

Trekking

The high mountains, deep valleys and endless plains of Tibet offer incredible opportunities for trekking. The remoteness of Tibet combined with climatic extremes poses special challenges for walkers – and unique rewards. In the higher reaches of the plateau snow storms and blistering heat are both possible on a single day. The wonders of Tibet's natural environment are enhanced by the people met along the trail, heirs to an ancient and fascinating way of life. Blessedly, it is still possible to trek for days in Tibet without having the experience marred by the hubbub of modern civilisation.

Most trekking is done in the centre of Tibet, not far from the major towns and high-ways. Cities such as Lhasa and Shigatse provide bases from which to equip and launch treks. Mastering the six great treks covered here will serve you well should you decide to venture further afield. There are certainly many new frontiers beckoning the experienced, well-equipped trekker. For the most adventurous and carefree, it is even possible to cross large sections of Tibet's mountain ranges on foot.

The first people trekked over the mountains to Tibet during the Old Stone Age, 40,000 years ago. Over the ensuing millennia invaders, pilgrims and traders covering huge distances made it to the mountain-ringed 'Land of Snows'. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a slew of spies, explorers and scholars walked great lengths in their attempts to reach the Holy City, Lhasa. For those who survived their Tibetan adventure it was standard practice to regale their fellow countrymen with an adventure book or two. The greatest Tibetan explorer of all time was the Swede Sven Hedin, who made more than a dozen epic trips to Tibet in the early part of the 20th century. One of the most memorable treks was mounted by George Roerich's Central Asiatic expedition in the 1920s. By traversing a great swathe of Tibet's northern plains, Roerich made a series of pioneering archaeological discoveries.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Walk the old pilgrims' trail from **Ganden to Samye** (p288), a test of one's physical ability and spiritual aptitude
- Follow the Buddhist trade route from **Shalu to Nartang** (p296), a fine introduction to trekking in Tibet and a window on the ancient art of pilgrimage
- Circumambulate **Mt Kailash** (p302) – not merely a walk around a mountain but a journey towards a deeper understanding of the inner self
- Traverse the **Nyenchen Tanglha range** (p308) to the turquoise healing waters of lake Nam-tso, extending one's reach and endurance
- Trek with **Mt Everest** (p299) as an ever-present beacon, for spectacular scenery, rigorous exercise and the opportunity for fellowship with Tibetans



PLANNING

For all its attractions, Tibet is a formidable place where even day walks involve survival skills and generous portions of determination. As it's situated on the highest plateau on earth and crisscrossed by the world's loftiest mountains, nothing comes easily and careful preparation is all important. Even on the most popular treks, which can involve several days of travel without any outside help, high passes up to 5600m are crossed.

WHEN TO TREK

The best time to plan a trek in Tibet is during the warmer half of the year. May and June are excellent months without much rain or snowfall but some high alpine passes in eastern Tibet may still be closed (although in this chapter we don't cover treks in eastern Tibet). July and August are the hottest months of the year but they tend to be rainy and this can make walking messy and trails harder to find. September and October are excellent months for trekking but in high areas the nights are cold and early snow is always a possibility.

It's a good idea to budget in a few extra days for your trek, especially if much road travel is needed to get to the trailhead, as roads can be blocked, especially in the wet summer months. You might also need additional time hiring local guides and beasts of burden.

Trekkers must be prepared for extremes in climate, even in the middle of summer. A hot, sunny day can turn cold and miserable

in a matter of minutes, especially at higher elevations. Night temperatures at 4500m and above routinely fall below freezing even in July and August! At other times of the year it gets even colder. In midwinter in northwestern Tibet, minimum temperatures reach minus 40°C. Yet Tibet is a study in contrasts, and in summer a scorching sun and hot, blustery winds can make even the hardiest walker scurry for any available shade. Between the two extremes, the Tibetan climate – cool and dry – is ideal for walking but always be prepared for the worst.

Before embarking on a trek, make sure you're up to the challenge of high-altitude walking through rugged country. Test your capabilities by going on day walks in the hills around Lhasa and Shigatse. Attempt a hike to the top of a small mountain such as Bumpa Ri (p116), the prayer-flag-draped peak on the far side of the Kyi-chu from Lhasa.

WHAT TO BRING

There is a great deal to see while trekking and you will be revitalised by the natural surroundings, but you must be prepared for extremes in weather and terrain. The time of year and the places in which you choose to walk will dictate the equipment you need.

Clothing & Footwear

As a minimum, you will need basic warm clothing, including a hat, scarf, gloves, down jacket, long underwear, warm, absorbent socks, all-weather shell and sun hat, as well as comfortable, well-made pants and shirts. Women may want to add a long skirt to their clothing list. Wear loose-fitting clothes that cover your arms, legs and neck and choose a wide-brimmed hat like the ones Tibetans wear. For information on culturally appropriate dress, see Responsible Tourism (p47).

If you attempt winter trekking, you will certainly need more substantial mountaineering clothing. Many people opt for synthetic-pile clothing, but also consider wool or sheep fleece, which have proven themselves in the mountains of Tibet for centuries. One of your most important assets will be a pair of strong, well-fitting hiking boots. And remember to break them in before starting the trek!

Equipment

Three essential items are a tent, sleeping bag and backpacking stove. There are no

restaurants in the remote areas of Tibet and provisions are hard to come by, so you will probably end up cooking all of your own food. Count on camping because, except in certain villages that are on the main trekking routes, it can be difficult to find places to sleep. Invest in a good tent that can handle big storms and heavy winds. A warm sleeping bag is a must. Manufacturers tend to overrate the effectiveness of their bags, so always buy a warmer one than you think you'll need.

You will also need a strong, comfortable backpack large enough to carry all of your gear and supplies. To save a lot of misery, test the backpack on day hikes to be certain it fits and is properly adjusted.

Other basic items include water containers with at least 2L capacity, a system for water purification, a torch (flashlight), compass, pocketknife, first-aid kit, waterproof matches, sewing kit, shrill whistle and walking stick or ski pole. This last item not only acts as a walking aid but, even more importantly, for defence against dog attacks. Tibetan dogs can be particularly large and brutal and they roam at will in nearly every village and herders' camp. Bring your walking stick or pole from home, or purchase Chinese-made trekking poles in Lhasa.

Petrol for camping stoves is widely available in towns and cities but is of fairly poor quality. To prevent your stove from getting gummed up you will have to clean it regularly. Kerosene (煤油, *meiyou* in Chinese, *sanum* in Tibetan) can also be obtained in cities. In Lhasa you will find kerosene vendors on Dekyi Shar Lam, opposite the road to Ramoche.

For details on buying and hiring trekking gear in Tibet, see p126. Nowadays, there are scores of shops in Lhasa selling such equipment.

MAPS

There are numerous commercially available maps covering Tibet, but very few of these maps are detailed enough to be more than a general guide for trekkers. The best overview map currently available is called Tibet, a 1:1,500,000 scale chart by **Reise Know-How** (www.reise-know-how.de) of Germany. The Chinese government produces small-scale topographic and administrative maps, but these are not for sale to the general public. The US-based Defense Mapping Agency Aerospace Center produces a series of charts covering Tibet at scales of

1:1,000,000, 1:500,000 and 1:250,000 (though the last can be hard to find). The most useful of the American 1:500,000 references for trekking in Tibet are H-10A (Lhasa region, Ganden to Samye, Tsurphu to Yangpachen), H-9A (Kailash and Manasarovar) and H-9B (Shigatse region, Shalu to Nartang, Everest region).

Soviet 1:200,000 topographic maps can now be consulted in many large university library map rooms. However, most libraries will not permit you to photocopy them because of international copyright laws. Buying them has become easier with commercial outlets in the West stocking them. Punch 'Tibet maps' into your computer search engine to see who carries them in your area.

The Swiss company **Gecko Maps** (www.gecko-maps.com) produces a 1:50,000-scale Mt Kailash trekking map.

For details of places to buy maps of Tibet and Lhasa, see p321.

TREKKING AGENCIES

The kind of trek you take will depend on your experience and the amount of time you have. Unless you have already hiked extensively in the Andes or Himalayas, it may be better to consider organising your walk through a travel agency. This can save much time and worry.

The main advantage of going with an agency is that it takes care of all the red tape and dealings with officials. Most agencies offer a full-package trek, including transport to and from the trailhead, guide, cook, yaks or burros to carry the equipment, mess tent and cooking gear. The package may even include sleeping bags and tents if these are required.

There is now a plethora of private agencies in Lhasa, some of which can arrange treks. Let the buyer beware, for the standard of service fluctuates wildly and may bear no correlation to the amount you pay. In general, standards of service and reliability are much lower than in Kathmandu or other popular trekking hubs. Shop around carefully and compare the services and attitudes of at least several agencies. Shady dealings are part of everyday business in China but they need not scuttle your trip. The good news is that competition between agencies offering trekking services is fierce, impelling the smarter ones to up the quality of their product. If cost is a big issue and you and your party are seasoned trekkers, consider the FIT agencies (see p100). They are

TREKKING DISCLAIMER

Although the authors and publisher have done their utmost to ensure the accuracy of all information in this guide, they cannot accept any responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by people using this book. They cannot guarantee that the tracks and routes described here have not become impassable for any reason in the interval between research and publication.

The fact that a trip or area is described in this guidebook does not mean that it is safe for you and your trekking party. You are ultimately responsible for judging your own capabilities in the conditions you encounter.

cheaper than other agencies, but are known to cut corners on service.

Make sure the agency spells out exactly what is included in the price it is quoting you, and be prepared to provide all your own personal equipment. The quality of equipment and logistics varies widely, and it's a good idea to closely inspect the vehicles and camping gear before leaving Lhasa. It's essential to sign a written contract with the tourist agency arranging your travel. However, as none of the Lhasa companies seem to have standard trekking contracts you may find yourself drafting one up. If so, be certain to include full details of the service you're paying for and money-back guarantees should your operator fail to deliver what has been agreed. For the standard contents of tour contracts, have a look at the brochures of adventure-travel companies in your home country. The best way to insure a good outcome is to pay one-third to a half of the total cost of a trip up front and the balance after the trek is completed. This is now standard operating procedure, so if an operator balks at this arrangement simply take your business somewhere else.

None of the Lhasa-based agencies that are listed (see below) can be unconditionally recommended, but all have run many successful treks. Trekkers are particularly at the mercy of those driving them to and from the trailheads. To avoid problems, it is prudent to test the driver and guide on a day trip before heading off into the wilds with them. Always have the phone number of your agency so that you can contact them should something go awry. Mobile (cell) phone coverage has now been extended to all the trailheads.

Prices vary according to group size and location but none are cheap. Costs per person tend to be lower in bigger groups. For treks in remote and border areas, expect to wait at least four days for the permits to be sorted. If you feel you have been cheated by your agent, you may find help with the department of marketing and promotion of the **Tibet Tourism Bureau** (Map p96; ☎ 0891-683 4315; fax 683 4632) in Lhasa. This government organisation is in charge of training tour guides and monitoring the performance of all trekking and tour companies.

Tibetan Agencies

On the Tourist's Way (Xizang Rikaze Zhongguo Guoji Lüxingshe; Map p100; ☎ 0891-634 5429; migmats@hotmail.com; Flora Hotel Office Bldg, Room No 4; per day US\$100) Located in the Muslim quarter, this

innovative company is run by the popular Migma Tsering and can arrange treks just about anywhere.

Tibet Chamdo International Travel (Xizang Changdu Guoji Lüxingshe; Map p100; ☎ 0891-633 3871; tntc@public.lx.xz.cn; Mandala Hotel, 31 Barkhor South; per day US\$100) Managed by a veteran operator named David Migmar. He and his staff have substantial trekking experience and are willing to please.

Tibet International Sports Travel (Xizang Shengdi Guoji Lüxingshe; Map p96; ☎ 0891-633 4082; peldon@tist.com; 6 Lingkhör Shar Lam; per day US\$130) The oldest agency specialising in trekking. Located next to the Himalaya Hotel, this is now managed by Peldon.

Tibet Wind Horse Adventure (Longda Guoji Lüxingshe; Map p96; ☎ 0891-683 3009; jampa_w@hotmail.com; www.tibetwindhorse.com; 3fl annexe, Gyadrokling Hotel/Zhazhulin Binguan, 26 Linkuo Xilu; walk-in rafting office (near Shangbala Hotel entrance, Zangyi Lu/Ment-sikhang Lam; per day US\$120) One of the best managed agencies in town and partnered with several international travel companies. The running of treks is handled by Jampa, the deputy general manager, while Chris Jones is project manager for the white-water rafting trips.

Tibet Yungdru Adventure (Xizang Yunzhu Tanxian; Map p96; ☎ 0891-683 5813; info@tnya.com.cn; No 5 Bldg, New Shol Village; per day US\$120-140) A main focus of the managing director Thupten is trekking in the more remote regions of Tibet. The office is impossible to find; call and staff will come pick you up.

Kathmandu Agencies

If you want to organise your Tibet trek from Kathmandu, here are some of the most qualified agencies:

Arniko Travels (☎ 01-443 9906; www.arnikotravel.com; PO 4695, Baluwatar)

Dharma Adventures (☎ 01-443 0499; www.dharmaadventures.com; GPO Box 5385, 205 Tangal Marg)

Great Escapes (☎ 01-441 8951; escape@mail.com.np; PO 9523, Baluwatar)

Malla Treks (☎ 01-441 0089; www.mallatreks.com; PO Box 5227, Lekhnath Marg)

Western Agencies

A few Western companies organise fixed-departure treks in Tibet. These tours can be joined in your home country or abroad, usually in Kathmandu. Prices are higher than treks organised in Tibet or Kathmandu, but they save you a lot of effort and are useful if you have the money but only a couple of weeks.

A trek organised at home includes a Western leader, a local leader, porters, a cook and so on. All your practical needs will be taken care of and you'll be free to enjoy the trekking.

PERMITS

Officially, individuals are not permitted to trek independently in Tibet and are required to join an organised group. Trekking, as with all travel in Tibet apart from that in Lhasa prefecture and Tsetang and Shigatse towns, requires a travel permit (see p324). Note, however, that the Tsurphu to Yangpachen trek covered on p292 doesn't require any permits.

The official requirements hardly stop the independent traveller, but should you opt to go it alone you must be willing to face the consequences. The good news is that the few people who do get caught are usually let off with a talking down and a light fine. Still, in some extreme cases, trekkers have been held by the police for several days and large sums of money demanded; some have even been deported.

That said, a number of trekkers set out alone, in the true spirit of independent travel, and many succeed. If you are caught by the security police without the right documents, be friendly and repentant. You will probably be let off lightly unless you (or the police) lose your cool. It's unusual to be asked for any documentation while on a trek. The most likely time to be apprehended by the police is when hitchhiking, so be particularly careful in towns and at truck stops.

ON THE TREK

Bear in mind that the trekking trails in Tibet are not marked and in many places there are no people from whom to ask directions. Paths regularly merge, divide and peter out, making route finding inherently difficult. If you're not good at trailblazing, your only alternatives

are to employ a local guide or to go through a travel agency.

GUIDES & PACK ANIMALS

The rugged terrain, long distances and high elevations of Tibet make most people think twice about carrying their own gear. In villages and nomad camps along the main trekking routes it's often possible to hire yaks or horses to do the dirty work for you.

It's helpful to know some Tibetan to negotiate what you want and how much you are willing to pay. Otherwise write out the figures involved and make sure the owners of the pack animals understand them. Be prepared for a good session of bargaining and don't set out until you and the Tibetans working for you are perfectly clear about what's been agreed. To avoid any misunderstandings, be sure to spell out the amount of time you expect from your helpers and the exact amount you intend to pay. Your mule skinner or yak driver will also serve as your guide, an important asset on the unmarked trails of Tibet. Consider just hiring a guide if you don't want or can't get pack animals – this could save you a lot of frustrating hours looking for the route.

Guides can also share their knowledge of the natural history and culture of the place, greatly adding to your experience. No less than the large trekking companies depend on local guides to make their trips work. Even without language skills much can be gleaned by being a good listener and observer. One technique is just to point at a landmark or plant and have your guide repeat its name. A whole catalogue can be put together in this fashion. You might also request your helpers to write down place names and other information and have

SOCIAL TREKKING

In most out-of-the-way places trekkers can quickly become the centre of attention, and sometimes just a smile may lead to dinner invitations and offers of a place to stay. If you really detest being the star of the show, don't camp in villages; if you do, don't expect Western notions of privacy to prevail.

If you ask directions, be prepared to be sent in the direction you are walking, no matter where you're trying to go. To avoid this age-old travellers' trap, be prepared to patiently and repeatedly explain what your travel goals are and, if in doubt, ask someone else.

If you have any religious sentiments, your trek probably qualifies as a pilgrimage, in which case you will generally receive better treatment than if you are 'just going someplace'. Another helpful hint: if all else fails try a song and dance. Even the most amateur of efforts is met with great approval.

For other cultural considerations related to trekking, see p47.

RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

The environment of Tibet is under tremendous pressure. It is therefore imperative that trekkers make their way lightly and leave nothing behind but their proverbial footprints. Tibet's beautiful but vulnerable alpine tracts deserve the utmost respect. A fire, for instance, can scar the landscape for centuries. Stay off fragile slopes and do not tread on delicate plants or sensitive breeding grounds. Follow the Tibetan ethos, killing not even the smallest of insects. In the long term, this approach will buy trekkers great respect and will help guarantee that later visitors get to enjoy the same pristine environment as you.

Rubbish

Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Make sure to have a dedicated rubbish bag. Gain good karma by carrying out rubbish left by others.

Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will more than likely be dug up by animals. Moreover, it may take years to decompose, especially at Tibet's high altitudes.

Minimise the waste you must carry, bringing in no more packaging than you will need. Take reusable containers, zip-lock bags or stuff sacks from home.

Do not burn plastic and other garbage as this is believed to irritate mountain spirits and affront the sensibilities of more traditional Tibetans.

Sanitary napkins, tampons and condoms must be carried out. They burn and decompose poorly.

Human Waste Disposal

Contamination of water sources by human faeces leads to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, human waste should be left on the surface of the ground away from trails, water and habitations to decompose. Aridity, cold and high ultraviolet exposure renders wastes into innocuous compounds relatively quickly.

If you are in a large trekking group, dig a privy pit. Be sure to build it far from any water source or marshy ground and carefully rehabilitate the area when you leave camp. Also, be certain that the latrine is not near mani (prayer) walls, shrines or any other sacred structures.

Washing

In the arid climate of much of Tibet, water is highly regarded. Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable. For personal washing and cleaning cooking utensils, use biodegradable soap and a container (such as a lightweight, portable basin) at

least 50m away from the water source. Try using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent. Widely disperse the waste water to allow the soil to filter it.

Erosion

Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitude, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing tracks and avoid short cuts.

If a well-used track passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud to avoid increasing the size of the patch.

Never remove the plant life that keeps topsoil in place.

Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

Building fires is not an option. Wood is nonexistent in much of Tibet and where there are trees and bushes they are desperately needed by locals. Cook on a lightweight kerosene, petrol, alcohol or multifuel stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.

Make sure you supply your guide and porters with stoves. In alpine areas, ensure that all members are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not needed for warmth.

Good Trekking Partnership

To insure an ecologically sound trek monitor all your staff members closely. Stress to your agency that you will not tolerate rubbish being thrown along the trail or at the trailheads. During transit explain to your drivers that rubbish should not be thrown out the windows, a common practice in Tibet. Let your helpers select camp sites where it's not necessary to trench around their tents. Make it clear that any gratuities will hinge upon good stewardship of the environment.

Wildlife Conservation

- Do not engage in or encourage illegal hunting.
- Don't buy items or medicines made from endangered wild species.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by cleaning up your food scraps.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

Camping

Seek permission to camp from the local villagers or shepherds. They will usually be happy to grant permission if asked.

it translated by an English-speaking Tibetan friend in Lhasa.

The rates for pack animals vary widely according to the time of the year and location. Horses and yaks are pricey at Mt Kailash, costing upwards of Y150 per animal. In most other places burros and horses can be had for Y50 to Y100 per head. Local guides and livestock handlers usually command Y50 to Y90 per day. Remember that your hired help will want to be paid for the time it takes them to return home. Sometimes a discount on the daily rate can be negotiated for their homeward travel.

FOOD

You should be self-sufficient with food since there isn't much to eat along the trail. In

most of the villages there is little or no food surplus thus probably nothing to buy. But there is no need to worry about supplies; in Lhasa there are now thousands of stalls and stores selling a huge variety of foodstuffs, making well-balanced, tasty meals possible on the trail. Even in Shigatse and the smaller cities there are many foods suitable for trekking.

Vacuum-packed red meat and poultry, and packaged dried meat, fish and tofu are readily found in Lhasa. Plenty of varieties of packaged and bulk dried fruits are sold throughout the city. The newest and tastiest offerings are peaches and kiwi fruit, which make a great and tasty trail mix when combined with peanuts, cashews, sunflower seeds and walnuts.

You can even find almonds and pistachios imported from the USA.

Soybean- and dairy-milk powders can be used with several kinds of prepackaged cereals. Oatmeal and instant barley porridge are now available in the supermarkets. Pickled and dried vegetables are good for dressing up soups and stir-fries. On the Barkhor are stalls selling Indian pickles and curry powders for an added touch. Lightweight vegetables such as seaweed and dried mushrooms can do wonders for macaroni and instant noodles. Wholemeal Chinese noodles and imported Korean spaghetti made of various whole grains are now on the supermarket shelves as well.

Cooking mediums include butter, margarine, vegetable oil and sesame oil. Butter can be pre-

served for long treks or old butter made more palatable by turning it into ghee (boil for about 20 minutes and then strain). For those with a sweet tooth, all kinds of biscuits and sweets are sold in Lhasa and the larger regional towns. Decent-quality Chinese and Western chocolate is available in Lhasa. Check out p126 for details of good supermarkets in the capital.

DRINK

As wonderfully cold and clear as much of the water in Tibet is, do not assume that it's safe to drink. Livestock contaminate many of the water sources and Tibetans do not always live up to their cultural ideals. Follow Tibetan tradition and eliminate the monotony of drinking plain water by downing as much tea as

you can. You can buy Chinese green tea in all its varieties in every city and town in Tibet. If you're offered Tibetan yak-butter tea, have it served in your own cup as per tradition – this eliminates the risk associated with drinking from used cups. More like a soup than a tea, it helps fortify you against the cold and replenishes the body's salts. For information on water purification and traditional beverages consult the Health chapter (p355).

TREKKING ROUTES

Detailed descriptions of six popular treks are given here. They offer fantastic walking, superb scenery and, with the exception of Lake Manasarovar and Mt Kailash, are close to Lhasa or the main highways. Walking times given are just that; they don't include breaks, nature stops or any other off-your-feet activities. On average, plan to walk five or seven hours at most in a day, interspersed with frequent short rests. You will also need time to set up camp, cook and just plain enjoy yourself.

The trek stages can be used as a daily itinerary, but plan ahead to avoid spending the night at the highest point reached in the day.

GANDEN TO SAMYE

This trek has much to offer: lakes, beautiful alpine landscapes, herders' camps and sacred sites, as well as two of Tibet's greatest centres of religious culture. With so much to offer, its popularity is understandable, but

HEALTHY TREKKING

To maintain your health in such a difficult high-elevation environment you will need to take some special precautions. With a little preparation and good sense your trekking experience will be one of the highlights of your trip to Tibet. Bring a first-aid kit (see p347) with all the basics and perhaps some extras as well. Never trek alone and buy health and evacuation insurance. Read the Health chapter (p346) for health considerations that affect visitors to Tibet. Trekkers are particularly vulnerable to sunburn (p354), hypothermia (p354) and acute mountain sickness (AMS; p351): make sure you're prepared. For detailed medical information, see *Medicine for Mountaineering* published by Mountaineers Books.

you should not underestimate the trek. Only those with experience hiking and camping in higher-elevation wildernesses should attempt this trek unsupported.

The best time for the trek is from mid-May to mid-October. Summer can be wet but the mountains are at their greenest and wildflowers spangle the alpine meadows. Barring heavy snow, it's also possible for those with a lot of trekking experience and the right gear to do this trek in the colder months. If you're coming straight from Lhasa, you should spend at least one night at Ganden Monastery (4190m) to acclimatise.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR WALKING

Before embarking on a walking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions along your intended route (eg from local inhabitants).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and customs about wildlife and the environment.
- Walk only in regions and on trails within your realm of experience.
- Be aware that weather conditions and terrain vary significantly from one region, or even from one trail to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any track. These differences influence the way walkers dress and the equipment they carry.
- Ask before you set out about the environmental conditions that can affect your trek and how local, experienced walkers deal with these considerations.

If you're fit, acclimatised and have a pack animal to carry your bags, it's not difficult to do the trek in 3½ days, overnighting in Hepu/Yama Do, Tsoptup-chu and Yamalung, though some groups take the full five days. You'll experience at least three seasons on this trek, probably in the same day! From the wintry feel of the Chitu-la you rapidly descend to the spring-time rhododendron blooms of the middle valley until the summer heat hits you on the final approach to Samye. Pack accordingly.

Public buses run between Lhasa and Ganden (see p127 and p140), and between Lhasa and the Samye ferry crossing (see p172).

Stage 1: Ganden to Yama Do

5-6 hours / 17km / 300m ascent / 450m descent
The trek begins from the parking lot at the base of Ganden Monastery. It's often possible to find a pack animal or porter here to help carry your bags to Hepu or beyond; ask among the incense and prayer-flag sellers near the car park.

Leave the parking lot and look for the well-trodden trail heading south along the side of Angkor Ri, the highest point on the Ganden kora. After 20 minutes the Ganden kora branches off to the right; keep ascending straight for another 30 minutes. You quickly lose sight of Ganden but gain views of Samdro village below you, before reaching a **saddle**, marked by a *lapse* (cairn) 2m tall and 3m in diameter.

From the saddle, look south to see the approach to the Shuga-la in the distance. Traversing the west side of the ridge from the saddle, you briefly get views of Trubshi village below and the Kyi-chu Valley to the west. The trail dips briefly into a gully and reaches a spur surmounted by a cairn after 45 minutes. The trail now descends towards Hepu village. Twenty minutes from the spur is a spring. From here it's a further 30 minutes to the village, 2½ hours or so from Ganden.

There are around 30 houses in the village of **Hepu** (4284m; N 29°42.387', E 091°31.442') and it's possible for trekkers to camp or find accommodation among the friendly locals. There's good camping to the south and west of the village. Look for a red-and-yellow masonry structure and white incense hearths at the southeastern edge of the village. This is the **shrine** of Hepu's *yul lha* (local protecting deity), the Divine White Yak.

If carrying your gear up the pass beyond Hepu is not a pleasant thought, you should be able to rent yaks to do the work for you. Villagers charge around Y35 to Y40 per yak per day, plus the same again for the salary of the yak herder. Usually, herders feed themselves and provide their own camping gear,

GANDEN TO SAMYE AT A GLANCE

Duration 4-5 days

Distance 80km

Difficulty medium to difficult

Start Ganden Monastery

Finish Samye Monastery

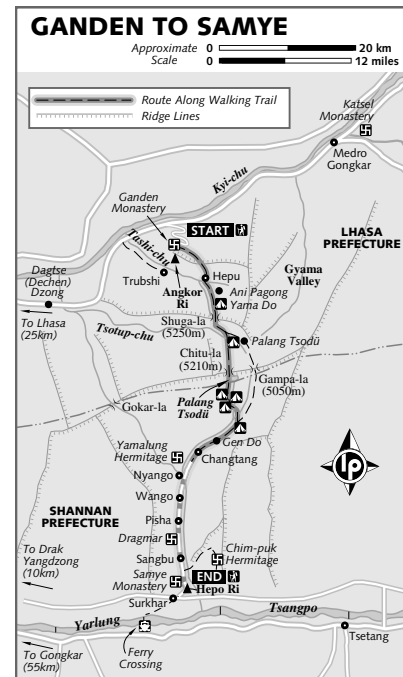
Highest Point Shuga-la (5250m)

Nearest Large Towns Lhasa and Tsetang

Accommodation camping

Public Transport bus

Summary This demanding trek crosses two passes over 5000m, connects two of Tibet's most important monasteries and begins less than 50km from Lhasa. It has emerged as the most popular trek in the Ü region.



but make this clear before you set out. A yak can carry two or three backpacks, depending on their weight. Small groups of two or three people are more likely to end up with a horse than a yak, as single yaks are notoriously difficult to manage. Pack animals generally only go as far as Nyango, the start of the dirt road, 3½ hours' walk from Samye.

Finding a guide and fetching the pack animals can take several hours, so if you haven't arranged things in advance you may have to spend the night in Hepu. If you have no luck finding pack animals in Hepu, try down the valley in the nearby village of Trubshi, about 45 minutes' walk away.

From Hepu, the trail climbs towards the Shuga-la, 3½ hours away. Walk west downhill from the village towards a bridge crossing the Tashi-chu, near the confluence with another stream. Round the inner side of the confluence and head south upstream along the east bank. You are now following the watercourse originating from the Shuga-la. Near the confluence are good camp sites.

One hour from Hepu you reach **Ani Pagong**, a narrow, craggy bottleneck in the valley. A small nunnery used to be above the trail. Across the valley is the seasonal herders' camp of Choden. From Ani Pagong, the trail steadily climbs for one hour through marshy meadows to **Yama Do** (4456m; N 29°40.650', E 091°30.858').

Yama Do offers extensive camp sites suitable for larger groups. Consider spending the night here as it's still a long way to the pass.

Stage 2: Yama Do to Tsotup-chu Valley

5-7 hours / 10km / 1000m ascent / 450m descent
Above Yama Do the valley's watercourse splits into three branches. Follow the central (southern) branch, not the southeast or southwest branches. The route leaves the flank of the valley and follows the valley bottom. The trail becomes indistinct but it's a straight shot up to the pass. Thirty minutes from Yama Do are two single-tent camp sites, the last good ones until the other side of the pass, at least five hours away. One hour past Yama Do leave the valley floor and ascend a shelf on the east (left) side of the valley to avoid a steep gully that forms around the stream. In another 45 minutes you enter a wet alpine basin studded with tussock grass.

The Shuga-la is at least 1¼ hours from the basin. Remain on the east side of the valley as it bends to the left. You have to

negotiate boulders and lumpy ground along the final steep climb to the pass. The **Shuga-la** (5250m; N 29°38.499', E 091°32.016') cannot be seen until you're virtually on top of it. It's marked by a large cairn covered in prayer flags and yak horns. Some maps refer to the pass as the Zhukar-la or Jockar-la. Either way, you've made it to the highest point of the trek.

The route continues over the Shuga-la and to start with descends sharply through a boulder field. Be on the lookout for a clear trail marked by cairns on the left side of the boulder field. This trail traverses the ridge in a southeasterly direction, paralleling the valley below. Do not head directly down to the valley floor from the pass unless you have good reason. It's a long, steep descent and once at the bottom you would have to go back up the valley to complete the trek. In case of emergency, retreat down the valley for a bolt hole back to the Lhasa-Ganden Hwy, a long day of walking away.

The trail gradually descends to the valley floor, 1½ hours from and 200m below the pass. The views of the valley and the lake at its head are one of the highlights of the trek. Cross the large **Tsotup-chu** (4907m; N 29°37.364', E 091°33.307'), which flows through the valley and keep an eye out for the herders' dogs. During heavy summer rains, take special care to find a safe ford. The pastures in the area support large herds of yaks, goats and sheep, and during the trekking season herders are normally camped here. This is an ideal place to camp and meet the *drokpas* (nomads).

An alternative route to Samye via the **Gampa-la** (5050m) follows the main branch of the Tsotup-chu past a couple of lakes to the pass. South of the Gampa-la the trail plunges into a gorge, crisscrossing the stream that flows down from it. These fords may pose problems during summer rains or when completely frozen. See Gary McCue's *Trekking in Tibet – A Traveler's Guide* for details of this route.

Stage 3: Tsotup-chu Valley to Herders' Camps

5 hours / 14km / 300m ascent / 400m descent
From the Tsotup-chu ford, the main watercourse flows from the southeast and a minor tributary enters from the southwest. Follow this tributary (which quickly disappears underground) steeply up for about 30 minutes

until you reach a large basin and a cairn that offers fine views down onto Palang Tsodü lake. Stay on the west (right) side of the basin and turn into the first side valley opening on the right. A couple of minutes into the valley you'll pass a large group **camp site** (5079m; N 29°36.604', E 091°33.544'), sadly covered in litter. This is a good alternative camp site to the Tsotup-chu but only if you're acclimatised, as it's 100m higher.

Follow this broad valley, which soon arcs south to the Chitu-la. The pass can be seen in the distance, a rocky rampart at the head of the valley. At first, stay on the west (right) side of the valley; there is a small trail. As you approach the pass, the trail switches to the east side of the valley. If you miss the trail just look for the easiest route up; the terrain is not particularly difficult.

The **Chitu-la** (5210m; N 29°34.817', E 091°33.159') is topped by several cairns and a small glacial tarn. Move to the west side of the pass to find the trail down and to circumvent a sheer rock wall on its south flank. A short descent will bring you into a basin with three small lakes. The trail skirts the west side of the first lake and then crosses to the eastern shores of the second two. It takes 45 minutes to reach the south end of the basin. Drop down from the basin on the west side of the stream and in 15 minutes you'll pass a collection of **cairns** (5077m; N 29°33.924', E 091°32.790') to the right. A further 10 minutes brings you the stone walls of a camp where herders have carved out level places for their tents.

Below the herders' highest camp, the valley is squeezed in by vertical rock walls, forcing you to pick your way through the rock-strewn valley floor. Pass a side stream after 10 minutes and then cross over to the west (right) side of the widening valley to recover the trail. In 10 more minutes you will come to a flat and a seasonal **herders' camp** on the east side of the valley, good for camping. At the lower end of the flat, return to the west side of the valley. The trail again disappears as it enters a scrub willow and rosebush forest, but there is only one way to go to get to Samye and that is downstream.

In 15 minutes, when a tributary valley enters from the right, cross to the east side of the valley. Fifteen minutes further, you will reach another seasonal **herders' camp**, inhabited for only a short time each year. Another 15 minutes beyond this camp, hop back to the west

bank to avoid a cliff hugging the opposite side of the stream. Pass through a large meadow and ford the stream back to the east bank. From this point the trail remains on the east side of the valley for several hours.

Camp sites are numerous here. Soon you'll pass herders' tents camped near the spot where the side valley coming from the Gampa-la joins the main valley. Descend the finger of land formed by the river junction and then cross the **stream** (4497m; N 29°31.600', E 091°32.982'). At times of heavy summer rain you might have to wait for the water to subside in order to cross safely.

Stages 4 & 5: Herders' Camps to Samye Monastery

10 hours / 39km / 1200m descent

The trail is now wide and easy to follow as it traces a course down the east side of the valley. Walk through the thickening scrub forest for one hour and you will come to another stream entering from the east side of the main valley. Look for the wood-and-stone **Diwaka Zampa bridge** (4380m; N 29°30.440', E 091°33.158') 50m above the confluence. The valley now bends to the right (west) and the trail enters the thickest and tallest part of the scrub forest. The right combination of elevation, moisture and aspect create a verdant environment, while just a few kilometres away desert conditions prevail.

The next three-hour stretch of the trail is among the most delightful of the entire trek. According to local woodcutters, more than 15 types of trees and shrubs are found here, some growing to as high as 6m. Fragrant junipers grow on exposed south-facing slopes, while rhododendrons prefer the shadier slopes. The rhododendrons start to bloom in early May and by the end of the month the forest is ablaze with pink and white blossoms.

The trail winds through a series of meadows. After 30 minutes the stony flood plain of a tributary joins the river from the north. In another 30 minutes look for a mass of prayer flags and an incense burner at a place known as Gen Do. This is a **shrine** (4180m; N 29°29.530', E 091°31.810') to the protector of the area, the ancient goddess Dorje Yudronma. Just past the shrine, cross a small tributary stream. In one hour the forest rapidly thins and **Changtang**, the first permanent village since Hepu, pops up. There's good camping just before the village.

Look south to the distant mountains; this is the range on the far side of the Yarlung Tsangpo Valley. Forty-five minutes down the valley at a prominent bend in the valley is the turn-off for the **Yamalung Hermitage**, visible on the cliff face high above the valley. A small shop run by the nuns of Yamalung sells soft drinks, beer and instant noodles. There's fine camping across the bridge; the path to Yamalung also leads up from here. It's a 45-minute steep climb to the hermitage. Yamalung (also called Emalung) is where Guru Rinpoche is said to have meditated and received empowerment from the long-life deity Tsepame (Amitayus).

The hermitage consists of several small temples, and a handful of nuns live here. Below the temple complex is a sacred spring and an old relief carving in stone of Guru Rinpoche, King Trisong Detsen and the Indian scholar Shantarakshita, all of whom lived in the 8th century. The cave Guru Rinpoche meditated in is enshrined by the Drubpuk Mara Titsang Temple. Inside on the roof are the footprint and handprint of the saint, said to have been created when he magically expanded the size of the cave. Other shrines higher up include the cave retreats of the fifth Dalai Lama and the translator Vairocana, as well as chapels dedicated to the Dzogchen protectors and the Guru Tsengye – the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche.

From the turn-off to Yamalung the walking trail becomes a motorable road and the valley much wider. In 15 minutes you will reach a bridge; the road now sticks to the west (right) side of the valley all the way to Samye, a 3½-hour walk away. Twenty minutes from the bridge you will come to the village of **Nyango** with its substantially built stone houses. A big tributary stream, entering from the northwest, joins the Samye Valley here. The old trade route from Lhasa to Samye via the Gokar-la follows this valley. In the lower half of Nyango are several small shops. You will probably bid your guide and pack animals a farewell here. You should be able to find a tractor here to take you all the way down to Samye, should you want one.

Thirty minutes' walk past Nyango is the village of Wango and, an hour beyond it, the hamlet of Pisha. From the lower end of Pisha, a hill can be seen in the middle of the mouth of the Samye Valley. This is **Hepo Ri** (p171), one of Tibet's most sacred mountains. The en-

tire lower Samye Valley – a tapestry of fields, woods and villages – can be seen from Pisha. Pisha is the last place where water can be conveniently drawn from the river. From here on, the trail only intersects irrigation ditches.

Fifteen minutes past Pisha a ridge spur called Dragmar meets the trail. On the ridge is the partially rebuilt **palace** where King Trisong Detsen is said to have been born. Formerly a lavish temple, it now stands empty. Below, just off the road, is a small red-and-white **temple** (3687m; N 29°22.802', E 091°30.399'), often locked, enshrining the stump of an ancient tree. Legend has it that a red-and-white sandalwood tree grew here, nourished by the buried placenta of Trisong Detsen. During the Cultural Revolution the tree was chopped down.

Twenty minutes further down the trail is Sangbu village, from where there are good views of the golden spires of Samye. The route follows the Land Cruiser track direct to Samye along the margin of woods and desert: it takes about one hour. The closer you get to Samye the hotter the valley can become; in May and June it can be fiery hot. You finally enter the perimeter wall of **Samye** (3630m), about three hours from Nyango. See p168 for details of the stunning monastery complex.

Tsurphu to Yangpachen

Beginning at Tsurphu Monastery, this rugged walk crosses several high valleys before emerging into the broad and windswept Yangpachen Valley. Combining alpine tundra and sweeping mountain panoramas with visits to monasteries and a remote nunnery, this trek nicely balances cultural and wilderness activities.

The best time for this walk is from mid-April to mid-October. Summer can be rainy but be prepared for snow at any time. As you will be in nomad country, beware of vicious dogs, some of which take a sadistic pride in chasing hapless foreigners. Fuel and food are not available, so come prepared. There are few permanent settlements along the way and the inhabitants are often away from home. Your only option on this trek is to be fully self-sufficient.

Tsurphu Monastery (4500m) is a good place to spend a night acclimatising. The area around the Karmapa's former **lingka** (garden), 10 minutes' walk upstream from the monastery, is ideal for camping (see p293). Some of

the area's herders spend a lot of time at the monastery, so this is a good place to start looking for guides and yaks. Villagers in Tsurphu ask around Y400 for a guide and horse/yak for a five-day return trip to Yangpachen.

If you're well acclimatised, it's possible to do this trek in three days by continuing on to Tajung on day two and finishing at Yangpachen on day three.

Minibuses leave the Barkhor in Lhasa daily around 7am for Tsurphu (Y15, 2½ hours). Minibuses shuttle regularly from Yangpachen back to Lhasa (Y25, three hours). Buses from Nagchu and Damxung pass nearby Yangpachen town en route to Lhasa, so hitching is also possible.

Tsurphu to Yangpachen at a Glance

Duration 3-4 days

Distance 60km

Difficulty medium to difficult

Start Tsurphu Monastery

Finish Yangpachen Monastery

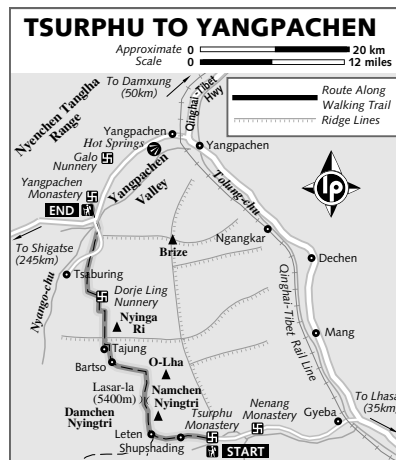
Highest Point Lasar-la (5400m)

Nearest Large Town Lhasa

Accommodation camping

Public Transport pilgrim buses

Summary An excellent choice for those who want to get a close look at the lifestyle of the *drokpas* (herders; see p148). You need to be well acclimatised for this high-elevation trek, which never dips below 4400m.



Stage 1: Tsurphu Monastery to Leten

3½-4 hours / 11km / 500m ascent

The trek begins by heading west or up the valley. Follow the kora trail 10 minutes west to the **lingka** (4550m; N 29°43.436', E 090°34.128'), a walled copse of old trees with a brook. This garden-like wood is used by the monks in the summer, so ask permission before you set up camp. The trees here are the last you will see until after finishing the trek. Just above the copse, the valley splits: follow the northwest branch and remain on the north side of the stream.

Forty-five minutes of walking through a rocky gorge along a well-graded trail brings you to **Shupshading** (4700m; N 29°43.574', E 090°32.876'), a seasonal herders' camp on an easily missed shelf above the trail. After 30 minutes look for a line of ruined chörtens to your right. After a further 10 minutes the valley looks like it splits; follow the main river valley (to the left) and descend to cross the stream on a stick-and-sod **bridge** (4890m; N 29°43.396', E 090°31.859'). The trail now continues on the south (left) side of the valley. In another 20 minutes you'll pass a popular camping spot. Look out for small herds of *na* (blue sheep) on the slopes to the north.

Twenty-five minutes further on, by a **mani wall** (N 29°43.373', E 090°30.856'), the trail forks. Both branches lead to Leten, about an hour away, but it's easier to take the right fork that follows the valley floor. This trail passes to the right of a small cliff, past the remains of winter ice, before swinging to the left up into the natural bowl of Leten.

Several families live year-round in the *drokpa* settlement of **Leten** (5090m; N 29°43.557', E 090°30.094'), braving the severe climate with their livestock. Leten is the last chance to find yaks and a guide, both of which are highly recommended because the route to and from the Lasar-la is not easy to find. Camping spots are limited by the lumpy terrain and over-protective dogs. If you value your peace and quiet, consider camping in the valley below Leten.

Spend at least one night (preferably two) in Leten acclimatising.

Stage 2: Leten to Bartso

5 hours / 15km / 300m ascent / 600m descent

It's about a three-hour walk from Leten to the Lasar-la. Head for the northern half of the settlement (assuming you aren't already there).

The route climbs steeply up a short ridge, reaching the highest house. Bear northwest into a steep side valley. As you ascend, a reddish knob of rock looms up ahead. Angle to the north, or right, of this formation, past a mani wall in the centre of the bowl, and leave the valley by climbing to the top of a spur marked by three **cairns** (5270m; N 29°43.973', E 090°29.869'). It's a 45-minute walk to here from Leten. The peak attached to this spur is called **Damchen Nyingtri** and is holy to the god ruling the environs.

As per Buddhist tradition, stay to the left of the three cairns and descend sharply into a narrow valley. As you look into the curved valley ahead you'll notice a round, bald, red peak called Tamdrim Dora; the main trail you'll be following for the next hour or so keeps to the right of that.

Once on the valley bottom, cross to the east (right) side of the stream and strike out north (up the valley). In 15 minutes a side-stream enters from the west (left): keep following the main north (right) branch. Cross back to the left side of the stream as the terrain here is easier to traipse over. In another 10 minutes you'll see O-Lha peak, the prominent jagged mountain to the northeast. Walk up the widening valley through arctic-like mounds of tundra for 40 minutes, following a minor trail. Then, as the valley floor veers west, look for a **cairn** (5310m; N 29°45.631', E 090°29.813') on the opposite bank of the stream.

Using this cairn as a marker, bear north-westwards over an inclined plain. This plain parallels the valley floor before the two merge. Continue ascending as the plain opens wider in the direction of the pass. The **Lasar-la** (5400m; N 29°46.165', E 090°29.600') is a broad gap at the highest point in the plain, beside a small tarn, and is heralded by cairns and prayer flags. (A separate pass to the northwest, the Tigu-la, also descends towards Yangpachen, but this is not the route described here.)

From the Lasar-la descend steeply into the north-running valley. A faint trail can be found on the east (right) side of this valley. Thirty minutes from the pass the trail passes a decent camp site, just before descending into a short gully. A side valley joins from the right, offering fine views of the back side of O-Lha. When this side stream joins the main stream, cross over to the west (left) side of the valley. There are many possible camp

sites along this next stretch, as well as views of the snowcapped Nyenchen Tanglha range to the north.

The valley is covered with hummocks, but a trail avoids the ups and downs of these mounds of turf and earth. About an hour from the pass, just past a large corral, you meet a large westward bend in the valley. If water levels are high, you should ford the river here and continue on the north side of the valley. In early summer when water levels are lower you can simply follow the valley as it bends to the west and ford the river further downstream.

As you now head westwards, along the north side of the river, there are superb views of the surrounding mountains. In the north is Brize, which is a heavily glaciated peak enclosing the south side of the Yangpachen Valley, and towards the west is a distinctive pinnacle named Tarze. Brize, meaning 'female-yak herder', and Tarze, 'horse keeper', are just two of many topographical features in a mythical society ruled by the mountain god Nyenchen Tanglha. These two mountains make convenient landmarks for trekkers as you go against the grain by heading north over a series of drainage systems that run from east to west.

Thirty minutes after the big bend the trail hits the settlement of **Bartso** (4950m; N 29°48.962', E 090°28.091'). This *drokpa* village of five homes with a permanent source of water is a decent place to camp. The hills around the village are still covered in juniper. In the 1960s and '70s huge amounts of this valuable bush were extracted from the region and trucked to Lhasa to feed the hearths of the new provincial city.

Stage 3: Bartso to Dorje Ling Nunnery

3½-4 hours / 15km / 150m ascent / 150m descent
Look northwest from Bartso to the far end of the valley. Clearly visible, a trail winds up from the valley to the top of the ridge. Make for this trail, 25 minutes' walk over marshy ground from Bartso, following the fenceline. It's another half-hour to the summit of the ridge. If you have a guide, a trail leads up to a saddle north of the valley for fine views of Nyenchen Tanglha. However, the more straightforward main path continues down into a gully in about 25 minutes to the village of **Tajung** (4660m; N 29°50.286', E 090°25.116'), a walk of around 90 minutes from Bartso. Tajung is a decent alternative spot to end the second

stage, though the insatiably curious villagers can be demanding of your time and supplies.

Stay to the left of the 14 whitewashed houses and ford the stream below the village. Bear northeastwards into the parting in the ridge and, after a few minutes, cross a low saddle. Continue going northeast in the direction of Brize until a large dip appears in the ridgeline to the west, 40 minutes from Tajung. Leave the trail going towards Brize and head cross-country between the ridgeline and a large hill to the right, using a **cairn** (4630m; N 29°51.353', E 090°25.740') on the saddle as your marker. If you have gained enough height, you will be able to see a group of white houses at the base of a hill to the far northwest. The Dorje Ling Nunnery is just downstream of here.

One excellent possible side trip from here is the 20-minute climb to the top of the hill to the right (east), known as **Nyinga Ri** (4800m; N 29°51.688', E 090°25.990'). Views of the Nyenchen Tanglha mountains, and the distinctive flat-topped 7111m massif that names the entire range, are fantastic from here. Nyenchen Tanglha is the holiest mountain in central Tibet and is said to be inhabited by a god of the same name. Envisioned as a regal white warrior on a white horse, his half-smile, half-grimace symbolises both the benevolent and destructive sides of his personality. The range is part of the trans-Himalaya, which circumscribes the plateau, dividing southern Tibet from the Changtang.

A 25-minute traverse down the valley (or a short, steep descent north from Nyinga Ri) will bring you to a stream at the base of a ridge, aligned east to west. (If you decide to climb Nyinga Ri, you can send your guide ahead to meet you here.) Two trails climb the ridge; one to the right just past a corral, and a gentler path, favoured by herders, 10 minutes downstream. From the top of the ridge, you'll have good views of the village just upstream of Dorje Ling Nunnery. The nunnery, which is out of view, sits at the bottom of a rock outcrop visible from the ridge top.

Strike out directly across the plain for the village, taking in the awesome views of the glaciers tumbling off Brize and the fertile flood plain below. After dipping briefly into a dry gully you crest a small ridge and see **Dorje Ling** (4474m; N 29°53.600', E 090°24.782'), reaching the nunnery in about one hour (two to three hours from Tajung).

The centrepiece of this friendly nunnery, home to 68 nuns, is the red *dukhang* (assembly hall). Good camping is found in the meadow to the southwest of the nunnery, by a small chapel, or you can stay in a room at the nunnery. A kora path climbs to a hillside meditation chapel before descending around the side of the nunnery.

Stage 4: Dorje Ling Nunnery to Yangpachen Monastery

3½-4½ hours / 14km / mostly level

From Dorje Ling, follow the motorable road west, or downstream. After a couple of minutes fill up your water bottle at a spring, the waters of which power a prayer wheel. After 40 minutes or so, past a fenced area, take the right fork over a ruined concrete **bridge** (4426m; N 29°54.216', E 090°23.247') and continue down the east bank of the stream as the valley drains into the huge Yangpachen plain. Below you to the left is Tsaburing village. The track quickly turns into a motorable road and runs north, paralleling the course of the Nyango-chu, which drains the upper Yangpachen Valley. The road stays close to the east bank of the silty river, skirting meadows that afford some fine picnic spots, offering encompassing views of the trans-Himalaya.

Once entering the Nyango drainage area it's a level but draining two-hour walk through the giant landscape to a steel **bridge** (4400m; N 29°59.072', E 090°24.451') spanning the river. Cross over the bridge to meet the northern road to Shigatse. Walk northwards (right) on the road for about 10 minutes, suddenly coming to Yangpachen Monastery.

Perched on top of a ridge above the village, the 15th-century **Yangpachen Monastery** overlooks a broad sweep of trans-Himalaya peaks. The monastery was once home to 115 monks, but many of them have fled to Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim and only about half that number remain. Yangpachen is headed by Shamar Rinpoche (also known as the Sharmapa), a leading lama of the Kagyupa order, whose 14th incarnation is based in India. You'll see images here of the important fourth Sharmapa (wearing a red hat), the 16th Karmapa (a black hat) and the 'alternative' rival Karmapa (see p146), who is supported by the Sharmapa in India. If you're interested in seeing what Nyenchen Tanglha looks like, check out the mural by the entryway to the main assembly hall. A glass case in the corner

of the main hall displays the stone saddle of Nyenchen Tanglha. *Cham* dances are held at the monastery on the 29th day of the fifth Tibetan month (around July).

From Yangpachen Monastery it's a jarring 18km road journey to Yangpachen town. You might be able to hitch there but there's not a lot of traffic along this road, so consider hiring a minibus in the village (around Y50). Look out for Galo Nunnery, nestled in the hills to the left after about 7km.

For a post-trek treat, the swimming-pool-sized **hot-springs complex** (Yangbajian Wenchuan; admission Y40-60; ☎ 7am-9pm), 7km west of Yangpachen town, is great to ease your aching limbs, though it's undergone rapid development in recent years.

From Yangpachen town there are minibuses back to Lhasa (three hours), or continue 2km further to the main Qinghai-Tibet Hwy and hitch from there.

SHALU TO NARTANG

This trek follows the old trade route between the great Buddhist centres of Shalu and Nartang, making a glorious chapter in Tibetan history come alive for walkers. Treading the ancient trail you can almost feel the caravans laden with scriptures and treasures that once passed this way.

The trek begins at the historic Shalu Monastery (p199) and traverses west over a couple of small ranges to Ngor Monastery. From Ngor it's a downhill roll to Nartang Monastery. The route passes through several villages as well as uninhabited dry canyons. It's about a 10-hour walk to Ngor from Shalu, which is best divided into two days, and another five hours from there to Nartang. Finding guides and burros to carry your gear in Shalu is easier than before. Expect to pay Y50 to Y80 for each. Having local support is a good thing because the route is not always easy to discern – the trail tends to vanish in the canyons.

The optimal walking season is from the beginning of April to the end of October. In summer the trail can be sizzling hot, and in other months cold and windy, so be prepared. One advantage of hiking in summer is that this region gets less rainfall than the Ü region.

For information on getting to Shalu, see p200. Lhatse-Shigatse minibuses travel the Friendship Hwy and pass near Nartang.

SHALU TO NARTANG AT A GLANCE

Duration 2-3 days
Distance 45km
Difficulty moderate
Start Shalu Monastery
Finish Nartang Monastery
Highest Point Char-la (4550m)
Nearest Large Town Shigatse
Accommodation camping
Public Transport bus
Summary This walk will give you a feel for trekking in Tibet. The trail and passes are not particularly high or difficult and the trailheads are easily accessible from Shigatse.

Stage 1: Shalu Monastery to Upper Lungsang

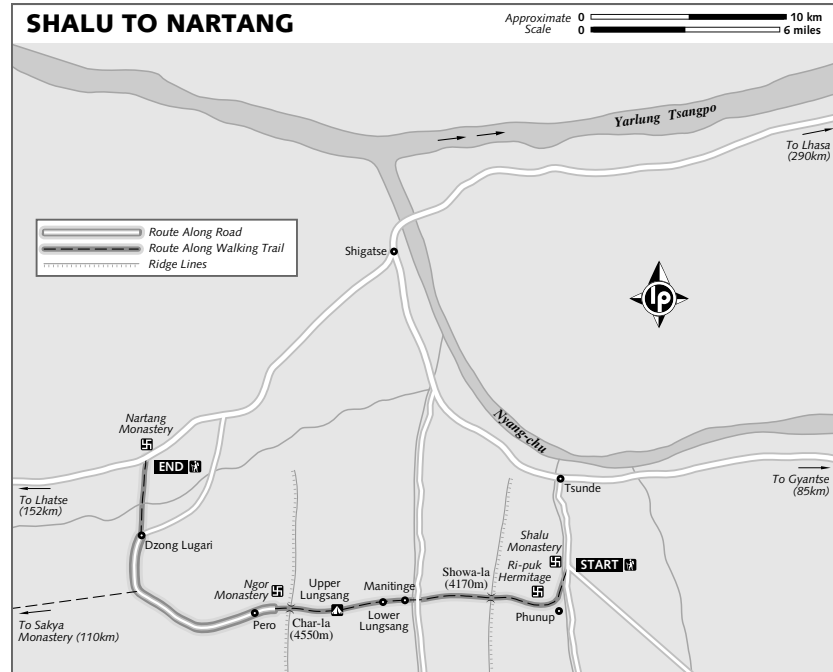
5½-6½ hours / 19km / 420m ascent / 240m descent

From **Shalu Monastery** (3980m; N 29°07.625', E 088°59.590') walk the motorable road south (up the valley). Thirty minutes from Shalu you will pass by the **Ri-puk Hermitage**, set on a hillside on the west side of the valley. If you wish to visit, cut across the fields and head directly up to the hermitage – the way is not difficult and there are several trails leading up to it.

Forty-five minutes from Shalu the road forks: take the south fork. In the south, a conical-shaped hill and a village at its base can be made out. If you struck out in Shalu, stay on the road to this village, called Phunup, about a one-hour walk away. You may also find a guide and pack animals here. Otherwise, there is a short cut that saves 2km of walking. A few minutes from the fork in the road, look for the base of a long red ridge. Leave the road and skirt the base of this ridge, going in a southerly direction. First cross a flood plain to reach a rectangular red shrine and, beyond it, enter a plain bounded in the south by the red ridge.

Gradually the trail climbs to a small white ridge blocking the route to the south. As you approach you will see a line of white cairns marking its **summit** (4030m; N 29°06.011', E 088°59.590'). Look for the trail that ascends to the cairns, a one-hour walk from the fork in the road. From the ridge's summit, Phunup village is to the south and the Showa-la is to the west. The pass is the obvi-

SHALU TO NARTANG



ous low point in the range at least one hour away. The trail descends gradually to enter the stream bed coming from the Showa-la, 30 minutes from the cairns. If you came via Phunup, your route will converge with the main trail here.

The climb up to the pass and the descent on the other side is through some heavily eroded, waterless ravines and slopes. Bring plenty of drinking water from the trailhead. From the stream bed the trail soon climbs back up the right side of the valley only to drop back in and out of the stream bed in quick succession. Don't make the mistake of walking up the stream bed for you would soon encounter ledges and other difficult terrain. After twice briefly dropping into the narrow stream bed, be alert for a trail carving a route up the right slope. It's situated just a few meters before a fork in the stream bed. The trail climbs steeply to a group of ruins and then winds around to the pass in 30 minutes. The top is marked by white cairns.

From the **Showa-la** (4170m; N 29°06.371', E 088°56.939'), the second pass, the Char-la, can be seen in the range of hills west of an

intervening valley. It is the dip in the crest of the range. The easy-to-follow trail descends from the pass along the south (left) side of a ravine. In one hour you will reach the valley floor. Leave the trail just before it crosses a small rise marked with cairns and continue west towards a distant group of trees. Cross over the sandy north-south valley, intersecting a road. Shigatse is about three hours north along this road.

The valley watercourse is dry except during summer flash floods. West of it is a **poplar and willow copse** (3950m; N 29°06.572', E 088°54.093'), the only bit of shade in the area. Consider stopping here for lunch and a rest. From the copse, you enter a side valley, continuing in a westerly direction towards the Char-la. There are places suitable for camping along the length of this valley and water is available in the villages. In a few minutes you will reach the village of Manitinge, on the southern margin of the valley, and pick up the main cart track going up the valley. The track passes through the village of Siphu and, one hour from the copse, crosses to the south side of the valley. You can glimpse the Char-la

from here, which for most of the trek is hidden behind folds in the mountains.

In 30 minutes you will reach **Lower Lung-sang** (4060m; N 29°06.265', E 088°51.824'), a few minutes later **Upper Lungsang**. There is a fine old wood here ideal for camping and resting.

Stage 2: Upper Lungsang to Ngor Monastery

3½-4 hours / 8km / 550m ascent / 240m descent
From Upper Lungsang the trail cuts across the valley floor gradually making its way back to the northern side of the valley. The cart track does not extend past the village and the trail up to the pass may be difficult to find in places. If you are in doubt, try to hire a local person to show you the way. It is at least three hours from Upper Lungsang to the Char-la. At first, the trail skirts the edge of a gravel wash. However, in 15 minutes a series of livestock tracks climbs out of the stream bed and onto an eroded shelf that forms above it. Observe the old agricultural fields here, many of which have been long abandoned due to a lack of water.

The terrain becomes more rugged and a gorge forms below the trail. There is a sidestream and small **reservoir** (4190m; N 29°06.619', E 088°50.763') 45 minutes above Upper Lungsang. This is the last convenient place to collect water until over the pass. From the reservoir, the trail descends back to the stream bed but quickly exits the opposite side of the valley.

Look for a series of switchbacks on the southern (left) side of the gorge and then follow them up. A further 15 minutes on, the trail crosses a gully and then another gully in 15 more minutes. The final leg to the pass is pretty much cross-country over a steep slope of raw expanses of rock. From the second gully, the Char-la can be reached in 45 minutes of steep uphill walking. At one time this trail was well maintained and formed a main trade link between Shalu and Sakya Monasteries but it has fallen into disrepair.

Eventually, the white cairns along the summit ridge come into focus. The pass is the obvious notch in the ridge line. From the **Char-la** (4550m; N 29°07.000', E 088°49.850'), mountain ranges stretch to the west across the horizon and Ngor Monastery is visible directly below. Ngor is a 45-minute steep descent from the pass. The route from the Char-la descends the south (left) side of a

ravine that forms below it. Several trails cross the stream that flows from the pass and provide access to Ngor, but the first trail is the quickest route – it climbs the right side of the ravine and traverses directly to the monastery. Consider camping near Ngor or staying in the monastery's little guesthouse and save the last five hours of walking for the next day, when you're rested.

Sakya master Ngorchen Kunga Sangpo founded **Ngor Monastery** in 1429, giving rise to the Ngorpa suborder, a distinctive school of Buddhist thought. Once an important centre of learning, Ngor used to boast four monastic estates and 18 residential units inhabited by about 340 monks. Only a portion of the monastery has been rebuilt but what has is pleasing to behold. The most eye-catching feature is a beautiful row of chörtens at the lower end of the complex dedicated to the eight victorious forms of the Buddha. The largest structure is the assembly hall, called the Gonshung. The outer walls of its gallery are painted in vertical red, white and blue stripes, a characteristic decorative technique used by the Sakya order. The three colours represent the Rigsum Gonpo, the three most important bodhisattvas. The present head of Ngor, Luding Khenpo, resides in northern India.

Stage 3: Ngor Monastery to Nartang Monastery

5-6 hours / 19km / 410m descent

From Ngor, a motorable road runs down the valley that is now suitable for all types of vehicles. Fifteen minutes from the monastery is the sizable village of Pero. Ninety minutes from Ngor the valley and road bend to the north, while the old trade route to Sakya continues west over a saddle. Thirty minutes further, there is a copse at the edge of the flood plain that is good for fair-weather camping.

The road now swings to the west side of the wide alluvial valley and 30 minutes past the copse is the village of **Dzong Lugari** (3910m; N 29°08.171', E 088°45.741'). The road exits the north side of the village and extends northeast for 10km before joining the Lhatse–Shigatse Hwy 11km from Shigatse, just east of the 4914 road marker. The trail to Nartang Monastery, however, splits from the road on the northern outskirts of Dzong Lugari and heads north. From Dzong Lugari, it's at least a two-hour trek across a broad valley to **Nartang** (N 29°11.490', E 088°45.927').

GOOD CITIZENS *John Vincent Bellezza*

Since the 1980s, accounts of unfriendly villagers, petty theft and stone-throwing have come out of the Everest region. Such actions have not helped relations between the local Tibetans and foreigners, but the good news is that in recent years there has been a drop in the number of incidents. While there are no excuses for bad behaviour, there are historical factors that have contributed to antisocial episodes.

Under the Chinese, the entire religious and civic infrastructure of the region was destroyed and never satisfactorily restored, creating many hardships in a particularly high, dry and poor area. The good news is that new economic opportunities spurred on by the burgeoning tourist trade are starting to better the lives of the local people. Add to their optimism by patronising local services and businesses as much as possible and, as always, go that extra mile to make friends and gain insights into the workings of the Everest region.

The trail to Nartang crosses over a small stream and an electric utility line. The track tends to merge with a welter of agricultural trails and if you miss it, simply continue walking north. Soon the massive ramparts that surrounded the Nartang Monastery come into view. Just before arriving, cross the Lhatse–Shigatse Hwy, about 14km west of Shigatse. Donations are expected if you want to visit the chapels and famous printing presses at the **monastery**. There are several shops selling soft drinks and noodle soup on the roadside. It should be pretty easy to catch a ride from here to Shigatse.

EVEREST BASE CAMP TO TINGRI

This thrilling trek in the shadow of iconic Mt Everest provides a heady mix of solitude, wild-life sighting and physical challenge. Onagers (wild asses) and gazelle thrive around the trail, and you might even get lucky and see a Tibetan brown bear rambling in the pastures.

If you drove to Everest Base Camp and are looking for an alternative exit route, this trek to Tingri is an excellent choice. The route passes through an isolated valley on the way up to the Nam-la and then enters a region used by herders and their livestock. Following the Ra-chu Valley, the route swings northwards to the plains of Tingri. It's also possible to do this trek in the opposite direction. If you get tired of trekking along the road, you can always try to get a lift. Vehicles ply the route during summer and there are pony carts along the way if you want a brief respite from carrying your bag.

If you do decide to trek into Everest from Tingri, it is usually possible to hire yaks, guides and even pony carts in Tingri, though if you want to keep a low profile it might be

better to organise this in Ra Chu. Animals and helpers can set you back as much as Y100 per head, but try your benevolent powers of persuasion to get the best deal possible.

The trekking season in the Everest region extends from April to late October. This is a difficult high-elevation region with altitudes ranging between 4400m and 5300m, and the high point is at the beginning of the trek! Careful preparation and the right gear are imperative. Subfreezing temperatures can occur even in summer at higher elevations and, conversely, hot gusty winds in May and June can make walking a sweaty experience. For well-equipped and seasoned walkers, winter treks to Everest Base Camp are often possible. Thanks to the rain shadow created by Mt Everest (Qomolangma) and its lofty neighbours, even the monsoon months are relatively dry in the region.

The trek via the Nam-la is the fastest route from Everest Base Camp to Tingri, but if you're short on supplies or not so well equipped, consider one of the alternative passes covered in Gary McCue's *Trekking in Tibet – A Traveler's Guide*. The longer routes may be preferable because they follow more of the main road, reaching villages where supplies might be bought. Once you leave Rongphu Monastery there are no permanent settlements until well in reach of Tingri, three days away. Don't chance this trip unless you are really ready.

Be aware that expeditions beyond Base Camp are only for those very experienced in trekking and mountaineering. It's all too easy, once you have reached Base Camp, to succumb to the temptation to push further up the mountains. Do not do it without adequate preparation. At the very least, spend a couple of days acclimatising in

the Rongphu area and doing day hikes to higher altitudes.

For highly fit and prepared groups it's possible to trek beyond Base Camp as far as Camp III. Including time for acclimatising, you would need to allow at least one week for this trek. The route skirts the Rongphu Glacier until Camp I and then meets the East Rongphu Glacier at Camp II. This glacier must be crossed in order to reach Camp III (6340m). For detailed information on reaching the advanced camps, see Gary McCue's book.

There is public transport in the region and it shouldn't be too difficult to get a lift along the Friendship Hwy to either the turn-off to Everest (kilometre marker 5145) or Tingri. Hired Land Cruisers can go all the way to Everest Base Camp, as do some minibuses.

For additional information relating to the Everest region, including the Everest Base Camp, see p206.

Stage 1: Everest Base Camp to Beyond the Nam-la

9½ hours / 27km / 450m ascent / 520m descent

Setting out downstream from Rongphu along the road, the meadows soon recede as the valley narrows between boulder-strewn slopes. A trail angles down a steep embankment from the road to the bridge. Cross the bridge and look for the trail along the west bank of the river (N 28°18.164', E 086°49.988'). Soon the trail starts to ascend the embankment and emerges onto a shelf above the Dza-chu. In a few minutes the trail climbs further and traverses around the base of a slope into the mouth of a side valley. It takes 30 minutes to reach the mouth of this valley from the bridge.

While the majority of the Dzaka Valley is dry and barren, this side valley is relatively luxuriant, hosting a variety of plants and shrubs, and plenty of fresh water. This is a nice place to camp or take a long lunch break. The valley bends to the west as the trail to Nam-la leaves the valley floor and climbs past a corral onto a plain abutting the north (right) side of the valley. The route to the pass now bears west all the way to the summit, paralleling the valley floor. It's at least a 3½-hour hike to reach the pass.

As you begin your ascent towards the pass there is a saddle in the ridge bounding the northern side of the valley – this is the most

EVEREST BASE CAMP TO TINGRI AT A GLANCE

Duration 3-4 days

Distance 70km

Difficulty moderate to demanding

Start Everest Base Camp

Finish Tingri

Highest Point Nam-la (5250m)

Nearest Large Town Shigatse

Accommodation camping

Public Transport bus

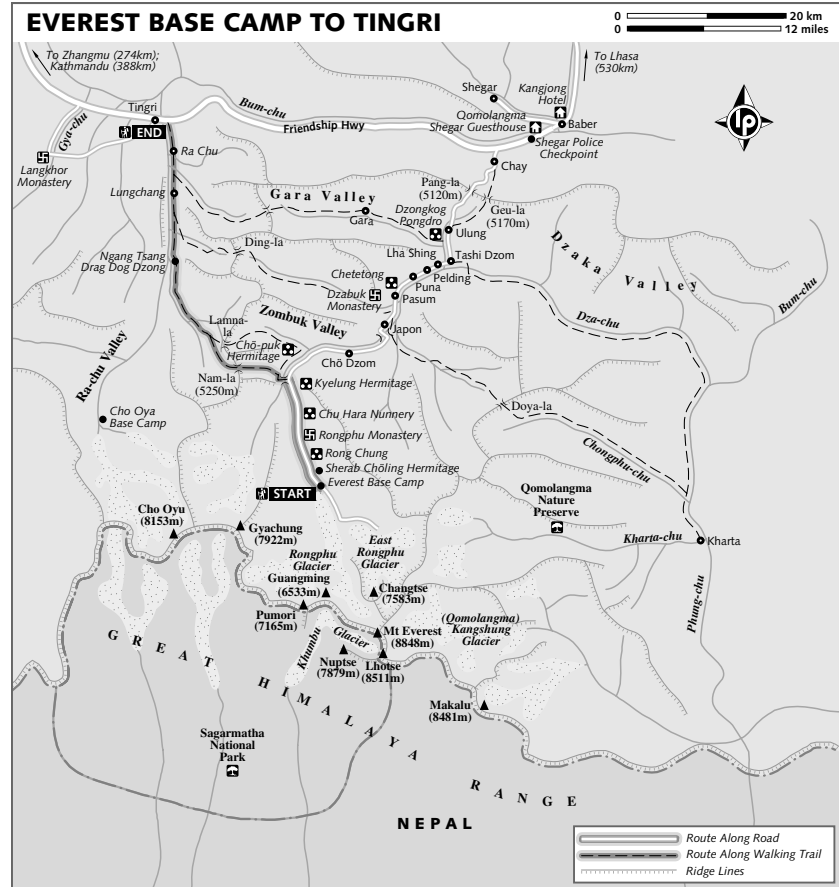
Summary This is fine alpine trekking in the shadow of the legendary Mt Everest. See onagers (wild asses) and other wild animals in the valleys and pastures along the way.

direct route to the Zombuk Valley. Walk close to the ridge enclosing the northern side of the valley. Past the corral there is no trail. The route clambers over rock-strewn shrubby terrain and then over big plates of tundra that fit together like a giant jigsaw puzzle. About one hour from the corral, a steep slope blocks the view to the west. It takes 10 minutes to climb over this onto another broad tundra-covered pitch. In 10 more minutes you will be able to see the head of the valley; however, the Nam-la is out of sight, tucked behind the folds in the ridge.

The route gradually levels out and in 15 minutes descends into a marshy side valley. There is a small stream in this valley, the last place you can count on for water until well beyond the pass. Look for a small corral on the far side of the side valley and bear to the left of it. Continue walking upward for 10 minutes before gradually descending into the main valley floor in another 15 minutes.

Remain on the north side of the valley, taking the trail that steeply climbs towards the pass. The trail remains clear for 40 minutes until it's absorbed by the tussock grass of the valley floor. The pass is near where the ridge south of the valley bends around to the west. It is still 40 minutes from here to the Nam-la over alpine meadows, but the terrain is now much more open and the gradient less steep.

Proceed west, looking out for the lowest point on the horizon. The **Nam-la** (5250m) is a very broad summit simply delineating the parting of drainage basins over a vast plain. There are a few small cairns on top of the



pass, seen only when you are already upon them. Towards the west, and across a wide, wet, downhill slope, is a small valley and the Ra-chu Valley far beyond that. North of the Nam-la, with only a small summit in between, is the Lamna-la coming from the Zombuk Valley.

Descend from the pass in a westerly direction over tussock grasses and tundra for one hour, and cross the cart track coming from the Lamna-la. If the time is right, you may see gazelles during your descent. From the cart track, descend a precipitous slope into the valley floor. There are both springs and a stream in this swampy valley of grasses and wildflowers, a tributary of the Ra-chu. Great camp sites are found on the drier margins of

the valley. It's at least a five-hour trek from here to the first village, Lungchang.

Stage 2: Base of Nam-la to Lungchang

5-6 hours / 21km / 200m descent

Do not follow the valley down and northward. It's easier to walk in a westerly direction. You can see the cart track cutting across the ridge from a group of corrals on the west side of the valley. The track goes all the way to Tingri, making route-finding easy.

Follow the cart track for 20 minutes, coming to a junction marked by a cairn. There is a short cut from here that rejoins the main track in 15 minutes. The track angles across the middle of the stony valley and is very wide and straight, like a runway used by bush planes. In

45 minutes the track passes through a narrow constriction in the valley formed by a series of orange cliffs. Beyond the cliffs the valley turns north (right) and retains this bearing all the way to Tingri.

The view to the north is now dominated by the blue or purple Tsebu Mountains. Tingri is in front of these mountains, south of the Bum-chu. The track unfolds along the bank of the stream for 45 minutes. It then ascends above the bank and traverses the side of a ridge with the stream running through a narrow channel directly below. Look south to see the glittering white Cho Oyu massif. In 30 minutes descend into the widening valley floor. In 10 more minutes cross a small side valley.

The track unrolls over a level shelf above the stream for 30 minutes before climbing over a small ridge that circumvents the gorge below. Just upstream of the gorge, the stream you've been following from the base of the pass flows into the much higher-volume main branch of the Ra-chu. The summit of the ridge is marked with a cairn and prayer flags and takes 10 minutes to reach from the shelf.

From the summit, the track descends to cross a side valley before ranging across a long and barren stretch of valley. In the distance you can see two rocky knobs at the end of the long eastern ridge line. It takes about one hour to reach the knobs and the disintegrating walls of the long-abandoned fort known as **Ngang Tsang Drag Dog Dzong**. Thirty minutes after passing beneath the ramparts of the ancient fort you reach **Lungchang** (N 28°28.188', E 086°39.814'), which is the first permanent settlement since Rongphu. Simple meals and beds are usually available here or with families in the village.

Stage 3: Lungchang to Tingri

3½ hours / 12km / 150m descent

From Lungchang, you can see several low-lying hills in the mouth of the Ra-chu Valley; Tingri is at the foot of the northernmost of these. From Lungchang, the track moves towards the middle of the valley, following a bluff along the edge of the Ra-chu. In 1½ hours it reaches the outskirts of the village Ra Chu. Before the village, at a white shrine, the track splits: the south, or main, branch goes to Tingri via Ra Chu village, while the other jogs west and then north over wide pastures to Tingri. The left fork is the shorter route and is a more pleasant walk. The lower part of the Ra-chu Valley is green during the warmer half

of the year; extensive meadows support flocks of goats and sheep.

Fifteen minutes south of Ra Chu you will pass ruins on the slopes bounding the east side of the valley – look back to see Everest rise up from behind the anterior ranges. The two tracks that split near Ra Chu are reunited 45 minutes beyond the village.

Thirty minutes further on, you reach a bridge over the Ra-chu, which allows you to access the south side of Tingri. You can cross the Ra-chu here and pass through the village to the highway or remain on the east bank and cross the new highway bridge. It's only 15 minutes to the highway.

For information on Tingri, see p210.

MT KAILASH KORA

Hike the age-old pilgrims' path around Mt Kailash, Asia's holiest mountain. With a 5630m pass to conquer, this kora is a true test of the mind and spirit.

There's some gorgeous mountain scenery along this trek, including close-ups of the majestic pyramidal Mt Kailash, but perhaps more rewarding is the chance to see and meet pilgrims. Tibetans travel on foot, singing or intoning prayers, while Hindus ride on horseback, with yak teams carrying their supplies. It's a real treat during the

MT KAILASH KORA AT A GLANCE

Duration 3 days

Distance 52km

Difficulty medium to difficult

Start/Finish Darchen

Highest Point Drölma-la (5630m)

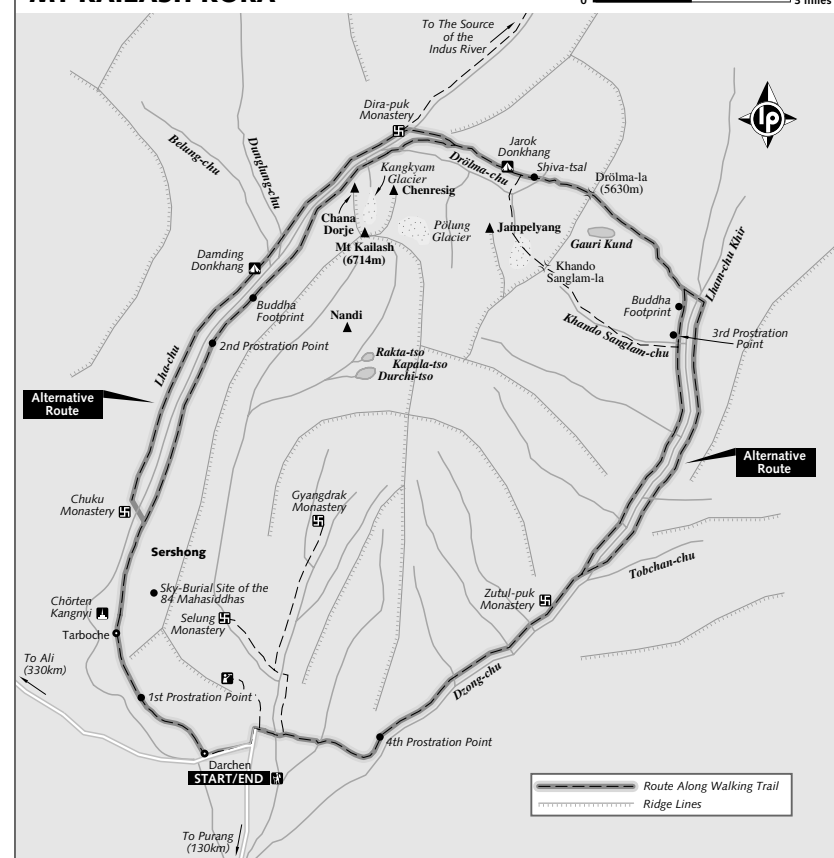
Nearest Large Town Ali

Accommodation camping and monastery guesthouses

Public Transport bus, when not restricted to Tibetans only

Summary The circuit, or kora, of Mt Kailash (6714m) is one of the most important pilgrimages in Asia. It's been a religious sanctuary since pre-Buddhist times, and a trek here wonderfully integrates the spiritual, cultural and physical dimensions of any trip to Tibet, which explains its growing attraction. Being able to meet pilgrims from across Tibet and other countries is one of the many alluring factors of this walk.

MT KAILASH KORA



main pilgrim season (June to September) to catch sight of this Asian-styled wild west scene. Both the Tibetan and Indian pilgrims are usually friendly and approachable.

The route around Mt Kailash is a simple one: you start by crossing a plain, then head up a wide river valley, climb up and over the 5630m Drölma-la, head down another river valley, and finally cross the original plain to the starting point. It's so straightforward, and so perfect a natural circuit, it's easy to see how it has been a pilgrim's favourite for thousands of years. Check it out on Google Earth even before you arrive.

The Mt Kailash trekking season runs from mid-May until mid-October but trekkers should always be prepared for changeable

weather. Snow may be encountered on the Drölma-la at any time of year and the temperature will often drop well below freezing at night. The pass tends to be snowed in from early November to early April.

The kora is getting more and more popular (and there's the litter everywhere to prove it). A tent and your own food is pretty much necessary no matter when you go as there's no guarantee of getting a bed at one of the primitive guesthouses at the monasteries, or in one of the tents that Indian pilgrims erect near them. Bottled water, instant noodles and snacks are usually available every few hours at nomad tents, especially during the busy Saga Dawa and Indian pilgrim season. Natural water sources abound.

For more information on the kora, Mt Kailash and Darchen, the small town where the kora begins and where you can buy supplies and hire porters, see p226.

Stage 1: Darchen to Dira-puk Monastery

6 hours / 20km / 200m ascent

The kora path begins rather obviously on the western edge of Darchen. Quickly leaving all traces of the grubby village behind, you head westward across the Barkha plain, a sandy expanse speckled with greenery like a massive camouflage jacket. To the north,

the east–west ridge blocks your view of Mt Kailash, but to the southeast are clear views of Gurla Mandata (7728m). Api and other peaks in Nepal are visible to the south, while look to the southwest for the twin, sharp humps of Kamet (7756m) in India.

Only 4km from Darchen the trail climbs up over the southwest end of the ridge to reach a cairn at 4730m. The cairn is bedecked with prayer flags and marks the first views of Mt Kailash's southern or lapis lazuli face and a *chaktsal gang*, the first of the kora's four prostration points.

ESSENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR WALKING AROUND MT KAILASH

There are several important questions to consider when planning to walk the 52km circuit – a *kora* if your pilgrimage is a Buddhist one, a *parikrama* if you're on a Hindu circuit – around Asia's most holy mountain. First, which direction will you go? Buddhist or Hindu, you should be walking the mountain in a clockwise direction. But if you meet walkers coming the other way (anticlockwise), don't be surprised; they're followers of Bön, the ancient pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet – a religion that still thrives in remote parts of Tibet, particularly in the east.

Second, how long will you take? If you're a Tibetan Buddhist, you'll probably plan to complete the circuit in one hard day's slog. Achieving this feat requires a predawn start and a late-afternoon return to Darchen. Occasionally, Westerners emulate this feat – modern folklore even tells of a Russian who did 13 circuits in 15 days – but don't expect to be faster than the average Tibetan walker, who makes it around the mountain in about 14 hours.

Hindu pilgrims, with the odd ritual immersion in an icy lake to endure along the way, typically take three days, overnighting in encampments set up for them close to the Dira-puk and Zutul-puk Monasteries. Independent Western visitors usually aim for a three-day circuit as well. Western trekking groups typically do the circuit in three or four days, as a longer circuit allows time for side trips and excursions to such things as the Mt Kailash north-face. Some very devout Tibetans make the round much more difficult by prostrating themselves the entire way. Count on around three weeks to complete a kora in this manner and be sure to wear knee padding and thick gloves.

How many times around the mountain will you go? Once will wipe out the sins of a lifetime if you have the right predeparture attitude and your sin load is not so great (check your current status at the sin-testing stones on the ascent to the Drölma-la). But Tibetans look upon three circuits as a much more satisfactory starting point and 13 as the real minimum. Like gold status for frequent flyers, completing 13 circuits also allows access to high-status detours, such as the short cut over the Khando Sanglam-la, or a visit to an inner kora (*nangkor*) on the south side of the mountain. Real walkers should aim for 108 circuits, which guarantees instant nirvana and a clean sin slate for all your lifetimes. Economisers should note that koras completed during a full moon are better than ordinary ones; ditto for koras during the Tibetan Year of the Horse.

The final question to ask yourself, and this may be the most important, is what you expect from completing this kora. Assuming you're not a Buddhist, Bönpo or Hindu, the promise of liberation may not grab you no matter how caught up in the moment you are. And yet, many foreigners go truly expecting to experience something holy or profound. This is a little like wanting to fall in love. But why not?

It's probably best to approach the kora without too many expectations (which ironically is what a good Buddhist would do anyway). You may experience the divine in nature, or you may just return with a lot of fond memories and some good photos. And any one of these is enough for us to get back on the pilgrim's path.

THE FACES & RIVERS OF MT KAILASH

It's easy to confuse the mystical Mt Kailash, the symbolic Mt Meru of legend reaching from the lowest hell to the highest heaven, with the real one. From the legendary Mt Kailash a river flows into the legendary Lake Manasarovar, from which flow four legendary rivers in the four cardinal directions. In reality, no rivers flow from Manasarovar but four real rivers do issue from the mountain in, more or less, the cardinal directions.

Direction	Face	Mythical River	Real River
south	lapis lazuli	Mabja Kambab (River from the Peacock Mouth)	Karnali
west	ruby	Langchan Kambab (River from the Elephant's Mouth)	Sutlej
north	gold	Seng-ge Kambab (River from the Lion's Mouth)	Indus
east	crystal	Tamchog Kambab (River from the Horse's Mouth)	Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra)

Very quickly the trail bends round to the north and enters the barren Lha-chu Valley. From here on, the narrow Lha-chu River provides a steady supply of water all the way to Dira-puk Monastery. For the best water, however, look for the occasional side-stream flowing down from the cliffs into the Lha-chu.

The valley is so open at this point you can see ahead to the tall Tarboche flagpole (4750m), which is another hour's walk. The Tarboche area is one of the most significant sites for Tibet's most important festival – Saga Dawa (p229). It's also the point where Indian pilgrims drive to begin their circuit of Mt Kailash. It can be a bit noisy, dusty and dirty here.

Just west of Tarboche is the 'two-legged' **Chörten Kangnyi**. It's an auspicious act for pilgrims to walk through the small chörten's archway. A short climb above Tarboche to the east is the sky-burial site of the 84 *mahasiddhas* (Tantric practitioners who reached a high level of awareness). The site is revered, as it was once reserved for monks and lamas, but is no longer used: too few birds these days and too many wild dogs. The first of the kora's three Buddha footprints is here, but it's hard to find.

Beyond Tarboche, the valley narrows dramatically at an area called Sershong. You can begin to get clear shots of Mt Kailash now, standing to attention above the eastern ridge. After passing a series of ruined chörtens and a number of long mani (prayer) walls the trail reaches a small bridge across the Lha-chu at 4710m. The bridge is less than an hour's walk from Tarboche, about three hours from Darchen, and is directly below Chuku Monastery.

Chuku Monastery (4820m), founded in the 13th century by Götsangpa Gampo Pel, a

Kagyupa-order master, is perched high above the valley floor on the hillside to the west. It blends so secretively into its rocky background you may not even notice it's there. All Mt Kailash monasteries were wrecked during the Cultural Revolution and the Chuku (or Nyenri) Monastery was the first to be rebuilt. Inside, look for a glass case over the altar; there's a highly revered marble statue called Chuku Opame (originally from India and reputed to talk!) inside and a conch shell inlaid with silver. Beside the altar there's a copper pot and elephant tusks, offering articles as found in temples in Bhutan.

During the pilgrim season, a few nomad tents may be set up on the other side of the river from the monastery, with food (instant noodles and snacks) and water for sale.

From the Chuku bridge there are alternative trails along the east and west banks of the river. Either way it's about three hours to Dira-puk Monastery. The trail along the eastern bank is the regular pilgrim route, but on the western trail there are some fine grassy camp sites at **Damding Donkhang** (4890m), about an hour before the monastery. The west or ruby face of Mt Kailash makes a dramatic backdrop to this camp site and in the early morning Tibetan pilgrims can be seen striding past on the other side of the river, already well into their one-day circuit.

Be aware, though, that walking on the western side requires crossing the side streams that flow into the Lha-chu. Even in early summer these can be waist high. Wear socks or rubber sandals when you cross; it helps on the slippery rocks.

Take your time between Chuku Monastery and Dira-puk Monastery as this stretch has some of the best scenery of the entire kora.

High sedimentary faces, wonderfully puckered and dented, and chiselled into shapes that seem alive, hem you in on both sides. When the weather is warmer there's even the occasional ribbon of water tumbling down the slopes from hundreds of metres high.

Many of the formations along the way have mythical connections, a number of them related to Tibet's legendary hero Gesar of Ling – but you're unlikely to find them without a guide. You will have no problem, however, finding the **second prostration point** (N 31°04.430', E 081°16.942'), with its prayer flags and clear view of the east side of Mt Kailash. Thirty minutes later look for the second Buddha footprint, and a **carving** (N 31°05.126', E 081°17.264') of the god Tamdrin, a wrathful horse-headed deity, on a black stone smeared with aeons of yak butter. There may be a few nomad tents here selling the usual drinks and snacks.

From the rock, the trail starts to climb and heads northeast toward Dira-puk Monastery. Before reaching the monastery, walkers who have followed the Lha-chu's east-bank trail will find themselves first at an Indian guesthouse and tent camp on the other side of the river. Water and instant noodles are again available for sale. At the time of writing a new, large, stone guesthouse was being built here.

Some groups camp in the vicinity of the Indian guesthouse (or even bed down here for the night, space permitting), but it's a noisy, dirty area. For something more pleasant try the grassy flats below the monastery itself, or even the northern valley (that leads to the source of the Indus River) east of the monastery.

Dira-puk Monastery, which was rebuilt in 1985, sits in a superb location on the hillside north of the Lha-chu across from the Indian tent camp. It directly faces the north face of Mt Kailash, which from this angle appears as a massive, jet-black slab of granite ornamented with alabaster-white stripes of snow. Three lesser mountains are arrayed in front of Mt Kailash: Chana Dorje (Vajrapani) to the west; Jampelyang (Manjushri) to the east; and Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) in the centre, but there's no doubting who is the superstar in this band.

Dira-puk Monastery takes its name from the words *dira* (meaning 'female-yak-horn') and *puk* ('cave') – this is where the Bön warrior god Gekho tossed boulders around

with his horns. The great saint Götsangpa, who rediscovered the kora route around Mt Kailash, was led this far by a yak that turned out to be the lion-faced goddess Dakini (Khandroma), who guards the Khando Sanglam-la. The main image in the *dukhang* (assembly hall) is of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), flanked by images of the Buddha and a fearsome protector deity.

It's possible to overnight in the monastery's rather basic guesthouse (beds Y40), though be aware that Indian pilgrims often book all the beds here, too. At the time of writing an attractive grey stone guesthouse was being built just below the monastery.

To get to the monastery from the Indian tent camp you must walk downhill to the river and then back up again, a trying ordeal at the end of a long day. There's a bridge to cross but note it's further upstream as you face the monastery.

Stage 2: Dira-puk Monastery to Zutul-puk Monastery

7-8 hours / 18km / 550m ascent / 600m descent
No doubt when you wake in the morning and step outside you'll want to revel in the glory of your surroundings. Mt Kailash's shiny black face dominates the high ground, a rushing river the low, while the middle slopes echo with the moans of yak teams complaining as drivers load them with the day's supplies.

If you have the time, consider walking up to the **Kangkyam Glacier** that descends from the north face of Mt Kailash, between Chenresig and Chana Dorje. It takes about two hours there and back.

Regular kora walkers will head off to the east, crossing the Lha-chu again by bridge. The route then climbs on to a moraine and soon meets the trail on the east bank. The long ascent up the Drölma-chu Valley that will eventually lead to the Drölma-la has begun. Bring water to last a few hours.

Less than an hour along is the meadow at **Jarok Donkhang** (5210m), where some trekking groups set up camp. It's not wise to camp any higher up than here because of the risk of problems with altitude.

Nearby Jarok Donkhang a trail branches off to the southeast, leading over the snow-covered Khando Sanglam-la. This shortcut to the east side of Mt Kailash bypasses the normal route over the Drölma-la, but only those on their auspicious 13th kora may use it. That

lion-faced goddess Dakini who led Götsangpa to Dira-puk makes sure of that.

Also nearby, another **glacier** descends from the east ridge off the north face of Mt Kailash, down through the Pölung Valley between Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) and Jampelyang (Manjushri). This glacier can be reached in a round-trip of a couple of hours from Jarok Donkhang. You can follow the glacial stream that runs down the middle of the valley to merge with the Drölma-chu, or you can avoid losing altitude from Jarok Donkhang by terracing around the side of Jampelyang.

Only a short distance above Jarok Donkhang, about two hours from the day's starting point, is the rocky expanse of **Shiva-tsal** (5330m; N 31°05.795', E 081°20.856'). Pilgrims are supposed to undergo a symbolic death at this point, entering in the realm of the Lord of the Dead, until they reach the top of the Drölma-la and are reborn again.

It is customary to leave something behind at Shiva-tsal – an item of clothing, a drop of blood or a lock of hair – to represent the act of leaving this life behind. Be aware, though, that to most foreign eyes the result looks more like a garbage dump than holy ground.

After Shiva-tsal the trail mercifully flattens for a time and proceeds along a glacial ridge. There are a number of interesting sights ahead, such as the sin-testing stone of **Bardo Trang** (a flat boulder that pilgrims are supposed to squeeze under to measure their sinfulness), but even your guide may not know where they are.

About 30 minutes from Shiva-tsal the trail turns eastward for the completion of the ascent to the 5630m **Drölma-la**. The saddle is fairly dull looking, just a long slope of boulders and scree, but there are some stark, jagged peaks to the right. Look south for your last glimpse of the north face of Mt Kailash.

Allow around an hour for the 200m climb to the top of the Drölma-la. The trail disappears at times, merging with glacial streams in summer, but the way up, up, is obvious. Take your time. Let children and old people pass you, and if you can't go more than a few metres at a time, don't.

After a few false summits, the rocky pass is reached. The great cubic **Drölma Do** (Drölma's Rock) that marks the top is barely visible behind an enormous number of prayer flags. Pilgrims perform a circumambulation none-

theless, pasting money onto the rock with yak butter, and stooping to pass under the lines of prayer flags. They also chant the Tibetan pass-crossing mantra, '*ki ki so so, lha gyalo*' ('*ki ki so so*' being the empowerment and happiness invocation, '*lha gyalo*' meaning 'the gods are victorious'). They have now been reborn, and, by the mercy and compassion of Drölma, their sins have been forgiven.

The tale associated with the revered Drölma Do is worth telling. When Götsangpa pioneered the kora and wandered into the valley of Dakini (Khandroma), he was led back to the correct route by 21 wolves that were, of course, merely 21 emanations of Drölma (Tara), the goddess of mercy and protectress of the pass. Reaching the pass, the 21 wolves merged into one and then merged again into the great boulder. To this day Drölma helps worthy pilgrims on the difficult ascent.

Weather permitting, most pilgrims and trekkers pause at the pass for a rest and refreshments before starting the steep descent. Almost immediately, **Gauri Kund** (5608m; one of its Tibetan names translates as 'Lake of Compassion') comes into view below. Hindu pilgrims are supposed to immerse themselves in the lake's green waters, breaking the ice if necessary, but few actually do.

It takes approximately an hour to make the long and very steep 400m descent to the grassy banks of the Lham-chu Khir. You may have to cross snowfields at first, sometimes leaping across streams that have cut through the valley floor, but later the trail turns dry, and rocky. Two walking sticks are useful here.

En route there is a much-revered footprint of Milarepa, though again, spotting it on your own is difficult. When the trail reaches the valley, you may find nomad tents and a tea-house selling drinks and noodles. A huge rock topped by the kora's third Buddha footprint stands nearby.

As with the Lha-chu Valley on the western side of Mt Kailash, there are routes that follow both sides of the river. The eastern-bank trail presents better views and there's less marshy ground but it requires crossing the river by boulder hopping, and later recrossing by wading into the river itself (which may be quite deep during the wetter months).

About 30 minutes south, a valley comes down from the Khando Sanglam-la to join the western trail. This valley provides the only glimpse of Mt Kailash's eastern or crystal face.

MILAREPA VERSUS NARO BÖNCHUNG

All around the Mt Kailash kora there are signs of the contest for supremacy that was fought between Milarepa, the Buddhist poet-saint, and Naro Bönchung, the Bön master. According to the Buddhists, in all encounters it was Milarepa who came out the victor, but despite this he still agreed to a final, winner-takes-all duel, a straightforward race to the top of the mountain. Mounting his magic drum, Naro Bönchung immediately set out to fly to the summit but, despite his acolytes' urging, Milarepa didn't bother getting out of bed. Finally, as the first rays of dawn revealed that Naro Bönchung was at the point of reaching the top, Milarepa rose from his bed and was carried by a ray of light directly to the top. Shocked by this defeat, his opponent tumbled off his drum, which skittered down the south face of the mountain, gouging the long slash marking Mt Kailash to this day. Hindu pilgrims call the slash the 'stairway to heaven'. Gracious in victory, Milarepa decreed that Bön followers could continue to make their customary anticlockwise circuits of Mt Kailash, and awarded nearby Bönri as their own holy mountain.

The kora's third prostration point is at the valley mouth but it's easy to miss this point if you're walking on the eastern bank.

About two hours on, grassy fields appear alongside the river affording those with tents endless spots to set up camp. During the Indian pilgrimage season, you may get to share the site with grazing yaks and horses, an opportunity for some fantastic photographs. Note that by this point, the river has changed name to the Dzong-chu, which translates as 'Fortress River'.

An hour or so from the start of the camping fields is the Zutul-puk Monastery (4790m). The *zutul phuk* (miracle cave) that gives the monastery its name is at the back of the main hall. As the story goes, Milarepa and Naro Bönchung were looking for shelter from the rain. They decided to build a cave together but Milarepa put the roof in place without waiting for Naro Bönchung to make the walls (thus once again showing the supremacy of Buddhism). Milarepa then made a couple adjustments to the cave, which left a footprint and handprint that can still be seen today.

The monastery has a simple guesthouse (beds Y40) but it can only be booked out by Indian pilgrims. The area around the monastery is also littered with rubbish mounting with every pilgrim season.

Stage 3: Zutul-puk Monastery to Darchen

3-4 hours / 14km / 150m descent

If you've camped, it's about 30 minutes to the monastery. From here, the trail follows the river closely for an hour or so then climbs

above the river and enters the lovely **Gold & Red Cliffs**, a narrow canyon whose walls are stained purple, cobalt and rust.

When the canyon narrows look for holes gouged into the cliff walls. These are not natural but made by pilgrims looking for holy stones. Also look for prayer flags festooned across the river, and in the far distance the blue waters of the lake Raksas Tal.

Where the trail emerges onto the Barkha plain, close to the fourth prostration point (4610m), Gurla Mandata is again visible in the distance. It's now an easy one-hour walk back to Darchen along a dirt road. While not a very scenic stretch of the kora, the steady ground below does allow you to drift off and reflect on the past three days.

NYENCHEN TANGLHA TRAVERSE

This is a fabulous trek for those who want to see the ecological mosaic of northern Tibet in all its splendour. Close encounters with the *drokpa*, the seminomadic shepherds of the region with their ancient customs and traditions, enliven the trail. Herds of blue sheep live in the crags and in the woodlands the endangered musk deer makes its home.

The trek begins on the main road to the Nam-tso lake, 5km beyond the Damxung-Lhasa Hwy turn-off. The trail cuts across the mighty Nyenchen Tanglha range and heads directly for Tashi Do, the celebrated headland on the southeast shore of Nam-tso. From Tashi Do there is an almost constant stream of Lhasa-bound vehicles, making prospects for a ride back easy. For further information on accessing Damxung and Tashi Do, see p149.

NYENCHEN TANGLHA TRAVERSE AT A GLANCE

Duration 3 days

Distance 60km

Difficulty moderate to demanding

Start Damxung

Finish Tashi Do

Highest Point Kyang-la (5330m)

Nearest Large Town Damxung

Accommodation camping

Public Transport bus

Summary Passing through gorges, forested slopes, alpine meadows and the plains of the Changtang, this is a great walk for those interested in the ecological diversity of northern Tibet.

The route leaves the Damxung valley and wends its way through a rocky defile, the gateway to a high-elevation forest in which dwarf willow and rhododendron are dominant species. A number of stream crossings await you. A tundra-filled upper valley gradually climbs to the Kyang-la (Onager pass), followed by a steep descent onto the Changtang plains. Fantastic views of sparkling Nam-tso and Tashi Do are visible from many vantage points on the trail. And colourful *drokpa* camps dot the way.

The best time to make the Nyenchen Tanglha traverse is from May to October. A winter crossing is also sometimes possible but don't attempt one unless you have the green light from local residents. This is a very high elevation trek with a 5330m pass and minimum elevations of 4310m, so factor in plenty of time for acclimatising. It's

prudent to spend two nights in Damxung before setting out (see p149). You will have to be fully equipped with a tent and stove and enough food to reach Tashi Do, three days away. Temperatures even in the summer regularly dip below freezing and gale force winds are common.

Horses and guides should be available in the villages near the trailhead for Y50 to Y90 apiece per day. In June when locals are out collecting caterpillar fungus (see p260) horses may be hard to get. If you're not successful in the nearby villages of Nakya or Baga Ara, try Nya Do, Largen Do or Tren Do, which are a little further afield but larger in size.

Stage 1: Nakya to the Tree-Line

5 hours / 18km / 480m ascent

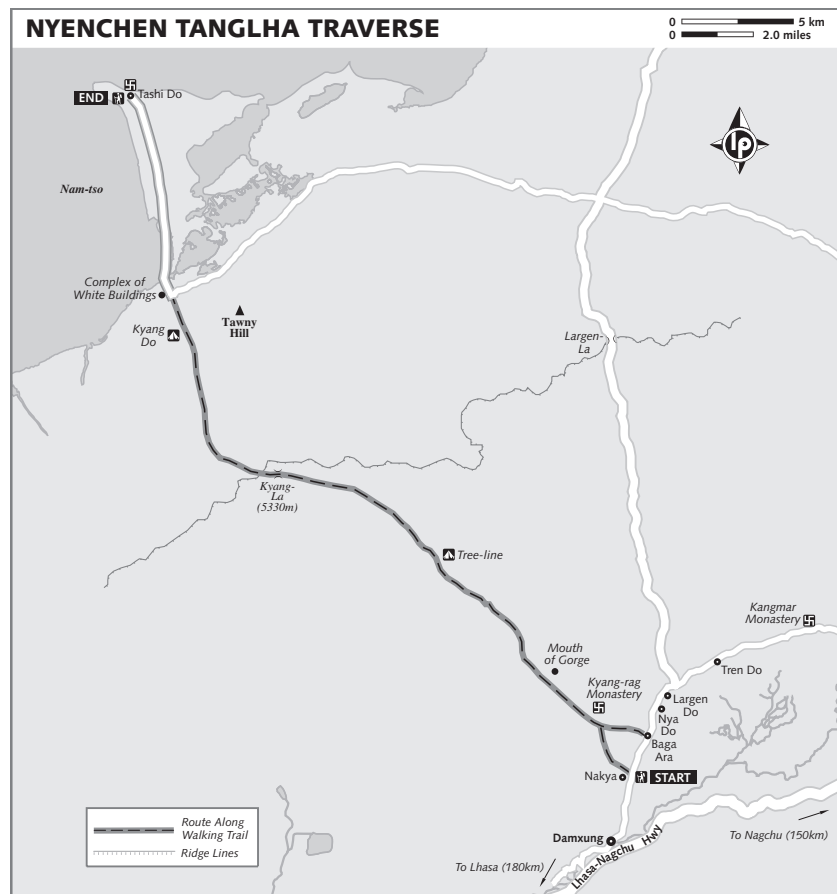
This trail sets off from villages outside Damxung and makes a beeline directly into the Kyang Valley. From the turn-off for Nam-tso at Damxung proceed along the black-top road 4.5km to the village of **Nakya** or 6km to **Baga Ara**. In both villages there are motorable tracks that head northwest over a plain entering the narrow mouth of the Kyang Valley in just over 2km. Perched 50m above the northeast side of the valley is **Kyang-rag Monastery** (4370; N 30°31.694', E 091°05.759').

Kyang-rag Monastery, a glistening white hermitage clinging to the cliff face, was founded by the Panchen Lama Palden Yeshe in the 18th century. It contains just one small chapel featuring various images of the protectress Palden Lhamo, as well as those of the Buddha and Guru Rinpoche.

All the way to the Kyang-la the valley runs in a northwest direction. From Kyang-rag remain on the east side of the valley heading upstream. Along the narrow valley floor are plenty of

KYAN-RAG

It is said that Palden Yeshe and his retinue once camped on the opposite side of the Kyang-chu. One day a *kyang* (onager or wild ass) wandered into camp and entered the tent used by the Panchen Lama for religious practise. The Panchen Lama tossed a sack containing sacrificial cakes on the onager's back. The *kyang* exited the tent, wandered to the other side of the river and disappeared into a cliff. Curious, Palden Yeshe went in pursuit of the *kyang* and reached the cliff where it was last seen. Here he found an old monk who had covered the very spot with his cloak. The Panchen Lama demanded to know what was going on and pulled off the cloak. Immediately his nose began to bleed. Taking this as a mystic sign, he used the blood to paint an image of Palden Lhamo on the rocks. This site became the inner sanctum of Kyang-rag Monastery. As it turned out the *kyang* was no ordinary animal but a local deity and the mount of the great goddess Palden Lhamo. For that reason the place became known as Kyang-rag (Onager Beheld).



small places to camp. About one hour from Kyang-rag Monastery ford the crystal waters of the Kyang-chu to the west side of the valley and enter a narrow **rocky gorge**. The gorge coincides with the high mountains that close in around the Kyang-chu. Five more fords await, so it's a good idea to bring canvas tennis shoes or rubber sandals especially dedicated to this purpose. A walking stick is also very helpful. The Kyang-chu is a fairly shallow stream but with a swift current, so make sure your walking legs are up to the task.

The trail is clear and easy to follow. In 10 minutes it crosses to the east side of the valley. There are rocks but these may be slippery and it's safer to get your feet wet. Within half an hour the trail crosses the river four more times,

breaking out of the gorge at the last ford and landing on the east side of the valley.

The valley is now a little more open and the west slopes quite heavily forested. The trail remains in the valley bottom or along the east edge of the slope. There are a number of places to camp provided they are not already occupied by the *drokpa* shepherds. In two or 2½ hours, reaching the tree-line, the trail skips over stones to the west side of the valley (4790m; N 30°34.662', E 91°02.350'). There are a number of excellent camp sites in the vicinity.

Stage 2: Tree-Line to Kyang Do

8-9 hours / 25km / 540m ascent / 490m descent
Twenty minutes up valley **springs** gush out of the base of a cliff. In about 200m the trail re-

turns to the east side of the valley where it remains until the pass crossing. There are good camping sites on both sides of the stream ford. Now the valley becomes more sinuous and somewhat steeper. The trail enters the tundra zone and becomes faint in places. Stay in the valley floor and head upstream. In around 45 minutes enter a long, wide section of the valley gravitating towards its east flank. You will need at least 1½ hours to trek over this stretch of the valley. High peaks of the Nyenchen Tanglha range tower above your line of travel.

Above this point you're not likely to find any more *drokpa* camps until well after the Kyang-la, but there are quite a few places to set up your tent should you decide to tarry in the flower-spangled meadows. Further up the valley narrows a little and becomes steeper. The trail is still near the east edge of the valley but hardly visible in places. In 1½ hours ascend the broad shelf east of the valley. It's only about 10m higher than the valley floor. In the vicinity the Kyang-chu forks: the larger branch flows down from the southwest originating in a group of dark-coloured rocky peaks. The smaller branch cascades down from the pass in the northwest. This is the last place to collect water until after the pass. Paralleling the smaller branch of the stream the trail heads in a northwest and then westerly direction to meet the base of the Kyang-la (5240m; N 30°37.522', E 090°58.080') in about 45 minutes.

Climb up to a higher and narrower bench continuing in a westerly direction. The way is moderately steep. Soon a line of brown cairns come into view. These mark the broad saddle rising to the Kyang-la. Continue up walking parallel to these cairns. The high point is **Kyang-la** (5330m; N 30°37.700', E 090°57.320'), about a 45-minute hike from the base of the pass.

It's only about a 30m descent to the head of the valley on the **Changtang** side of the pass. This valley is also known as **Kyang**. Good drinking water is had here – fill up because water can be scarce down valley. The valley now bends to the north, the direction it takes all the way down to the Nam-tso basin. Soon the great lake in all its glory comes into view. The eastern tip of Tashi Do and a long headland jutting deep into the lake, bright gems on a scintillating cobalt-blue surface, are clearly visible.

Stay on the east side of the valley. In a few minutes the trail leaves the valley and steeply

descends through rocky slopes, followed by grassy slopes. In about 45 minutes you reach the **valley floor** (5120m; N 30°38.505', E 090°56.954'). Note that the **Kyang-chu** on this side of the pass is much smaller and prone to disappear underground in places.

The trail soon crosses to the west side of the valley before returning to the east side in only five minutes. The trail traces the east edge of the valley. In 45 minutes the magnificent Tashi Do comes into full view. In 20 minutes recross to the west side of the stream and point your feet downstream. The terrain is quite gentle and Nam-tso is your constant companion, so going cross-country is easy and fun. The valley is wide open and in 30 minutes there are many excellent camps by the stream at **Kyang Do**.

Stage 3: Kyang Do to Tashi Do

4-5 hours / 17km / 80m descent

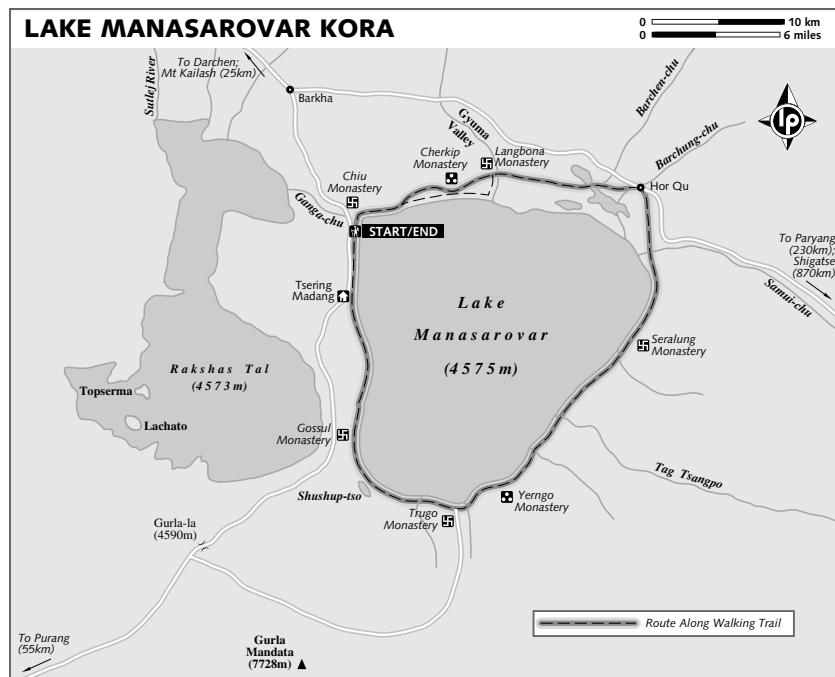
A tawny-coloured hill appears in the distance. Leave the valley and skirt its west side by walking across the plain. The base of this hill is reached in approximately one hour. Do not make the mistake of staying in the valley floor, although this may seem the best route. Further down swampy ground would come between you and Tashi Do. After walking around the base of the tawny hill look for a complex of mainly white buildings to the north. Hike directly to it in about one hour. This complex at the base of the Tashi Do headland is part of its management apparatus.

The tourist centre of **Tashi Do** (4730m; N 30°46.652', E 090°52.243') is still 8km away on a black-top road. It should be easy should you want to hitch a ride from there. For information on this burgeoning tourist mecca, see p147.

MORE TREKS

LAKE MANASAROVAR KORA

Although there is now a road all the way around Lake Manasarovar (4575m), this is still a very lovely walk. Fortunately, the road can be avoided for much of the 110km mostly level route. Lake Manasarovar reflects the most lucid shades of blue imaginable. She represents the female or wisdom aspect of enlightenment and is a symbol of good fortune and fertility, explaining why



Tibetans are always very eager to circumambulate her. There are five friendly Buddhist monasteries along the way. Public buses now ply the north side of the lake. Horses and guides can be hired in Hor Qu, the town on the northeastern side of the lake. Expect to pay at least Y100 per day for each.

Due to the elevation (averaging 4600m) this is a moderately difficult trek. May, June and September are the best months for the four- or five-day trek; July and August are also good, save for the hordes of gnats that infest the shores. A tent and stove are required and you should be prepared for any kind of weather at any time.

The best place to start the walk is at Chiu Monastery on the northwest corner of the lake. Go in either a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction, depending on whether you more closely relate to the Buddhists and Hindus or the Bönpos. If walking in a clockwise direction you will reach Langbona Monastery in about four hours. It's about another four hours to Hor Qu. Seralung Monastery, on the east side of Lake

Manasarovar, is approximately three hours from Hor Qu, with four to five more hours bringing you to Trugo Monastery on the southern flank of the lake. You can make it back to Chiu Monastery via Gossul Monastery in nine to 10 hours of walking from Trugo Monastery.

EVEREST EAST FACE

Follow a river conduit breaching the Himalaya to the spectacular forested east flank of Mt Everest. Small lakes and fantastic camping make this a most attractive trek, but route finding is demanding and the terrain difficult so consider a local guide. Drive to Kharta, with its alpine hamlets, some 90km from Shegar on the Friendship Hwy (for getting to Shegar, see p206). Budget at least 10 days for the trek. There are two main passes accessing the east or Kangshung side of Everest: Langmala (5330m) and Shao-la (5030m). The huge Kangchung glacier reposes on the west end of the Karma Valley. For detailed information, see *Tibet Handbook* by Victor Chan and *Trekking in Tibet* by Gary McCue.

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