery and nunnery, and you can rent horses and trek to nearby Yam-tso, known as the 'mother of Nam-tso'. Accommodation is provided in Tibetan-style tents or the Pilgrim Lodge. The local English-speaker guide/fixer can even arrange a local elder to come to your

tent at night and spin tales about King Gesar of Ling. See the website [www.holylandnortherntibet.com](http://www.holylandnortherntibet.com) for details.

From Goluk the road climbs to 4646m Chokse-la, where Tibetans throw into the air the paper prayers they bought at Nagchu bus station. One kilometre further is the Chörten Rango, a line of eight chörtens that commemorate the eight main events in the life of Sakyamuni.

From here on the plain is dotted with nomad tents and thousands of grazing

yaks, offering quintessential north Tibetan scenery. You might spot endangered black-necked cranes along the roadside in May.

**Damxung**, 40km from the pass, is the turn-off for Nam-tso and a good place to get lunch (p149)

About 20km south of Damxung a side dirt road branches off to the east towards Reting Monastery (p151), past the cliffside monastery of Shalung, while the main highway follows the railway line south to Yangpachen, Tsurphu Monastery (p144) and Lhasa.