

Overland Routes from Sichuan

Wild, mountainous and deliciously remote, the Tibetan areas of western Sichuan are a cultural and geographical extension of the Tibetan plateau in all but name. The area was once part of the eastern Tibetan region of Kham, before it became part of Sichuan province. It has long been the meeting point of the Chinese and Tibetan worlds and it was this region that first experienced the Chinese invasion and provided the stiffest resistance to it.

It is an irony that because it is part of Sichuan, Tibetan culture is in many ways better preserved here than in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and subject to fewer religious restrictions. You'll see photos of the Dalai Lama freely displayed. Free of the regulations that dog travel in the TAR, travellers are here able to explore to their heart's content.

This chapter details overland routes through western Sichuan to the borders of Tibet. (For other land routes to Tibet, see p335.) The northern and southern roads offer the main sights, including the big monasteries of Ganzi, Derge and Litang. Off the main roads are several spectacularly situated and rarely visited monasteries. Hikers can find bliss in the sublime scenery of Yading Nature Reserve or on horseback in the lovely valleys around Derge.

Western Sichuan sees few visitors, partly because travel is still rough and time-consuming, but there are some real Tibetan cultural jewels here. And if you have the permits to continue over the high passes and deep gorges into remote eastern Tibet, you deserve to feel a little smug in the knowledge that you have completed one of the world's great road trips.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Watch traditional Tibetan block printing done by hand at **Bakong Scripture Printing Press** (p274) in Derge
- Jump off the bus and explore Tibetan monasteries at small towns such as **Rongbatsa** (p272) and Luhuo (p271)
- Explore the mountain valleys around remote **Dzogchen Monastery** (p273)
- Hire horses and ride with Khampa wranglers in the wild west town of **Tagong** (p270)
- Walk the kora of **Yading Nature Reserve** (p277) amid the region's stunning scenery
- Hike and then hitch out to **Tsopu Gou** (p279), a remote monastery by a holy alpine lake surrounded by prayer flags
- Play pool with wild-looking Khampas in the high-altitude town of **Litang** (p275), before exploring the large monastery



PERMITS

The good news is that no permits are required anywhere in western Sichuan. You will technically need permits to continue into the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and the only way to get these is to book a vehicle and guide, either in Lhasa or Chengdu. For more details, see p323 and p337.

KANGDING (DARTSEDO) 康定

☎ 0836 / pop 82,000 / elev 2616m
Kangding (Dartsedo or Dardo in Tibetan) is nestled in a deep river valley at the confluence of the Zheduo and Yala Rivers, known in Tibetan as the Dar-chu and the Tse-chu. (The 'do' of the town's Tibetan name means 'river confluence'.)

Arriving in Kangding, there is a tangible sense that you have reached the border of the Chinese and Tibetan worlds. The town has been a trade centre between the two cultures for centuries with the exchange of yak hides, wool, herbs and, especially, bricks of tea from Ya'an wrapped in yak hide. It also served as an important staging

post on the road to Lhasa, as indeed it does today as western Sichuan's largest town.

Kangding was historically the capital of the local Tibetan kingdom of Chakla (or Chala) and later, between 1939 and 1951, the capital of the short-lived province of Xikang, when it was controlled by opium-dealing warlord Liu Wenhui. Today Kangding is largely a Han Chinese town.

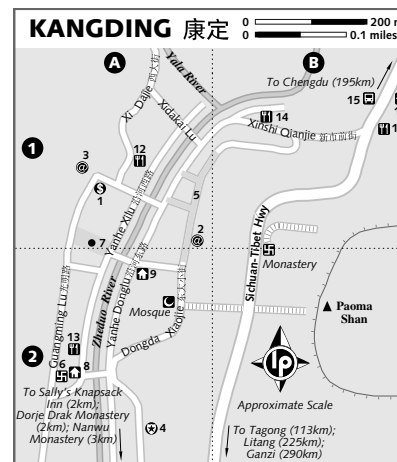
Information

Agricultural Bank of China (Zhongguo Nongye Yinhang; Xi Dajie; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Can change US dollars and UK pounds and *sometimes* travellers cheques, but there's no ATM or cash advances on credit cards.

China Telecom (Zhongguo Dianxin; Yanhe Xilu) Next to the Black Tent Guesthouse; offers cheap international phone calls.
Internet cafés (Wangba; per hr Y2-3; ☎ 8am-midnight) There's one in an alley off Xi Dajie, or get online at Sally's Knapsack Inn (opposite).

Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gong'anju; ☎ 281 1415; Dongda Xiaojie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Visa extensions in three to five days, maybe even the same day if you ask nicely.

Yala Snow Mountain Outdoor Shop (☎ 139 0516 2433; email 13905162433@e172.com) Mr Lin Yueluan



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TRANSPORT	
Bus Station 汽车站	15 B1

rents and sells trekking equipment, can advise on local trekking routes and can arrange guides and horses.

Sights

There are several minor monasteries in and around Kangding. Just behind the Black Tent Guesthouse, the **Ngachu Monastery** (Anjue Si) is a fairly quiet temple built in 1654. It is home to around 20 monks and a new Jampa Chapel.

The **Nanwu Monastery** in the west of town is the most active monastery in the area and has around 80 lamas in residence. To reach it, walk south along the main road and follow its bend to the left for 2km. South of town is the **Dorje Drak Monastery** (Jingang Si), which was under renovation at last look.

You can head up **Paoma Shan** for excellent views of Kangding and, if you're lucky, Mt Minya Konka (Gongga Shan; 7556m). Take particular care when wandering around Paoma Shan and try to avoid hiking on your own. A British tourist was murdered here in the spring of 2000.

In town, the **market** on Dongda Xiaojie is worth a look. Locals flock most evenings to **People's Square** for some Tibetan and Western-style dancing.

Festivals & Events

The **Zhuanshanjie**, or 'Walking around the Mountain' festival, takes place on Paoma Shan on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month to commemorate the birthday of

Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa). White and blue Tibetan tents cover the hillside and there's plenty of wrestling and horse racing, with visitors from all over western Sichuan.

Sleeping

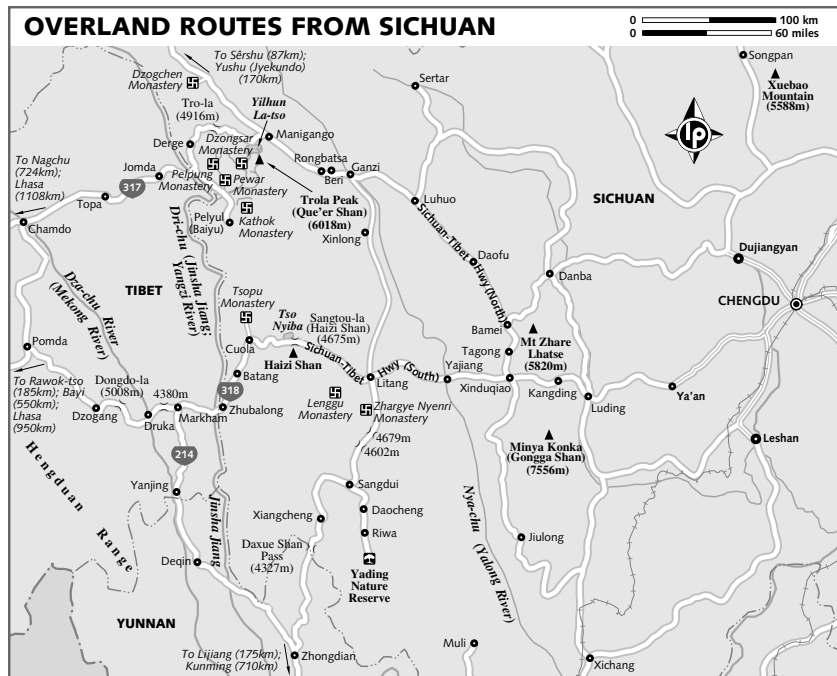
If you're only staying in Kangding a night, to catch an onward bus, it's convenient to be in the east of town near the bus station, although most guesthouses and attractions are over the river on the west side of town.

Black Tent Guesthouse (西藏雨黑帐篷; Xizang Yuhei Zhangpeng; ☎ 886 2107; 28 Yanhe Xilu; dm/d Y20/50) Next to Ngachu Monastery, this clean and sociable place is the spot to meet other travellers. Showers and toilets are clean, but there's only one of each.

Sally's Knapsack Inn (背包客栈; Beibao Kezhan; ☎ 283 8377; zanglingren666@163.com; dm Y20-30) Next to Dorje Drak Monastery, 2km south of town, this laidback hostel and café has colourful carved wooden beds and the most helpful staff in town. A taxi from the bus station costs Y5.

Qingyuan Dajudian (☎ 669 9888; Yingbin Dadao; d Y380; ☎) Some rooms here are missing lights, electric kettles and even room switches, but once you stumble on an intact room, they're terrific, with reliable hot water and heating. It's conveniently located right by the bus station, and a discounted room may run as low as Y120 to Y150.

Love Song Hotel (Qingge Dajudian; ☎ 281 3333; fax 281 3111; 156 Dongda Xiaojie; d Y580) Service here



can be pretty lethargic but the rooms and facilities are the best in town, despite being overpriced.

Eating

Nine Bowls Vegetable of Country (Jiuwan Nongjia Xiang; ☎ 287 5199; Yanhe Xilu; dishes from ¥5; ☎ 11am-9pm) You can't miss this cubbyhole place – the sign next door says 'Chongqing Strange Taste Fish!'. The hospitable manager speaks decent English. Menu in English.

Droma Yudia-Khampa Tibetan Eatery (☎ 282 3463; Xinshi Qianjie; dishes from ¥10; ☎ 9am-9pm) A newer place with a large, warm dining room and comfy seating. It's got a huge menu of local, Nepali and Western food, and even breakfast.

Hongkang Fandian (☎ 283 5101; 14 Xi Dajie; dishes ¥12-18; ☎ 9am-10pm) Outstanding Sichuan food is served in this modest but spotless restaurant – you really can order just about anything off the menu and not be disappointed.

In the evening, numerous covered stalls in the northern end of town offer arguably the widest selection of skewered meat, vegies and fish in Sichuan.

Getting There & Away

The completion of the Erlang Shan (Two-Wolf Mountain) tunnel has cut the ride to Chengdu down to a comfortable seven hours. Buses leave half-hourly for Chengdu from 6am to 5pm (¥105 to 125). In Chengdu, buses to Kangding leave from the Xinnanmen bus station.

Going west from Kangding, there are daily buses at 6.45am for Litang (¥80, seven hours), at 6.15am for Ganzi (¥107, 12 hours), at 6.30am for Batang (¥138, two days), at 7.30am for Derge (¥166, 24 hours) and at 6am for Xiangcheng (¥140, 14 hours). Local minibuses run to Yajiang, Daofu and Luhuo.

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

THE NORTHERN ROUTE

This is one of the two main routes of the Sichuan-Tibet Hwy, which links the Tibetan areas of western Sichuan with Tibet proper. Almost 300km longer than the southern route, the northern route extends from

Kangding to Chamdo, via Derge, Ganzi and the Tro-la, the highest pass this side of Lhasa.

TAGONG (LHAGONG) 塔贡

In the midst of lovely grasslands dotted with Tibetan herders is the vibrant Tibetan community of Tagong, an excellent place to spend a day or so exploring.

Information

Khampa Cultural Centre (☎ 136-1813 0199) This is the place to get information on local treks, learn some Khampa phrases, get your laundry done and even get a *chuba* (Tibetan cloak) made. The Tibetan-Australian venture also organises local horse treks (¥150 per person per day with accommodation). A café and small museum is planned.

Khampa Nomad Treks (www.definitelynomadic.com) Established by a former Peace Corps worker, this company runs horse treks and artisan tours and sells crafts through the Khampa Nomad Arts Cooperative.

Sights

At the north end of town, the Sakyapa-school **Tagong Monastery** (admission ¥10) blends Han Chinese and Tibetan styles and appears to have survived the ravages of time amazingly well, though two of the three main halls have been rebuilt recently. The holiest statue in the far right building is a replica of Lhasa's Jowo Sakyamuni Buddha, said to have been carved *in situ* when the original passed through en route to Lhasa in the 7th century. Note also the beautiful 1000-armed Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) in the building to the left. Make sure you visit the stunning collection of over 100 chörtens behind the monastery; finish off your visit with a clockwise kora of the site.

The velvety hills around Tagong, topped with prayer flags and chörtens, offer views of the rolling grasslands and the stunning 5820m pyramid peak of Zhare Lhatse. Take a walk up to the hill above town, which is topped by a chörtens surrounded by votive rags, amulets and beads left by pilgrims.

The grasslands are also the stage for an annual **horse-racing festival**, held at the beginning of the eighth lunar month (mid-July to August) and attended by thousands of local Tibetan herders.

A 20-minute walk west of town, over the river, leads to the *shedra* (Buddhist college),

which has a large collection of Buddhist rock carvings in the plain below.

Sleeping & Eating

Snowland Guesthouse (雪城旅社; Xuecheng Lüshe; ☎ 286 6098; dm ¥25) Top of the accommodation heap is this great guesthouse right next to the monastery. It's got wooden everything and rigid but comfy beds; best are the thick blankets. The shower and facilities are clean.

Travellers have recommended the Tibetan-style rooms at Gayla's Guesthouse, in the opposite corner of the monastery square from Sally's Kham Restaurant.

Sally's Kham Restaurant (☎ 139-9045 4752; tagongsally@yahoo.com) This travellers' gold mine serves Tibetan, Chinese and Western food and has internet access, CD burning, a bakery, and rental of bicycles and sleeping bags. English-speaking Sally is a good source for local travel information and can arrange one- or two-day horse treks for two people or more (¥100 to 120 per person per day).

Getting There & Away

One bus to Tagong (on its way to Daofu) runs daily from Kangding (¥33, three hours) at 6am. If you're heading to Ganzi (¥70), you can pick up the same bus the next day at about 10am as it passes through town.

Afternoon buses returning to Kangding can be flagged down in Tagong. You can also catch a minibus or shared taxi (¥20) to take you to the Xinduoqiao crossroads, from where there are buses through to Kangding and Litang.

TAGONG TO GANZI

Several bustling but little-visited towns en route from Tagong to Ganzi offer impressive monasteries and some basic accommodation. The Khampa houses in this region, built from wood and stone, are particularly elegant.

Bamei (八美; Garthar in Tibetan) is a lunch stop about 20km north of Tagong; there's a pretty series of chörtens in the south of town. Bamei is famous as the birthplace of the 11th Dalai Lama. Just 8km northeast of town, along the road to Danba, is the **Garthar Chöde Monastery** (惠远寺; Huiyuan Si), built by the seventh Dalai Lama.

A further 72km north is **Daofu** (道孚; Tawu in Tibetan), home to the 450-year-old Gelugpa-school **Nyitso Monastery**, one of the largest monasteries in the region.

Luhuo (炉霍; Drango in Tibetan), 70km further, has **Drango Gompa**, which once had over 1000 monks. The monastery sits on the hillside in the Tibetan-style southern part of town and has a large, newly carved wooden statue of Jampa (Maitreya). The Tibetan name of Drango means 'head of the rock' and derives from Luhuo's strategic position at the confluence of two rivers.

About 20km before Ganzi the road rises to a high pass before dropping down past the lake and monastery of **Kasuo-tso**.

GANZI 甘孜

☎ 0836 / pop 61,400 / elev 3394m

The bustling market town of Ganzi (also spelled Kandze, Garze and Ganze) sits in a valley at 3400m, surrounded by the sleeping giants of the Trola (Chola) range, and is a natural place to break your trip. The gorgeous surrounding countryside is peppered with Tibetan villages and resurgent monasteries. A couple of isolated bombings took place in Ganzi and Chengdu between 1998 and 2002, a sign of the growing frustrations of local Tibetan communities.

Information

Dorjee Tsewang (☎ 135-6868 8297; bondorjee@yahoo.com) If you're looking for a local guide, English-speaking Dorjee Tsewang can arrange hiking and horse-riding treks, plus pretty much anything else. He lives in Rongbatsa, so email in advance.

Sights

Over 540 years old, **Garze Monastery** (甘孜寺; Ganzi Si; admission sometimes ¥15) is just north of the town's Tibetan quarter and is the region's largest monastery, with over 500 monks. Encased in the walls of the main prayer hall are hundreds of small golden Sakyamuni statues. In a smaller hall just west of the main hall is an impressive statue of Jampa (Maitreya), dressed in silk.

To find the monastery, turn left out of the bus station and head north for about 10 minutes until you reach the Tibetan neighbourhood. A kora winds clockwise around and above the monastery. To follow it take one of the roads to the left when you reach the Tibetan quarter and look for

a huge chörten and then a hall of prayer wheels, from where the path winds uphill.

Den Monastery in the southern part of town is smaller but older and much more atmospheric. The inner chapel is surrounded by three pilgrimage paths and houses fierce statues of the protector god Nagpo Chenpo (Mahakala). Upstairs are several Mao slogans left over from the Cultural Revolution and a small printing press.

For a nice half-day walk head south from the bus station over the Nya-chu (Yalong Jiang) river. The right fork leads through barley fields for 20 minutes to **Dongtong (Dontok) Monastery** and the new but impressive **Dingkhör chörten**. The left fork leads to **Pongo Monastery** after about an hour or so.

Ganzi has the region's best antique shops and many general stores selling Tibetan goods.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation options in Ganzi are limited as most of the hotels do not accept foreigners.

Pubu Living Buddha Family House (布绒朗寺旅店; Buronglang Si Lü dian; ☎ 899 5861; www.burongna.net; 233 Jiefang Lu; dm Y25) This small guesthouse was set up by the rinpoche (high lama) of nearby Burongna Monastery. Beds are in three- or four-bed rooms and food is available. Best of all, know your money is going to fund the construction of a home for elderly Tibetans.

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

Chengxin Binguan (诚信宾馆; ☎ 752 5289; Dajin Jie; s/d without bathroom Y60/80, r with bathroom Y180) Opposite the bus station, this place has very clean rooms and great staff.

Himalaya Hotel (喜马拉雅宾馆; Ximalaya Binguan; ☎ 752 1878; r with/without air-con Y170/150; ☎) The small but spotless modern rooms at this friendly hotel are the nicest in Ganzi (discounted rooms cost from Y110 to 120).

Golden Yak Hotel (金牦牛酒店; Jinmaoniu Jiudian; ☎ 752 5188, 752 5288; 1 Dajin Tan; s/d Y150)

This place, attached to Ganzi's bus station, has similar rates to the Himalaya Hotel but it's not as nice. Still, it's worth considering if you have an early bus the next morning.

Daba Zanghan Yijia Xin Fandian (大巴藏汉一家新饭店; 27 Dajin Tan; dishes Y8-10; ☎ 9am-10pm) The Sichuan dishes at this place are good.

The Muslim restaurants east of the bus station double as video bars and offer good noodles if you can stand the ear-shattering sounds of kung fu.

Getting There & Away

Buses to Ganzi (Y107, 12 hours) leave Kangding daily at 6.15am. From Ganzi, a bus leaves each morning at 6.30am for Kangding. There are also morning buses to Derge (Y50 to 70, seven hours, 8.30am) and an afternoon bus to Manigango (Y21, two hours, 2.30pm), or try for a seat on the bus from Kangding. Private minibuses to Derge are available for hire for Y450.

To reach Beri and Dargye Monasteries (see the next section), catch anything heading west or negotiate a taxi down to Y20.

You can also head north from Ganzi to Yushu (Tibetan: Jyekundo) in Qinghai, via the town of Sërshu (Y92, nine hours, 6.30am).

GANZI TO DERGE

Beri

A 15km excursion from Ganzi, on the north side of the river, is the Gelugpa **Beri Monastery**. There are several other monasteries in the pretty village of Beri.

Rongbatsa

☎ 0836

Around 65km before Manigango, near the village of Rongbatsa, are the circular walls of **Dargye Monastery** (Dagei Si). The nearby hot springs, although more lukewarm than hot, may be the only bathroom you get for some time.

A local lama named Gyalten Rinpoche operates the excellent **Gyalten Rinpoche Guesthouse** (dm Y35), a couple of kilometres west of Dargye Monastery. Set against a backdrop of white-capped mountains, this wonderful guesthouse feels superbly isolated. The rooftop commands some breathtaking views of the valley and you can easily lose yourself here for a day or two. Simple meals

are available. Beds are mattresses covered with Tibetan carpets; a sleeping bag is a good idea. To find the guesthouse, walk out of Dargye Monastery's west gate and look for a pond; beyond this a sign directs you up a dirt track to the guesthouse.

From the monastery it's a two-hour walk north along the Nya-chu (Yalong River) to **Hadhi Nunnery**, home to around 60 nuns who operate a basic shop and are reportedly happy to receive short-term guests.

Manigango 马尼干戈

☎ 0836

This scruffy crossroads town halfway between Ganzi and Derge can be a useful base for visiting Dzogchen Monastery (below) or Yilhun La-tso (right). A construction boom was underway at last check, so you might find upgraded places to stay.

There is one guesthouse, **Manigange Shisudian** (马尼干戈食宿店; dm Y10-20), where all the buses stop. The rooms are comfortable if basic, but the toilets are half a mile up the road – make sure you bring a torch! The friendly staff can help with travel information, even horse hire (Y100 per day, plus Y100 for a guide). The restaurant here is good and cheap.

Next door, **Yulong Shenhai Binguan** (玉龙神海宾馆; dm Y15-30) is more modern and has its own public toilet – bonus! Look for the large red sign with white Chinese characters.

A daily bus passes through Manigango at 11am for Derge (Y35, three to four hours). Coming from Derge, a bus stops in Manigango at 11am and heads on to Ganzi (Y25, five to seven hours) and Luhuo (Y50, five hours), where it overnights before heading on to Kangding (Y130). A 9am bus leaves daily for Sërshu.

Around Manigango

A 50km detour north from Manigango takes you to **Dzogchen Monastery** (竹庆佛学院; Zhuqing Foxueyuan), founded in 1684 and the home of the Dzogchen school (see p67), the most popular form of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. The monastery and *shedra* (monastic college) have a stunning location at the foot of a glacial valley. Several important high Nyingmapa lamas, now exiled abroad, originally came from nearby valleys.

The site includes the small town, 1.5km off the road, which has a few shops, chörten and a chapel with huge prayer wheels. Up the small gorge is the main monastery and 1km further is the *shedra*. It's possible to stay at the college for Y15, though you'll need a sleeping bag and your own food.

Getting here can be tricky. Buses to Yushu and Sërshu pass the monastery but it's probably easier to hitch. If you do hitch, make sure you set out in the morning as there is not much traffic on the roads in the afternoon (for information on the risks associated with hitching, see p344).

The road crosses the Muri-la (4633m). A hired vehicle from Manigango (ask at the Manigange Shisudian; left) costs around Y250 return.

Manigango to Derge

Around 13km from Manigango the highway passes **Yilhun La-tso** (新路海; Xinlu Hai; admission Y20), a stunning, holy alpine lake bordered by chörtens and dozens of rock carvings. The lake is backed by the huge glaciers of 6018m Trola Peak (Que'er Shan) and it's possible to walk an hour or two up the left (east) side of the lakeshore for glacier views. The lake has many great places to camp (take mosquito repellent), though recent reports suggest the lakeshore has been fenced off by local tourist authorities. To get here you'll have to hitch to the turn-off where there's a bridge and trail 1km to the lake. A return taxi to the lake from Manigango costs Y70, including a couple of hours' wait time.

From the lake the road ascends to the wild and craggy scenery of the 4916m Trola before descending through deep gorges and some pretty Tibetan villages to arrive in Derge.

DERGE 德格

☎ 0836 / pop 58,000 / elev 4327m

Resting in a valley between the Tibetan border to the west and the Trola (Chola) range to the east, Derge forms the cultural heartland of Kham. While the Chinese influence is evident and growing rapidly here, the old town and surrounding villages are very much Tibetan.

There are many historically important monasteries in the valleys south of Derge, namely at Pelpung (Chinese: Babang), Dzongsar, Pewar (Baia), Kathok and Pelyul

(Baiyu). For details on these monasteries and wonderful treks in the area see Gary McCue's book *Trekking in Tibet* and visit the travel section of the website www.khamaid.org.

Sights

At the heart of Derge is the 18th-century **Bakong Scripture Printing Press and Monastery** (德格印经院; Dege Yinjingyuan; admission Y25; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-6.30pm). The press houses more than 217,000 engraved blocks of Tibetan scriptures from all the Tibetan Buddhist orders, including Bön; the collection makes up an astonishing 70% of Tibet's literary heritage. These texts include ancient works about astronomy, geography, music, medicine and Buddhist classics, including two of the most important Tibetan sutras. A history of Indian Buddhism comprising 555 wood-block plates is the only surviving copy in the world (written in Hindi, Sanskrit and Tibetan).

Within the monastery, dozens of workers hand-produce over 2500 prints to order each day, as ink, paper and blocks fly through the workers' hands at lightning speed. Upstairs is an older crowd of printers who produce larger and more complex prints of Tibetan gods on paper or coloured cloth. If you catch them with a free moment, they'll print you one of your choice for Y10.

You can also examine storage chambers, paper-cutting rooms and the main hall of the monastery itself. Protecting the monastery from fire and earthquake is the guardian goddess Drölma (Tara). There are some nice murals in the two ground-floor chapels, so bring a torch. You can get a close-up look at the workers who carve the printing blocks (in relief) in the administrative building across from the monastery.

Admission to the monastery includes an obligatory guided tour. Photography is not allowed. To reach the printing house, turn left out of the bus station and right over the bridge. Continue up this road to the southeast of town and to the monastery's front door.

Just uphill behind the printing house, the large Sakyapa **Gonchen Monastery** is well worth a look. Restored during the 1980s, the three inner sanctums are dedicated to Guru Rinpoche, Sakyamuni and Jampa (Maitreya).

Also worth seeking out is the **Tangtong Gyelpo Chapel** (Tangyel Lhakhang) – as you head uphill to the printing press look out for the small alley leading to the right. For an introduction to the remarkable Tangtong Gyelpo, see p30

Sleeping

Dege Binguan (德格宾馆; ☎ 822 2157; dm Y20, d with bathroom Y180) The only place in town officially open to foreigners has clean, damp and overpriced doubles and fairly grim dorm rooms. Worse, you may be directed across the street to the expensive wing (Y280).

Wuzi Zhaodaisuo (物资招待所; dm Y20) Some travellers have managed to bag a bed at this place, directly opposite the bus station, which has nicer dorms, although they are still very basic. Look for the multicoloured bunting strung up outside.

Getting There & Away

From Derge a daily early-morning bus leaves for Kangding (Y166, two days) via Manigango (Y35, three hours), Ganzi (Y60, eight hours) and Luhuo (Y86, 10 to 12 hours), where it stops for the night before carrying on to Kangding the following day.

If you're travelling west, note that individuals are officially forbidden from travelling into the TAR without travel permits (see p323). The occasional sleeper bus trundles through Derge to and from Chamdo but rarely has empty berths. There is occasional transport west to the town of Jomda, just over the Tibetan border.

DERGE TO CHAMDO

From Derge it's 109km to Jomda (江达; Jiangda), crossing the Dri-chu (Jinsha Jiang or Yangzi River) at the Tibetan border. From here it's 228km to Chamdo via Topa and several high passes. If you are hitching along this route without a permit, you'll have to be careful at Jomda (where there is a guesthouse, a PSB office and an occasionally manned checkpoint) and at the checkpoint at the bridge over the Dri-chu. Your best bet is to travel through this checkpoint at night.

The occasional minibus travels between Derge, Jomda and Chamdo, but you will probably have to change rides when you get to Jomda.

THE SOUTHERN ROUTE

The southern route that goes from Kangding to Pomda is shorter than the northern route and passes equally stunning scenery. It offers fewer monasteries but includes the option of detouring south to Yading Nature Reserve and continuing on the rugged back-door route to Zhongdian (Gyeltang) in Yunnan.

LITANG 理塘

☎ 0836 / pop 51,300 / elev 4014m

Resting on open grassland framed by snowcapped peaks, Litang is a friendly and authentically Tibetan place in which to hang out for a couple of days. At over 4000m, it's not uncommon for travellers to feel the affects of altitude sickness (see p351).

The town is famed for its annual **horse-racing festival**, held from 1 to 7 August, when the town swells with tens of thousands of local Khampas and their colourful Tibetan tents. It's a great time to visit, though accommodation is impossible to come by at this time, so bring a tent. Every five years an even more spectacular event is staged. The festival was cut short in 2006 after a disputed race result ended in rioting. There were more political disturbances during the 2007 festival after one Khampa grabbed a microphone and called for the return of the Dalai Lama.

Litang is also famed as the birthplace of the seventh and 10th Dalai Lamas and also four of the Pabalas, Chamdo's religious leaders. After a visit to Litang the controversial sixth Dalai Lama wrote a famous poem about a crane, indicating through it that his reincarnation would be born in Litang. The area around Litang also has strong connections to the epic warrior Gesar of Ling and a statue of the man, complete with plastic palm trees, decorates a square in town.

There's some scope for hiking around Litang. Travellers are increasingly being approached by freelance guides at the bus station or outside the Crane Guest House, offering to organise walks or a visit to a nomad camp. Most have had good experiences; some have been disappointed. Ask around when you arrive to get the latest from other travellers.

Information

China Post (Zhongguo Youzheng; Tuanjie Lu Beiduan; ☎ 9-11.30am & 2-5.30pm) On the main north-south street.

Internet café (Wangba; Tuanjie Lu Beiduan; per hr Y3) Right next to China Post.

Sights

At the northern end of town is the large and recently restored **Litang Chöde Monastery** (理塘长青春科尔寺; Litang Changqing Chunke'er Si), built for the third Dalai Lama. Inside is a statue of Sakyamuni that is believed to have been carried from Lhasa by foot. A collection of chörtens and mani stone (prayer stone) carvings line the main entrance. The monastery was bombed by Chinese troops in 1956 during a Khampa rebellion.

On the eastern edge of Litang is a 33m-high **chörten**, supported by snow lions, which locals perpetually circumambulate. The entrance is on a side street off Xinfu Xilu.

A difficult-to-find 420-year-old building known as the Zenkhang marks the **birthplace of the seventh Dalai Lama**. The upper-floor sleeping room of the Dalai Lama has a statue and several relics of the man, and an interesting old Chinese army bag. It can be hard to find the lady with a key. Photos are not allowed.

There are **hot springs** (admission Y7) at the western edge of town, 4km from the centre. A taxi here costs Y7 one way.

Sleeping

Litang has decent food and lodging, making it a fine place to break a trip for a day or more. Many hotels have no showers or hot water and electricity everywhere can be unreliable.

Safe and Life International Hotel (平安涉外宾馆; Ping'an Shewai Binguan; ☎ 532 3861; Xingfu Xilu; 2-bed dm Y15, s Y30) Right across from the bus station, the location here is ideal if you have an early-morning bus, or arrive late at night. The owners speak no English but are eager to help. Rooms are cramped, beat-up, and can get cold and damp in winter. A communal shower in the courtyard has hot water from 8am to 11pm and the 1st-floor restaurant has an English-Chinese menu.

Crane Guest House (仙鹤宾馆; Xianhe Binguan; ☎ 532 3850; Xingfu Xilu; dm Y25, s/d with

bathroom Y156/166) Handsdown the backpacker favourite. Here, the two- and three-bed dorms are cosy and the rooms with private bathroom have hot-water showers and heat lamps in the bathrooms. Some staff speak a little English and they often invite guests to sit around the fire and sip yak-butter tea. Take a left out of the bus station and head about 350m east into town; it's on the right-hand side of the road.

Nomad Homestay (☎ 532 2013, 135-0829 6651; Chengxihe Lu Bei'erduan; d/q Y60/100) Travellers have recommended this Tibetan-style family guesthouse, with 10 rooms annexed to a traditional stone home. The traditional Tibetan décor is joined by hot showers. Home-made Tibetan food is available. It's a 20-minute walk from the bus station.

High City Hotel (高城宾馆; Gaocheng Binguan; ☎ 532 2706; Genie Donglu; d/tr Y480/340; ㉔) This government-run hotel is the most upscale option in town, though the upkeep is a bit lax. The nice lobby has a killer karaoke setup loaded and ready at all times. Low-season rates start at Y120.

Travellers have recommended the new Potala Inn, in the east of town, with doubles around Y160, a large lounge and plenty of excursions on offer.

Eating & Entertainment

Litang has countless small restaurants, with the best selection on Xingfu Xilu around the Crane Guest House.

Wanglong Guan Tangbao (Genie Donglu; ㉔ 8am-late evening) This is a good place for your morning *baozi* (dumplings).

If you want something to do at night, try the bar (*jiuba*) behind the High City Hotel. It's a big, saloon-style place that has Tibetan dancing performances on many nights. Drop by around 9pm to see what (if anything) is going on.

Just north of the bar is the Sichuan Fandian, one of the fanciest restaurants in town and getting good reviews from travellers.

Getting There & Away

Litang's bus station is a chaotic place, so double-check all times and prices. Getting tickets can take a lot of patience (and often a lot of time) so don't leave it until the last minute. The ticket window opens at 2pm. It's 284km to Kangding and 654km to Chengdu.

Buses leave Litang for Kangding (Y81, eight hours) and Batang (Y60, six hours) at 6.30am. At the time of writing, there was serious roadwork between Litang and Batang, so expect either heavy delays or a smooth new road along this route.

A back-door route to Yunnan runs south from Litang, through 400km of spectacular scenery to Zhongdian, from where another road leads into Tibet (see p337). Buses run to Xiangcheng (Chatreng; Y62, four hours, 6am) and Daocheng (Y47, three to four hours, 6am), the latter for Yading Nature Reserve.

AROUND LITANG

The **Zhargye Nyenri Monastery**, 18km from Litang along the road to Daocheng, is next to a holy outcrop of rock honeycombed with caves and covered in prayer flags, *kathaks* (prayer scarfs), sacred symbols, eagles' nests and a hard-to-make-out image of self-arising Jampa (Maitreya). Pilgrims come here to make an hour-long kora around the peak, past several caves and sin-testing spots, particularly on the second day of the eighth month. The monastery itself has images of Tsongkhapa, Drölma, Jampelyang and Marpa, plus fine murals by artists from Ganzi. To get to Zhargye Nyenri, take the morning bus to Daocheng or Xiangcheng, get off at the monastery and hitch back (for information on the risks associated with hitching, see p344). It's possible to stay the night here. Sadly two bears are kept chained up in the courtyard.

Leggu Monastery is in a remote but stunning area 70km from Litang, between 6224m Mt Gambo Gongga (Genyen Peak, or Genie Feng) and 5807m Mt Xiaozha. The monastery was built by the first Karmapa in 1164. It's an adventure to get here as there's little public transport; from Litang branch left off the main road to Batang after 15km or so to the village of Lamaya in Reke district. From here walk or hire a horse to Legando village (a short day) or the monastery (a long day). It's a minimum three-day return trip but with more time you could make day trips to Xiaozha Lake and waterfall, and to Ruogen-tso. It's possible to stay with families in Lamaya and Zhamla villages and Legando. The region is part of Genie Natural Biological Tourism Protection Zone.

The road from Litang to Batang traverses the **Maoya Grasslands** and crosses the Sangtoulapass before dropping down to the twin lakes of **Tso Nyiba**, with a backdrop of the Haizi Shan, before continuing to Batang.

DAOCHENG (DABPA) 稻城

☎ 0836 / pop 7000 / elev 3800m

The county town of Daocheng (Dabpa in Tibetan) is mainly a jumping-off point for Yading Nature Reserve (right). Peak season for Chinese tourists is the first week of May, followed by the first week of October.

There are two **internet cafés** (per hr Y5; ㉔ 24hr) on the renovated cobblestone street that leads off the main north-south drag.

The **Xiongdeng Monastery** is a large Gelugpa monastery about a two- to three-hour walk northeast of town. The monks are friendly and the views are good. Head east out of town to the bridge and then north up the hillside. You can hitch parts of the way on a passing tractor or you can hire a minibus from town for Y50.

After a trek in Yading, soak your weary limbs in the **Rapuchaka Hot Springs** (admission Y10), 4km southeast of town. A taxi here costs Y10 one way.

Sleeping

There are numerous excellent Tibetan-style B&Bs. Most offer beds from around Y20, basic pit toilets and no showers. Rates are flexible and are 30% higher in May.

Tongfu Hostel (同福客栈; Tongfu Kezhan; ☎ 572 8667; www.inoat.com; 1 Yazhuo Jie; dm Y20, d Y80-100) The backpacker-friendly Tongfu has a young, friendly owner who speaks a little English and is very helpful with tourist info.

Jinsui Binguan (金穗宾馆; ☎ 572 7179; d Y100-120; ㉔) Across the street, this option is open year-round, has simple rooms, and keeps the hot water and electricity running 365 days a year.

There are plenty of places to eat here but don't leave it too late; many restaurants shut by 8pm.

Khampa Restaurant (康巴藏餐; Kangba Zangcan; dishes Y6-25; ㉔ 8.30am-8.30pm) This place has a good selection of Tibetan fare.

Getting There & Away

From Daocheng, buses run early in the morning to Kangding via Litang, and to

Zhongdian. Daily buses to Xiangcheng and Litang (both Y47) leave at 6am and take three hours. A minibus or taxi to either of these places costs Y300.

If you take the bus between Litang and Xiangcheng, you may get dropped off at the junction of Sangdui, 28km from Daocheng. Microbuses shuttle people to Daocheng (45 minutes) for Y10 per person, or Y40 for the vehicle. About 5km north of Sangdui is the recently rebuilt Kagyud-school **Benpo Monastery**, which is well worth a visit.

An airport is being built 8km outside Daocheng, with direct flights to Chengdu planned.

YADING NATURE RESERVE

亚丁自然保护区

Six hours south of Daocheng, this stunningly beautiful **reserve** (Yading Ziran Baohuqu; admission Y150) is the real reason to detour all the way out here.

You'll need to time your trip well, as April and October see snowfalls, and early May and October see a flood of Chinese tourists during national holidays. September is a good time to visit.

The reserve is centred around the three peaks of Jampelyang (Yangmaiyoung Shenshan; 5958m) to the south, Chana Dorje (Xiari Duoji Shenshan; 5958m) and Chenresig (Xiannairi Shenshan; 6032m). The mountains are named after the Rigsum Gonpo, the Tibetan Buddhist trinity of bodhisattvas. None have ever been climbed. The reserve is a strong contender as the inspiration for James Hilton's novel *Shangri-La*.

The region was once part of the old kingdom of Muli and was visited by the fifth Dalai Lama in the 17th century. Joseph Rock, *National Geographic's* 'man in China', who counted the corpulent King of Muli as a close personal friend, visited in the 1930s and described the famed 'Bandit Monastery', whose 400 monks would regularly head out on plundering expeditions before returning to prayer and contemplation.

En route to the reserve you'll pass **Rewu Monastery** on the other side of the valley and then, after a high pass, **Konkaling Monastery** (Gongling Si), the largest in the region, before reaching the town of Riwa. Riwa is 60km from Daocheng and has accommodation.

Just south of Riwa, where the road branches, you have to pay the hefty park entry fee. Yading village and the entrance to the park is 35km further on.

Among Chinese tourists the most popular way to see the reserve is by horse. Horse treks generally cost Y180 for the first day, Y120 to 150 for each day after that, depending on your bargaining skills. Most foreigners just walk.

There are several inns here, including the friendly **Gedong Hotel** (☎ 0836-572 7119; dm Y30), offering basic beds and food in a Tibetan home. It's signposted on the main road before you reach the park entrance. The owners can advise on the two-hour hike up to Qingwa Lake.

Inside the park there's simple accommodation at **Tsongu Monastery** (r Y40-60). A basic wooden **guesthouse** (☎ 136-9814 2416; dm Y30) was being built near here at the time of research and may be worth checking out. The owner plans to offer horses for hire.

The Kora

From the entrance it's a 45-minute walk through dripping forests and past chörtens to **Tsongu Monastery** (Chonggu Si), currently under renovation, where there is simple accommodation.

Two hours' walk southeast is Luorong Pasture (Luorong Muchang; 4188m), where there is normally another **tent hotel** (beds Y30) and restaurant. From here it's three hours to alpine Milk Lake (Niunai Hai; 4720m). Five Colours Lake (Wuse Hai) lies just over the side ridge.

From this point most Chinese tourists return the way they came but it is possible to do a kora of the mountain. For this you'll need camping equipment for one night. From the lake the kora climbs for one hour to a wide 4400m triple pass; it then branches right and descends to meadows, a popular place to camp. There are shepherds' huts here, where guides or porters normally stay the night.

From the valley a trail leads west to the main road, but the kora continues two hours northeast to Drölma-la (4375m). The trail continues four hours downhill, beneath the north face of Chenresig and past spectacular **Drölma-tso** (Tara Lake, sometimes called Pearl Lake) en route back to Tsongu Monastery. It's also possible to

do a day hike to Drölma-tso from Tsongu Monastery.

Getting There & Away

The reserve is about 110km from Daocheng and takes about 2½ hours to reach. There is no public transportation here, although someone occasionally gets a bus to the park up and running during the high-season summer months, but this service cannot be counted on. Most people just arrange a ride through their accommodation. Alternatively, minibuses ply Gongga Lu Yiduan, Daocheng's main street, all day; fellow travellers will be trolling for a ride here as well, so you could hook up with them and split the cost to the reserve. Out of season it's not a bad idea to organise for your driver to take you back at a pre-arranged time. Snows can block the road without warning in April and October.

BATANG 八塘

☎ 0836 / pop 10,000 / elev 2589m

Lying 32km from the Tibetan border and 197km from Litang, low-lying Batang is the closest town to Tibet that is open to foreigners. An easy-going and friendly place with lots of streetside barbecue grills and outdoor seating, the modern town is surrounded by suburbs of beautiful ochre Tibetan houses. When it's still the end of winter in Litang it's already spring in Batang. If you are here in November, ask about the colourful *cham* dances held outside town on the 26th of the ninth Tibetan month.

Many travellers try to sneak into Tibet from here, so – unsurprisingly – the local PSB is a little suspicious of foreigners.

Roadwork between Litang and Batang (begun in 2004 and continuing indefinitely) is wreaking havoc with transportation and Batang's infrastructure; hot water and electricity are frequently cut for hours at a time. A torch (flashlight) is essential.

Sights

The Gelugpa-sect **Chöde Gaden Pendeling Monastery** in the southwest of town is well worth a visit. The monks (over 500) are friendly and active (they had just finished building a sand mandala during our visit). There are three chapels behind the main hall; up some stairs via a separate entrance

is a room for the Panchen Lama, lined with photos of exiled local lamas. An old, Chinese-style hospital is now used as monk accommodation. Stop in the kitchen for some yak-butter tea before leaving. A kora of prayer wheels surrounds the monastery. To get here, follow Wenhua Jie downhill and keep your nose alert for the smell of yak butter.

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

Sleeping

Jinhui Hotel (金汇宾馆; Jinhui Binguan; ☎ 562 2700; dm Y10-15, 3-bed dm Y30, d without bathroom Y100, with bathroom Y160-180) Rooms here are in pretty good shape, for the most part very clean and well maintained. Get a room away from the street to escape the karaoke. The communal hot-water showers are pretty good and there's lots of space for washing clothes. Take the first right after the huge, hard-to-miss golden eagle statue in the little park area; the hotel's a block down on the left.

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

Snowlands Tashi Hotel (雪域扎西宾馆; Xueyuzhaxi Binguan; ☎ 562 3222; Shangmao Jie; r from Y288; 24) People may try to steer you to this place, supposedly the best in town, but the décor is enough to make you ill (green-, yellow- and burgundy-striped carpets?) and the bathrooms have some serious plumbing problems.

Cui Zhao Mian (脆沼面; ☎ 8am-8pm) This sparkling-clean place is the best of an uninspiring lot of restaurants. Its dumplings in broth, *chaoshou* (抄手; Y5), are outstanding. Turn left coming out of the bus station and follow the main road to the

first major intersection. This small eatery will be on your left near the corner before you cross the street.

Local supermarkets stock everything from chocolate to French red wine.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎ 6.30am-10pm) has daily buses to Kangding (Y139) and Chengdu (Y239), both leaving at 6am and overnighting in Yajiang. The road to Litang is under major construction work so expect serious delays. Buses normally leave at 7am to Litang (Y59, six hours).

If you have to spend the night at Yajiang, the **Yalongwan Dajudian** (雅龙湾大酒店; d Y80) at the bus station has electric blankets and is your best lodging option.

Headed west into Tibet, there are buses at 2pm (Y44, four hours) and afternoon microbuses (Y50) to Markham, 138km away inside the TAR. Foreigners may have problems buying bus tickets to Markham but should be able to get on the microbuses.

The bus station is a 10-minute walk from the town centre.

AROUND BATANG

One excellent detour from the Litang-Batang road is to **Tsopu Gou**, a scenic valley, lake and monastery 78km from Batang, then 38km off the main road. From Litang or Batang get off the bus at Cuola, where there is basic accommodation, and arrange a ride up the valley. The route passes the village of Chaluo, a monastery and some hot springs before entering a wide valley and village at the base of the lake.

A beautiful kora leads clockwise around the lake to the Nyingma-sect **Tsopu Monastery**, whose guesthouse offers mattresses on the floor for Y20. Bring your own food and purify the stream water. You can hike for a couple of hours up the valley behind the monastery to a glacial lake, or just get the views from the retreat chapels above the monastery.

BATANG TO POMDA

The road west from Batang crosses the Dri-chu (Jinsha Jiang or Yangzi River) into Tibet at Zhubalong and continues to Markham, where it joins the road from Yunnan.

Markham (芒康; Mangkang; 3900m), traditionally known as Garthok Dzong, is where permitless hitchhikers from Sichuan

and Yunnan commonly get caught by the vigilant PSB. Try to avoid the town's main road. Coming from the east, head for the road to the north of town that connects with the main highway. Markham has a county guesthouse. The bus station won't sell tickets to foreigners. There's a checkpost about 3km west of town.

It's 158km on to **Dzogang** (左贡; Zuogong; 3800m), also known as Wamda in Tibetan, over a 4380m pass, dropping to cross the

Dza-chu (Mekong River) at Druka, rising again to the 3900m Joba-la, dropping to stunning scenery around Denpa, then rising again to the 5008m Dongdo-la (pew!). There is a basic guesthouse in Dzogang. Transport along this stretch of the road is particularly infrequent.

The road continues along the Yu-chu, a tributary of the Salween River, for 107km to the main Lhasa–Chamdo road at Pomda (see p256).