

# Central Bhutan



There is a great variety of people, architecture and scenery in central Bhutan. Because it takes a little extra time to get here, the countryside and hotels see fewer tourists than in Thimphu, Paro and Punakha. In fact, until the 1970s the only way to reach this part of Bhutan was on foot or atop a sure-footed horse.

Across the 3420m-high Pele La and the Black Mountains is the large, fertile Mangde Chhu valley and the great Trongsa Dzong. Commanding the junction of three major roads, Trongsa has long been the glue that holds the country together. Even today the Crown Prince must serve as the *penlop* (regional governor) of the dzong before he can rule as king.

A short drive over the mountains from Trongsa leads to the four valleys of Bumthang, a magical region of saints and treasure-seekers, great demon-subduing struggles and fabulous miracles, rich with relics from the visits of Guru Rinpoche and Pema Lingma. This forested landscape is Bhutan's cultural heartland. For the visitor it offers several of Bhutan's best and oldest monasteries, some great day hikes and short treks and spectacular festivals, primarily at Jampey Lhakhang and nearby Ura. Bumthang is one of the real highlights of Bhutan.

In the south the Royal Manas National Park protects a region of tropical vegetation and rich biodiversity. It's hoped that the park will soon reopen to foreigners.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore sprawling **Trongsa Dzong** (p164), one of the most dramatic examples of traditional Bhutanese architecture
- Stretch your legs on one of the many excellent hikes in the **Bumthang valley** (p171)
- Pay a visit to **Kurjey Lhakhang** (p173), **Jampey Lhakhang** (p172) and **Tamshing Lhakhang** (p176), Bumthang's most spectacular ancient temples
- Pause at **Chendebji Chorten** (opposite): smaller, but patterned after, Swayambhunath in Kathmandu, en route to Trongsa
- Head up the Tang Valley to the hundred-year-old **Ogyen Chholing Palace** (p178), now home to a fine museum and guesthouse retreat
- Time your visit to take in the **Ura festival** (p179) or leave the groups behind and linger in the nearby traditional village of **Shingkar** (p179)



## History

Central Bhutan is believed to be the first part of Bhutan to have been inhabited, with evidence of prehistoric settlements in the Ura valley of Bumthang and the southern region of Khyeng. These and many other valleys were separate principalities ruled by independent kings. One of the most important of these kings was the 8th-century Indian Sindhu Raja of Bumthang, who was eventually converted to Buddhism by Guru Rinpoche (see p173). Bumthang continued to be a separate kingdom, ruled from Jakar, until the time of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century.

During the rule of the first *desi* (secular ruler), Tenzin Drugyey, all of eastern Bhutan came under the control of the Drukpa government in Punakha. Chhogyel Mingyur Tenpa unified central and eastern Bhutan into eight provinces known as Shachho Khorlo Tsegay. He was then promoted to Trongsa *penlop* (governor).

Because of Trongsa Dzong's strategic position, the *penlop* exerted great influence over the entire country. It was from Trongsa that Jigme Namgyal, father of the first king, rose to power.

Bumthang retained its political importance during the rule of the first and second kings, both of whom had their principal residence at Wangdichholing Palace in Jakar. Several impressive royal residences and country estates remain in the region, including at Kuenga Rabten, Eundu Chholing and Urgyen Chholing.

## TRONGSA DZONGKHAG

### WANGDUE PHODRANG TO TRONGSA (129KM)

It takes about four hours to drive between the windswept town of Wangdi (Wangdue Phodrang's colloquial name) in western Bhutan, and Trongsa. The route crosses the Black Mountains over the Pele La (3420m) before entering the broad, heavily cultivated Mangde Chhu valley. See p151 for details of the drive from Wangdi to the Pele La.

### Pele La to Chendebji

27km / 1 hour

From Pele La the road drops through hillsides of a strange dwarf bamboo called *cham*. This bamboo never gets large enough to harvest for any useful purpose, but when it is small it is a favourite food of yaks and horses. The

area near Pele La is probably the best place in Bhutan to see yaks from the road. Be alert, though, as these great shaggy beasts are skittish and likely to run off into the forest when your vehicle approaches.

The road drops into the evergreen forests of the Longte valley, passing Kgebji village and the Tashi Choeling Restaurant below the high village of Longte. The groups of small white numbered houses along the road here are quarters for road-maintenance crews.

Lower down into the valley the vegetation changes to broadleaf species and bamboo. The road passes opposite **Rukubji** village with its big school and goemba at the end of a huge alluvial fan believed to be the body of a giant snake. The houses in this village are clustered closely together, an unusual layout for Bhutan. Surrounding the village are extensive fields of mustard, potatoes, barley and wheat.

About 16km from the pass keep an eye open on the left for the roadside rock inscription and mural that was left here in 2002 for the filming of the Bhutanese movie *Travellers and Magicians*. After the Buddhist blessing come the words 'Scene 112, take 101!'

The road enters a side valley and drops to **Sephu** (2610m), next to the bridge that spans the Nikka Chhu. This is the end point of the 25-day Snowman trek that starts from Paro and passes through the remote Lunana district (see p237). You could stop briefly to examine the bamboo mats and baskets for sale here, though most of the products are functional items. The larger baskets, called *zhim*, are tied to horses' pack saddles to transport goods. Tsering's Restaurant cum Bar beside the bridge offers *mosmos* (dumplings), tea and a clean toilet.

The road follows the Nikka Chhu to two chortens that mark the river's confluence with the Nyala Chhu. It is then a gentle, winding descent through rhododendrons, blue pines, spruces, oaks and dwarf bamboo to the village of Chendebji, recognisable by the yellow roof of its *lhakhang* (chapel), on the far bank. This was a night halt for mule caravans travelling from Trongsa during the reign of the second king.

Two kilometres beyond Chendebji village is **Chendebji Chorten**, at a lovely spot by a river confluence. The large white chorten is patterned after Swayambhunath in Kathmandu and was built in the 19th century by Lama Shida, from Tibet, to cover the remains of an evil spirit that was killed here. The proper name of this structure is Chorten Charo

Kasho; it is the westernmost monument in a 'chorten path' that was the route of early Buddhist missionaries. (The easternmost monument in this path is Chorten Kora in Trashi Yangtse.) The nearby Bhutanese-style chorten was constructed in 1982. Bring some insect repellent to fight off the persistent flies.

Just 500m past the chorten is the **Hotel Chandjee/Urgyen Dorji Tabdea Restaurant** ☎ 490052; lunch buffet Nu 285, a popular lunch spot and gift shop run by the owners of the Dochu La Hotel.

### Chendebji to Trongsa

41km / 1¼ hours

From the chorten the road passes a few farms, crosses a side stream and climbs again to a

ridge, passing above the village of Tangsi-bji. The valley widens and the road turns a corner into the broad Mangde Chhu valley. The shrubs along this part of the road are edgeworthia, which is used to make paper. The brown monkeys you will probably see are rhesus macaques.

At Tashiling, next to the 'Thinley Zangmo Shop And Bar', you'll see the new **Potala Lhakhang**, consecrated in late 2005 by the Je Khenpo. Inside is a fine 9m-tall statue of Chenresig, alongside a wrathful Guru Rinpoche.

After the road weaves in and out of side valleys for another 5km you finally get a view of Trongsa and the huge, sprawling white dzong that seems to hang in space at

the head of the valley. On the opposite side of the huge Mangde Chhu valley you can see the road that heads south to Zhemgang and Gelephu near the Indian border. A **viewpoint** next to a small chorten by the road offers a good place for a picnic and photo stop. The dzong looks almost close enough to touch but is still 14km away. There are plans to restore the old footpath between here and Trongsa Dzong.

To reach Trongsa, you switchback into the upper reaches of the Mangde Chhu valley, cross the raging river at the Bjee Zam check-post, and then climb again above the north bank of the river, past a waterfall and the Yangkhil Resort, before pulling into town.

### TRONGSA

☎ 03 / elev 2180m

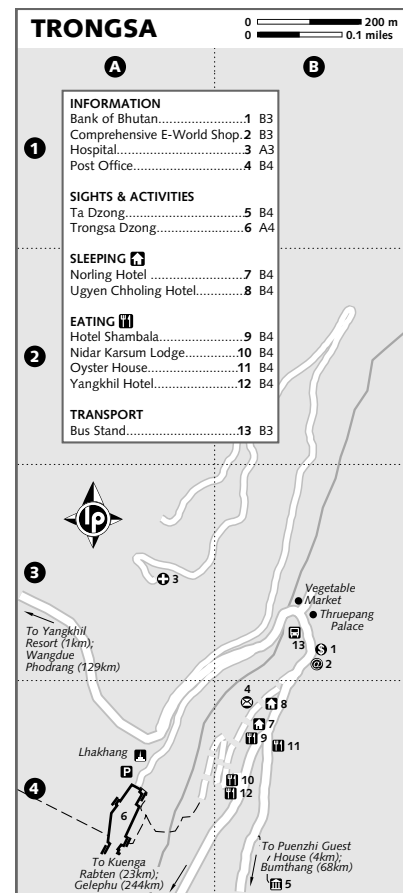
Trongsa is smack in the middle of the country, a seven-hour drive from Thimphu, and separated from both east and west by high mountain ranges. The dzong and surrounding town is perched above a gorge, with fine views of the Black Mountains to the southwest. It's a relaxed and pleasant town, lined with the whitewashed wooden façades of shops decorated with potted plants.

Trongsa Dzong has a rich history dating back to the 16th century. The first construction on the site of the dzong was carried out by Lam Ngagi Wangchuck, son of Ngawang Chhojey, who established Pangri Zampa in Thimphu (see p115). He came to Trongsa in 1541 and built a *tshamkhang* (meditation room) after discovering self-manifested hoof-prints belonging to the horse of the protector deity Pelden Lhamo. Trongsa ('New Village' in the local dialect) gets its name from the retreats, temples and hermit residences that soon grew up around the chapel.

The town received a large influx of Tibetan immigrants in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and Bhutanese of Tibetan descent run most shops here. The Tibetans are so well assimilated into Bhutanese society that there is almost no indication of Tibetan flavour in the town.

### Orientation

The main road from the west traverses above the dzong and passes the weekend vegetable market and small Thrupeang Palace (closed to visitors), where the third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, was born in 1928.



The road climbs to a cluster of shops and hotels that form the bazaar. A traffic circle marks the junction of the road that leads south to Gelephu. A short walk down this road offers good views back to the dzong.

The road east goes uphill from the traffic circle. A short walk on this road leads to a steep, narrow path that will take you to the Ta Dzong watchtower.

### Information

**Bank of Bhutan** (Map p163; ☎ 521123; 🕒 9am-1pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat) You need a photocopy of the cheque to change travellers cheques here.

**Comprehensive E-World Shop** (Map p163; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-6.30pm Thu-Tue; per min Nu 2) Internet access.

**Post Office** (Map p163; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat)

## Sights

### TRONGSA DZONG

This commanding dzong, high above the roaring Mande Chhu, is perhaps the most spectacularly sited dzong in Bhutan, with a sheer drop to the south that often just disappears into cloud and mist. The rambling collection of buildings trails down the ridge in a remarkable succession of streetlike corridors, wide stone stairs and beautiful stone courtyards.

The southernmost part of the dzong, Chorten Lhakhang, is the location of the first hermitage, built in 1543. The actual dzong was built in its present form in 1644 by Chhogyel Mingyur Tenpa, the official who was sent by the Zhabdrung to unify eastern Bhutan. It was then enlarged at the end of the 17th century by the *desi*, Tenzin Rabgye. Its official name is Chhoekhor Raptentse Dzong, and it is also known by its short name of Choetse Dzong.

The dzong's strategic location gave it great power over this part of the country. The only trail between eastern and western Bhutan still leads straight through Trongsa and used to run directly through the dzong itself. This gave the Trongsa *penlop* enviable control over east-west trade and the tax revenue to be derived from it. Today visitors enter through the main eastern gate but there are plans to renovate and revive the old footpath and cantilever bridge over the Mande Chhu, allowing tourists to hike up to Trongsa (two hours) from the current viewing area by the chorten (see p161) and enter the dzong via the eastern gate, in traditional fashion.

Trongsa Dzong is the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family. The first two hereditary kings ruled from this dzong, and tradition still dictates that the crown prince serve as Trongsa *penlop* before ascending to the throne. When the current crown prince became *penlop* in 2004 the yellow roof was repainted red. The Trongsa *rabdey* (monastic body) migrates between winter (Trongsa) and summer (Bumthang) residences, just as the main *dratshang* (monk body) does between Thimphu and Punakha (see p135).

There are 23 separate lhakhangs in the dzong, though what you get to see depends on which keys are available. The dzong was severely damaged in the 1897 earthquake and repairs were carried out by the *penlop* of

Trongsa, Jigme Namgyal, father of Bhutan's first king. Most of the existing fine decoration was designed during the rule of the first king, Ugyen Wangchuck. The dzong was recently renovated by the Austrian team that is currently working on the nearby Ta Dzong.

The atmospheric northern **assembly hall** is still preserved as it was during his reign. There is a painting of the court as it was then, and other paintings of the guardians of the four directions and the deity Phurba in the main hall. There is also a 17th-century mural depicting Swayambhunath in Nepal and another with a pictorial map of Lhasa. The main chapel to the south, the **Chorten Lhakhang**, houses the funerary chorten of the founder Ngagi Wangchuck.

The five-day Trongsa *teschu* is held in the northern courtyard in December or January.

### TA DZONG

This watchtower on the hill above the dzong has been converted into a state-of-the-art museum by the same Austrian-financed team that renovated the excellent Patan Museum in Nepal. The displays, which should open in mid-2008, will focus on Buddhist art and the history of the monarchy. Views from the fifth-floor roof will be unrivalled. A café is planned.

A chapel inside the tower is dedicated to the 19th-century *penlop* of Trongsa, Jigme Namgyal. Two British soldiers are said to have been kept in the dungeon here for several months during the Duar War.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Amankora** (www.amanresorts.com; s/d full board US\$925/1000) plan to open a hotel above the dzong by 2008.

**Yangkhill Resort** (Map p163; ☎ 521417; yangkhillresort@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1600/1800, deluxe s/d Nu 1900/2300; 📺) This resort, 1.5km west of town, should be your first choice, with rooms lined on a terrace to look back toward the dzong. Rooms are spacious and comfortable with a nice balcony and extremely comfortable beds. The pleasant grounds and sitting areas make it a great place to relax, so arrange your itinerary to ensure an early arrival or late departure. Request one of the six view rooms in advance, as some rooms have only partial views.

**Puenzhi Guest House** (Map p163; ☎ 521197; puenzhi@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 800/1000, deluxe r Nu 1500) A 4km drive above the town leads to this place, run by the former governor of Trongsa. The simple but cosy new rooms at the top are the best and come with a private balcony; next best

are the rooms below the restaurant. Literally bottom of the heap are the cottages below. The restaurant balcony offers great aerial views of Trongsa Dzong and steep footpaths lead down to the Ta Dzong.

**Norling Hotel** (Map p163; ☎ 521171; fax 521178; s/d Nu 1050/1200) This concrete hotel occupies a spot somewhere between a local and tourist hotel. The food in the pleasant dining room is quite good and there's BBC World on the TV.

**Ugyen Chholing Hotel** (Map p163; ☎ 521400; r Nu 250-400) This family-run inn is probably the best of the cheapies, with a decent restaurant, western-style bathroom and hot-water geyser.

Several small, friendly places offer simple wooden rooms upstairs and Tibetan-style restaurants and a shop downstairs. These include the **Yangkhill Hotel** (Map p163; ☎ 521126), **Nidar Karsum Lodge** (Map p163; ☎ 521133) and **Hotel Shambala** (Map p163; ☎ 521135). Expect to pay about Nu 60 for a meal of rice, curry and vegetables or Nu 250 for a double room.

**The Oyster House** (Map p163 ☎ 521413) This new upper-floor restaurant is popular with young Bhutanese attracted to its full-sized snooker table. The Indian and Bhutanese dishes are good but they only really serve a fraction of the stuff on the menu. There are a few basic rooms out back.

### AROUND TRONGSA

#### Kuenga Rabten

The winter palace of the second king, Jigme Wangchuck, is 23km (one hour) south of Trongsa. It's an interesting drive, passing below Takse Goemba (after 17km), several huge waterfalls, and the fertile rice terraces of the lower Mande Chhu valley. It's a good half- or three-quarter-day side trip from Trongsa and could even make for a fine bike trip if you can arrange to be picked up at Kuenga Rabten. Traffic is light and it's all downhill from Trongsa!

The palace is under the care of the National Commission for Cultural Affairs so you don't need a special permit to enter. The first storey of the U-shaped building was used to store food; the second was the residence of royal attendants and the army; and the third housed the royal quarters and the king's private chapel. Part of this floor has been converted into a library and books from the National Library are stored here. Sandwiched between the king's and queen's quarters is the Sangye Lhakhang, with statues of Sakyamuni, the Zhabdrung and Guru Rinpoche (take your shoes off for this chapel).

A 15-minute hike uphill from the building is the **Karma Drubdey Nunery**, which is currently being expanded by its 85 hard-working *anim* (nuns).

A further 25km down the valley is **Eundu Chhaling**, the winter palace of the first king, Ugyen Wangchuck. From Kuenga Rabten the road drops down in huge loops, past Refey village to the river and road camp at Yourmu, and then 2km later branches up a dirt road to the palace. The building belongs to a local *dasho* (nobleman) but is looked after by the *dzongpen* (master of the dzong) and tourists can normally visit. The second-floor *goenkhang* (chapel devoted to protective deities; men only) has a highly venerated chorten of Pema Lingpa, as well as a fabulous collection of arms and a lovely *dramnyen* (lute). The entry chapel has some of the finest murals you'll see, depicting the mythical kingdoms of Zangto Pelri and Sukhavati.

## BUMTHANG DZONGKHAG

The Bumthang region encompasses four major valleys: Chokhor, Tang, Ura and Chhume. Because the dzongs and the most important temples are in the large Chokhor valley, it is commonly referred to as the Bumthang valley.

There are two versions of the origin of the name Bumthang. The valley is supposed to be shaped like a *bumpa*, the vessel of holy water that is usually found on the altar of a lhakhang. *Thang* means 'field' or 'flat place'. The less respectful translation relates to the particularly beautiful women who live here – *bum* means 'girl'.

For a more detailed map of the region, see p230.

### TRONGSA TO JAKAR (68KM)

The 2½-hour run between Trongsa and Jakar, the main town in Bumthang, is one of the easier and more interesting drives in Bhutan because it passes numerous villages and goembas as it winds through the Chhume valley.

### Trongsa to Yotong La

28km / 1 hour

The road quickly switchbacks up the ridge above Trongsa, climbing steeply for 7km

past the Puenzhi Guest House to a viewpoint where you can look down on the town and dzong. It's then a 5km climb past the small Dorji Goemba to the head of a valley. Finally the road traverses across the top of the valley to a Tibetan chorten and array of prayer flags atop the **Yotong La** (3425m). The old trade route to eastern Bhutan parallels the modern road as it crosses the pass.

### Yotong La to Zungney

24km / 1 hour

The descent from the pass is through firs, then blue pines and bamboo. The road enters the upper part of the Chhume valley, marked by the small roadside Chuchi Lhakhang at Gaytsa. On a hill 10 minutes' walk to the north of Gaytsa is the Nyingma school **Buli Lhakhang**, built by Tukse Chhoying, the son of Dorji Lingpa (1346–1405) and recently renovated with assistance from the American Himalayan Foundation (see [www.ahf-bhutan.com](http://www.ahf-bhutan.com) for details). On the ground floor is the Jowo Lhakhang, with some impressive 12-sided pillars, or *kachens*, and on the upper floor is the Sangay (or Sangey) Lhakhang, named after images of the past, present and future Buddhas. The mural by the window depicts Dorji Lingpa. Look above the stairs to the upper story for a slate carving of the local protective deity. A few black-necked cranes winter in the fields to the northeast of the village.

The red roofs of **Tharpaling Goemba** are visible above the trees on a cliff to the north-east. Nyingma (Dzogchen) philosopher and saint Longchen Rabjampa (1308–63) founded Tharpaling in the 14th century as part of eight *lings* (outlying temples) and lived here for many years, fathering two children. It has several temples, and houses about 100 monks. It's possible to visit the goemba by driving 10km up a rough road just past the turn to Buli

Lhakhang or by trekking over the hill from Jakar (see p170). After heavy rain the road turns to the consistency of butter tea but it's currently being upgraded. Above Tharpaling, at about 3800m, is the large white hermitage of Choedrak Goemba, which consists of two ancient chapels separated by a chorten and a sacred spring. The Thukje Lhakhang to the right has a central 1000-armed statue of Chenresig, whose offerings include Glenfidich whisky and Coke. The Lorepa Lhakhang contains a stone footprint of Guru Rinpoche and the stone skull of a *dakini* (khandroma, or female celestial being)! Further uphill is the Zhambhala Lhakhang, named after the popular God of Wealth. Pilgrims ask for boons here at a set of circular grooves in the rock behind the lhakhang, which contains the surprisingly grand funeral chorten of Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. Pema Lingpa revealed several *terma* (sacred texts and artefacts) near these monasteries.

From Gaytsa the road follows the Gaytsa Chhu gently down the valley for 2km to Domkhar. A dirt road branches south for about 900m to **Domkhar Trashi Chholing Dzong**, the summer palace of the second king. It was completed in 1937 and is a replica of Kuenga Rabten (see p165). It served for years as the residence of the grand queen mother, and now serves as a guesthouse for the crown prince, and so is closed to visitors. The monastic school to the south was built in 1968 by the previous reincarnation of the Karmapa, the head of the Karmapa lineage, but it is not currently in use.

Beyond Domkhar village, past Hurjee, is the settlement of Chhume, with two large schools alongside more than 500m of straight road, perhaps the longest stretch of its kind in the hills of Bhutan. Speed bumps have been strategically placed to ensure that your driver does not take advantage of this to make up time!

A further 1km on is **Sangay Arts and Crafts**, a crafts shop that has a great cartoon mural of three phalluses above the entry. At nearby Zungney you pass the 1.5MW Chhume mini-hydro plant, which supplies electricity to Trongsa and Bumthang. Just before Zungney a new paved road branches off to Nimalung Goemba (see below).

Stop at the two shops at the eastern end of Zungney village to watch the weavers. The speciality here is *yathra*, distinctive strips of woven woollen fabric in numerous colours and patterns. You can buy single strips of cloth or woollen jackets and blankets. Zungney Lhakhang is the small building to the west of the first *yathra* shop. Just past Zungney look out for some unusual two-storey prayer wheels.

### Zungney to Jakar

16km / 30 mins

East of Zungney, **Prakhar Goemba** is visible on a promontory on the opposite side of the river. It's a charming 10-minute walk to the three-storey goemba, which was built as a residence by Dawa Gyaltsen, a son of the famous Pema Lingpa (see the boxed text, p175). On the ground floor is a statue of Sakyamuni crafted by artists from Nepal. On the middle floor are statues of Guru Tshengay, one of the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche. The top floor contains nine small chortens and murals that are as old as the goemba. The Prakhar tsechu is held in autumn (middle of the ninth month) in the courtyard of a nearby newer building.

A stiff 20-minute walk uphill from Prakhar leads to **Nimalung Goemba**, a Nyingma monastery that was founded in 1935 by Doring Trulku. It now houses more than 100 monks who study here in the *shedra* (monastic school). The ground-floor inner chapel contains a venerated statue of Drolma (Tara) inside an amulet. Walk behind the cabinets full of statues to see the collection of black hats used during the tsechu in the fifth month (around July). Also here are large metal boxes, one of which holds a large festival *thondrol* (huge *thangka*, painted or embroidered religious picture) that was donated to the monastery in 1994. The upper floor is a *goenkhang* (chapel devoted to protective deities). Outside you might catch the monks playing *kuru*, a game that is part darts, part archery.

The road follows the valley down past the apple orchards of Mangar and into blue-pine forests. A new road is being built from here to

Ura, bypassing Bumthang. It's a short climb to the Kiki La, a crest at 2860m marked by a chorten and many prayer flags. Once over the side ridge, the road descends into the Chokhor valley.

### JAKAR

☎ 03 / elev 2580m

Near the foot of the Chokhor valley, Jakar (or Chakkar) is the major trading centre of the region. This will probably be your base for several days as you visit the surrounding valleys.

Jakar itself is a fairly interesting one-street town, with a goldsmith, tailor, several butchers and a hardware store, and it's worth a quick wander. As with other towns in Bhutan, Jakar plans to shift location to a new town, just north of the Sey Lhakhang, though no date has been given as yet for the move.

Bumthang has some important festivals, of which the most important is the Jampey Lhakhang Drup, in the ninth month (October). The recently introduced three-day Bumthang tsechu, a week earlier, features mask dancing in the dzong. Tamshing, Nyang and Ura monasteries all have large festivals. See p274 for dates.

There is a strong wind from the south every afternoon, which makes Jakar nippy in the evenings.

### Orientation

The road from Trongsa enters Jakar from the south, passing a football field that doubles as an army helipad. A traffic circle and the 14th-century Jakar Lhakhang mark the centre of the town.

The main street leads east from here to a bridge over the Chamkhar Chhu. Just before you cross the bridge to leave the town, a small chorten marks the spot where a Tibetan general's head was buried after the defeat of a 17th-century Tibetan invasion force. From the bridge roads lead north to the Swiss Guest House and the east bank of the Chamkhar Chhu, and south to Mongar and eastern Bhutan.

### Information

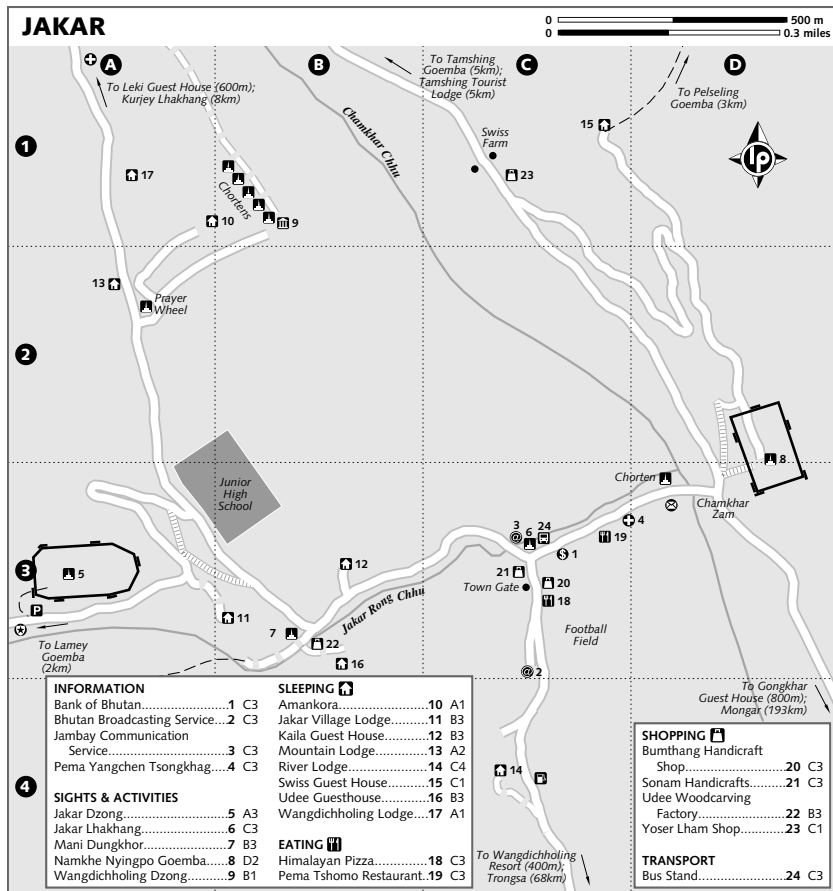
**Bank of Bhutan** (☎ 631123; 🕒 9am–1pm Mon–Fri, to 11am Sat)

**Bhutan Broadcasting Service** (📺 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat; per min Nu 1) Slow but cheap internet access on a hill at the south end of town.

### YATHRA

Hand-spun, hand-woven wool strips with patterns specific to the Bumthang region are called *yathras*. They mostly have geometric designs, sometimes with a border. Three strips may be joined to produce a blanket or bed-cover called a *charkep*. In earlier days *yathras* were often used as shawls or raincoats to protect against the winter cold of Bumthang. *Yathras* were once made from wool from Tibet; nowadays some of the wool is imported from New Zealand and some wool is used from nearby Australian-supported sheep-breeding projects.

Since Bhutan does not have the carpet-weaving tradition of Tibet, *yathra* pieces have often served the same function as Tibetan rugs. Today *yathras* are fashioned into *toegos*, the short jackets that women often wear over the *kira* in cold weather.



**Jambay Communication Service** (☎) 8am-7.30pm; per min Nu 2) Internet access.

**Pema Yangchen Tsongkhag** For medical supplies.

## Sights

### JAKAR DZONG

According to legend, when the lamas assembled in about 1549 to select a site for a monastery, a big white bird rose suddenly in the air and settled on a spur of a hill. This was interpreted as an important omen, and the hill was chosen as the site for a monastery and for **Jakar Dzong**, which roughly translates as 'castle of the white bird'. The Zhabdrung's great-grandfather, Ngagi Wangchuck, founded the monastery.

Jakar Dzong is in a picturesque location overlooking the Chokhor valley. The current

structure was built in 1667 and has a circumference of more than 1500m. Its official name is Yuelay Namgyal Dzong, in honour of the victory over the troops of Tibetan ruler Phuntsho Namgyal. The *utse* (central tower) is unusually situated on the outside wall, so there is no way to circumambulate it. A covered passage leads from the dzong down the hill to a nearby spring – a feature that ensured water could be obtained in the event of a long siege.

The approach to the dzong is made on foot along a stone-paved path. The entrance leads into a narrow courtyard surrounded by administrative offices. The *utse* is on the east side of the courtyard and beyond that is the monks' quarters and the district court. At the west end of the dzong is a slightly larger

courtyard surrounded by administrative offices. Behind here, outside the main dzong, is a half-round *ta dzong*, or watchtower.

Compared to other dzongs, there are relatively few wood carvings here; most of the timber is decorated with paintings.

Even if the chapels are closed it's a worthwhile climb for the views of the Chokhor valley from the front courtyard.

### WANGDICHHOLING DZONG

The extensive **palace** of Wangdichholing was built in 1857 on the site of a battle camp of the *penlop* of Trongsa, Jigme Namgyal. It was the first palace in Bhutan that was not designed as a fortress. Namgyal's son, King Ugyen Wangchuck, the first King of Bhutan, chose it as his principal residence. The entire court moved from Wangdichholing to Kuenga Rabten (see p165) each winter in a procession that took three days. Wangdichholing was also for a time the home of the third king, before he moved the court to Punakha in 1952.

Wangdichholing was inherited by Ashi Choeki Wangchuck, an aunt of the present king, and the grand but rather neglected building is now used as a *lobdra* (school for younger novices). There are five giant prayer wheels inside square chortens just to the north. The impressive building next door is the Amankora resort.

### NAMKHE NYINGPO GOEMBA

On the hill to the east of Jakar is the **Namkhe Nyingpo Goemba**. This Nyingma monastery was founded in the 1970s and has more than 300 monks in residence. The new prayer hall has massive statues of Guru Rinpoche, Chenresig and Sakyamuni. If you're here between 4.30pm and 6pm check out the mass debating in the courtyard of the *shedra*, behind the main monastery, where monks reinforce their theological arguments with a stamp of the foot and a victorious slap. Don't disturb the debating with your photography.

### LAMEY GOEMBA

High on a hill sits **Lamey Goemba**, a large palace and monastery built in the 1800s as a residence for King Ugyen Wangchuck. Its design is in the palace style of the time, and is similar to Wangdichholing. It is now being used by the Integrated Forest Development Project and isn't formally open to visitors.

## Sleeping

All of Bumthang's guesthouses follow a similar design, with pine-clad rooms and cosy separate dining rooms, and the majority are family run. Most guesthouses have *bukharis* (wood stoves) to heat the rooms. If you're cold, ask the room attendants to light the stove – they start it with a dollop of kerosene and a *whump!* The efficient *bukharis* heat the room quickly, but don't burn for very long.

### JAKAR

The following hotels are either in Jakar town or on the outskirts.

**Jakar Village Lodge** (Map p168; ☎ 631242; gyeldup@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1100/1200, deluxe r Nu 1600; ) Said to have some of the best food in Bumthang, this hotel situated below the dzong is run by an ex-*dzongdag* (district administrator) who will regale you with stories as you sample his assortment of teas and real freshly ground coffee (!) in the lounge/dining room. The terrace enjoys great views over the valley. Major renovations added new rooms in 2006.

**Mountain Lodge** (Map p168; ☎ 631255; mtnlodge@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1500/1700) The lodge has wood-panelled rooms in a large two-storey building overlooking Wangdichholing Palace. Good staff, tasty food and good rooms make this a good choice.

**Swiss Guest House** (Map p168; ☎ 631198; swissguesthouse@druknet.bt; s/d without bathroom Nu 1000/1100, s/d with bathroom Nu 1300/1500, deluxe r Nu 2000; ) It doesn't get more bucolic than this wooden farmhouse surrounded by apple orchards on a hillside above the valley floor. The pine-panelled rooms are rustic but cosy and some have verandas. In 1983 this was the first guesthouse in Bumthang and 10 of the 30 rooms still share bathrooms. Check out the bearskin in the main lodge (the bear was caught raiding the farm's honey hives in 2000). The water supply in the main building is from a rock spring; this is probably the only place in south Asia advertising that you can safely drink the tap water. The bar is the only place in Bhutan where you can get Red Panda beer on draft, guaranteed fresh, since it's brewed just down the road!

**River Lodge** (Map p168; ☎ 631287; pemaadawa@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 800/950; ) This popular place above the road has rooms in a converted farmhouse, in motel-style cottages or in deluxe rooms below the restaurant. A few rooms share bathrooms. The lodge has helpful management, a small library and hot-stone bath (Nu 295 to

### WALKING THE BUMTHANG VALLEY

There are plenty of opportunities for day hikes in the Bumthang region, many involving visits to remote goembas. If you are on a tourist visa, take advantage of the vehicle at your disposal and arrange for the driver to pick you up at the end of a walk.

From Swiss Guest House to **Pelseling Goemba** is a favourite half-day walk, descending a different route to Thamshing Goemba in a total of about four hours' walking. The first half is all uphill (2½ hours) but is more varied than the hike to Tharpaling, through a mix of forest, meadows and villages, and you are rewarded with great views. The monastery is a great place for a packed lunch or flask of tea.

You can also walk from Lamey Goemba over the ridge to **Tharpaling Goemba**, at 3500m in the Chhume valley, and meet your vehicle there. The trail branches off a logging road 1km past the goemba. The first two hours are a hard uphill slog through rhododendron and bamboo, before you finally cross a pass and descend across the bare hillsides of the Chhume Valley to the Zhambhala Lhakhang, Choedrak Hermitage and finally Tharpaling. The hike offers less in the way of views but more the feel of a pilgrimage, taking in several sacred sites. Check for ticks along this route.

A good full-day excursion is to hike up the valley from **Thangbi Goemba** (p174) to **Ngang Lhakhang** (p174). This is the first day of the Bumthang Cultural trek (see p230).

A longer day hike leads from the Swiss Guest House over the ridge to **Kunzangdrak Goemba** (see p178).

The best short walk is between **Kurjey** and **Tamshing** goembas via the Dozam and rock paintings of Lha Kharpo (see p175). You can also walk down the east valley road from Konchogsum Lhakhang to the Swiss Farm (5km) for fine views of Jakar and the Chokhor Valley.

495 per person). Irritants include dim lights, small bathrooms and a lack of electrical plugs, and the food's not brilliant, but most people seem to enjoy the stay.

**Kaila Guest House** (Map p168; ☎ 631219; kailaguesthouse@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1300/1500; 📺) This is the closest hotel to Jakar and is frequented mostly by NGO workers, who get a 40% discount. The rooms open onto the parking lot, motel style, so get an upper-floor room. The owner was the cook at the Swiss Guest House for many years, so the food is good. In retrospect, the Hello Kitty bedspreads were probably a mistake.

Several new hotels are planned, including a branch of the **Druk Hotel** www.drukhotels.com near Namsey Goemba, and an as yet unnamed hotel just north of the River Lodge.

The **Wangdichholing Lodge** (Map p168) is a new BTCL luxury option next to Wangdichholing Dzong. The new **Amankora** Map p168; www.amanresorts.com; s/d full board US\$925/1000; 📺) is just next door. Both places are due to open in 2007.

### BUMTHANG VALLEY

The following hotels are outside Jakar in the Chokhor valley but still within easy reach of the town and with quiet rural locations.

**Gongkar Guest House** (Map p172; ☎ 631288; tsheringgong@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 850/1000; 📺) This excellent hotel, 1.5km southeast of Jakar, has spacious

and comfortable rooms with *bukharis* and abundant hot water in super clean bathrooms. There's a good view of the dzong, garden seating, excellent service and the food is some of the best and most varied in the valley.

**Lodge Rinchenling** (Map p172; ☎ 631147; jampel@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1500/1750; 📺) This recommended place, run by Dasha Jampel Ngedup, has spacious rooms, with comfortable mattresses and large bathrooms, either in the main farmhouse or the modern 'L' block out back.

**Yangphel Guest House** (Map p172; ☎ 631191; fax 631176; s/d Nu 1100/1300; 📺) Near the Jampa Lhakhang, Yangphel is a lovely guesthouse in traditional style with a large hot-stone bath, cosy open-plan dining hall and balcony seating. The carpeted rooms vary in size and the shared bathrooms are clean. Some stylish decorative touches add a boutiquey feel.

**Wangdichholing Resort** (Map p172; ☎ 631452; wangdichholingresort@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1200/1300) This is another good place, on a bluff overlooking the valley to the south of town. The main building has a relaxing balcony festooned in climbing flowers. Rooms are a bit old-fashioned but fine.

**Leki Guest House** (Map p172; ☎ 631231; lekilodge@druknet.bt; s/d Nu 1200/1500) The Leki is one of the oldest hotels in the valley and is showing its age. There are 20 rooms, in a three-storey house or separate cottages, and a dining room

decorated with homemade weavings (for sale). Some rooms have shared bathrooms. Some Japanese dishes are available.

Other places are used mostly during tsechu time. These include **Udee Guesthouse** (Map p168; ☎ 631139; udee@druknet.bt; s/d without bathroom 850/1000, with bathroom s/d Nu 1200/1300), a small family-run farmhouse with simple rooms; **Sidhartha Guest House** (Map p172; ☎ 631774; s/d Nu 1400/1600), a place whose pine walls make it look like a giant sauna; and the secluded **Tamshing Tourist Lodge** (Map p172; ☎ 631184; s/d Nu 850/950), on a bluff overlooking the valley, with great views but so-so rooms.

### Eating

Because of the altitude, buckwheat is the crop of choice in Bumthang and buckwheat noodles and pancakes are a Bumthang speciality. The Bumthang Chhu is also famous for its large stock of trout, and despite Buddhist prohibitions on the taking of life, fish do mysteriously appear on hotel dinner plates.

There are plenty of small bars and local restaurants along Jakar's main street, the best of which by a long way is **Pema Tshomo Restaurant** (Map p168; ☎ 631128), with excellent Bhutanese dishes.

There are a few places to try if you're craving Western-style food.

**Himalayan Pizza** (Map p168; ☎ 631437; pizza slice Nu 30) At the south end of town, this place produces decent pizza as well as spaghetti and *roesti*. There is no menu and the owner speaks fluent Swiss-German but no English. Give your order an hour or more in advance if possible.

With prior notice the **Swiss Guest House** (Map p168; ☎ 631198; swissguesthouse@druknet.bt) can produce Swiss specialities such as *roesti* (crispy, fried, shredded potatoes), fondue and *rack-lette* (a melted-cheese dish).

### Shopping

As in most towns in Bhutan, the shops in Jakar contain a surreal hodgepodge of goods, many of which are brought over the border from China. A typical shop may sell shoes, pens, nails, soap, toy cars, locally made baskets, dried fish and prayer flags, as well as 'foreign fancy items'. One item in good supply in Jakar is *chugo*, dried cheese. Unless you want to break your teeth, let a piece soften for a long time in your mouth before you bite into it.

Udee Woodcarving Factory (Map p168) employs a few woodcarvers who turn out traditional lama tables and painted carvings.

### SWISS FARM

The Swiss Farm is a development project established by Fritz Maurer, one of the first Swiss to work in Bhutan, and now run by his son. The project introduced brewing, farming machinery and fuel-efficient, smokeless wood stoves to the valley, as well as its first tourist guesthouse (p169). The milk from large Jersey cattle is used in Bhutan's only commercial cheese factory and Bhutan's only native beer, Red Panda, is brewed here. It's possible to visit the farm but your guide needs to arrange this in advance.

The **Yoser Lham Shop** (Map p168; ☎ 631193) is the main outlet for the Swiss Farm. The shop sells the farm's cheese, apple juice, peach brandy and apple or honey wine, as well as soft Gouda or hard Emmenthal cheese at Nu 250 per kg. This cheese is made for eating off the block, unlike the soft Bhutanese *datse*, which is used only in sauces. Honey is available in July and August.

**Sonam Handicrafts** (Map p168; ☎ 631370) has pricey but nice pieces, including *chang* (barley beer) holders and ornate *gau* (amulets). Credit cards incur a surcharge of 5%. The Bumthang Handicraft Shop, also in the centre, is strong on textiles from eastern Bhutan.

**Handicrafts Emporium** (Map p172; ☎ 631576) is the showroom of a government-supported handicraft project and sells textiles, wooden bowls, tables runners and *ghos*. It's 250m down a dirt road just past the Leki Guest House.

### Getting There & Away

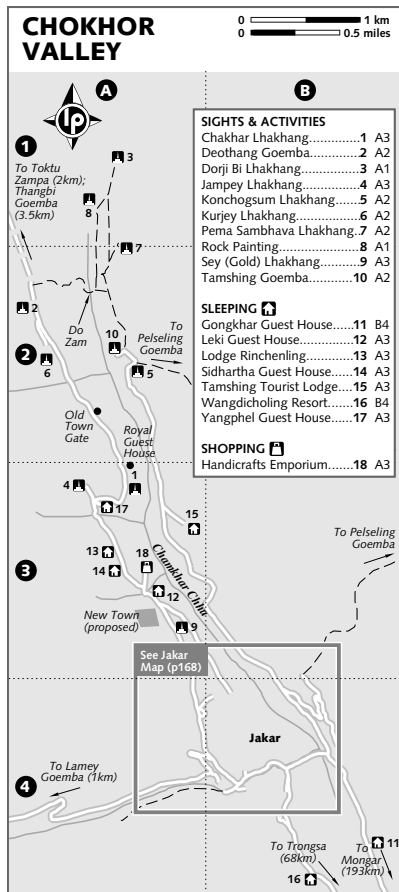
**Gari Singye Express** has Coasters to Thimphu (Nu 267, 12 hours), daily except Monday, leaving at 5.30am.

### CHOKHOR VALLEY

To most people the Chokhor valley is Bumthang and the Chokhor valley is often called the Bumthang valley or just simply Bumthang. It's possible to visit Jampey and Kurjey Lhakhangs in the morning, cross the river and have a packed lunch at Do Zam, and then visit Tamshing and Konchogsum Lhakhangs in the afternoon.

### Western Side of the Valley

The road that leads up the western side of the valley connects a string of interesting temples which are connected in one way or another



with the visit of Guru Rinpoche to Bumthang in 746. A mountain bike would offer a great way to link up the monasteries and continue over to the east bank.

### SEY (GOLD) LHA KHANG

Beyond the hospital north of Jakar is the **Sey (Gold) Lhakhang**, properly known as Lhodrak Seykhar Dratshang. This is a monastic school, established in 1963, with about 25 students. The central figure in the lhakhang is Marpa Lotsawa, a great teacher and translator of the Kagyu lineage. The chapel is open to visitors.

### JAMPEY LHA KHANG

This fabulous **temple** is up a short side road about 1.5km past Sey Lhakhang. It is believed

to have been built in the year 659 by the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo, on the same day as Kyichu Lhakhang in Paro, in order to subdue a Tibetan demoness (see the boxed text, p129).

The temple was visited by Guru Rinpoche during his visit to Bumthang and was renovated by the Sindhu Raja after the Guru restored his life force (see the boxed text, opposite). It has been repaired several times, and a golden roof built over time by various *penlops* of Trongsa.

Inside the main Jampey (or Jampa) Lhakhang are three stone steps representing ages. The first signifies the past, the age of the Historical Buddha, Sakyamuni. This step has descended into the ground and is covered with a wooden plank. The next age is the present, and its step is level with the floor. The top step represents a new age. It is believed that when the step representing the present age sinks to ground level, the gods will become like humans and the world as it is now will end.

The central figure in the ancient inner sanctum is Jampa, the Buddha of the Future, with his feet on an elephant. This is the oldest part of the oldest chapel in Bhutan. The statue is protected by an iron chain mail that was made by Pema Lingpa. Look up into the alcove above the entry to see a statue of Guru Rinpoche. He sat in this alcove and meditated, leaving behind a footprint. It is said that under the lhakhang there is a lake in which the Guru hid several *terma*.

The inner *kora* (circumambulation) path around the chapel is lined with ancient-looking murals. There are more lovely murals in the atrium. On the right side of the wooden wall divider is an image of Kim-lha, the goddess of the home.

On the northern side of the courtyard is the Kalachakra Temple (Dus-Kyi-khorlo), added by Ugyen Wangchuck when he was *penlop*. Chimi Dorji, the administrator of Jakar Dzong, added the Guru Lhakhang, on the south side of the *dochey* (dzong's inner courtyard), which features Guru Rinpoche, Tsepame and Chenresig. Above the entryway is the Sangay Lhakhang.

Behind the main temple are two large stone chortens; one is in memory of the second king's younger brother, Gongsar Dorji. Nearby is a chorten in memory of Lama Pent-sen Khenpo, spiritual adviser to the first and second Bhutanese kings. The four corners of the complex are anchored by four more chortens, coloured yellow, red, white and blue.

The pile of carved *mani* stones in the parking lot in front of the goemba is called a *thos* and represents the guardians of the four directions.

Each October one of the most spectacular festivals in Bhutan, the Jampa Lhakhang Drup, is staged here. The festival ground and VIP viewing platform is to the left (south) of the chapel. On one evening, after the lama dances, the monastery is lit by a bonfire for a *mewang* (fire blessing), when pilgrims jump through a burning archway. Another late-night rite is the *tercham* (treasure dance), also referred to as the 'naked dance', normally performed at midnight. Both dances serve as fertility rites.

Tourists need a Cultural Affairs permit to visit the lhakhang, which your travel agency will arrange for you.

### CHAKHAR LHA KHANG

Beside the main road, a short distance beyond Jampa Lhakhang, is **Chakhar (Iron Castle) Lhakhang**. Although it is easy to mistake it for a house, this is an interesting temple and worth a short visit. It is the site of the palace of the

Indian king Sendha Gyab, better known as the Sindhu Raja (see below), who first invited Guru Rinpoche to Bumthang. The original palace was made of iron, hence the name Chakhar; it was said to have been nine storeys high, holding within it all the treasures of the world.

The current building was built in the 14th century by the saint Dorji Lingpa and its correct name is Dechen Phodrang. The main statue is of Guru Rinpoche, and there are dozens of masks and black hats that are used during the Jampey Lhakhang Drup festival.

Opening hours are a bit hit and miss, and you may have to pay several visits to find the caretaker in.

### KURJEY LHA KHANG

This large, active and important temple complex is named after the body (*kur*) print (*jey*) of Guru Rinpoche, which is preserved in a cave inside the oldest of the three buildings that make up the temple complex. It is at the end of the paved road, 2.5km from Chakhar Lhakhang.

As you enter the complex, there are three large lhakhangs against a hillside on the right.

### THE STORY OF KURJEY LHA KHANG

In 746 the saint Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) made his first visit to Bhutan. At this time, the Indian Sendha Gyab had established himself as the king of Bumthang, with the title Sindhu Raja. He was feuding with Naochhe (Big Nose), a rival Indian king in the south of Bhutan, when Naochhe killed the Sindhu Raja's son and 16 of his attendants. The raja was so distraught that he desecrated the abode of the chief Bumthang deity, Shelging Kharpo, who then angrily took revenge by turning the skies black and stealing the king's life force, bringing him near to death.

One of the king's secretaries thus invited the tantric master Padmasambhava to Bumthang to use his supernatural powers to save the Sindhu Raja. The Guru came to Bumthang and meditated, leaving a *jey* (imprint) of his *kur* (body) in the rock, now surrounded by Kurjey Goemba. Guru Rinpoche was to be married to the king's daughter, Tashi Khuedon. He sent her to fetch water in a golden ewer. While she was away the Guru transformed into all eight of his manifestations and, together, they started to dance in the field by the temple. Every local deity appeared to watch this spectacle, except the stony-faced Shelging Kharpo who stayed hidden away in his rocky hideout above the present temple.

Guru Rinpoche was not to be set back by this rejection, and when the princess returned he changed her into five separate princesses, each clutching a golden ewer. The sunlight flashing off these ewers finally attracted Shelging Kharpo, but before he ventured out to see what was going on he first transformed himself into a white snowlion. On seeing the creature appear the Guru changed into a *garuda*, flew up and grabbed the lion and told Shelging Kharpo in no uncertain terms to behave himself. He thus recovered Sendha Gyab's life force, and for good measure converted both the rival kings to Buddhism, restoring the country to peace.

Shelging Kharpo agreed to become a protective deity of Buddhism; to seal the agreement the Guru planted his staff in the ground at the temple where its cypress tree descendants continue to grow. Furthermore, Guru Rinpoche made the king, Sendha Gyab, and his enemy from the south make peace; a stone pillar at Nabji (see p180) in the Black Mountains marks the spot where the agreement was made.

The first temple, the **Guru Lhakhang**, is the oldest and was built in 1652 by Mingyur Tenpa (see p183) when he was *penlop* of Trongsa. Tucked just below the eaves is a figure of a snowlion with a *garuda* above it, which represents the famous struggle between Guru Rinpoche (appearing as the garuda) and the local demon, Shelging Kharpo (as the snowlion).

At the entrance to the lower-floor San-gay Lhakhang is a small crawl-through rock passage; Bhutanese believe that in crawling through a narrow tunnel like this you will leave your sins behind. Behind the statues of the three Buddhas is a secret passageway which is said to have once led to Tharpaling.

The upper-floor sanctuary is the holiest in the complex, and has an image of Shelging Kharpo in a shrine just inside the door. There are a thousand small statues of Guru Rinpoche neatly lined up along the same wall, plus statues of Guru Rinpoche, Pema Lingpa and Drolma (Tara). The main statue in this sanctuary is again of Guru Rinpoche, flanked by his eight manifestations and eight chortens. Hidden behind this image is the **meditation cave**, where he left his body imprint. The far wall has paintings of Guru Rinpoche, his manifestations, his 25 disciples and various other figures connected with the Guru. The big cypress tree behind the lhakhang is said to have sprouted from the Guru's walking stick.

Ugyen Wangchuck, the first king of Bhutan, built the second temple, the **Sampa Lhundrup Lhakhang**, in 1900, when he was still *penlop* of Trongsa. On the entrance porch are paintings of the guardians of the four directions and of various local deities who were converted to Buddhism by Guru Rinpoche. The white ghost-like figure on the white horse to the top right is Shelging Kharpo. Inside the temple is a statue of Guru Rinpoche, this one 10m high, flanked again by his eight manifestations. A smaller image of the Guru sits facing the entrance.

The third building in the complex is a recent three-storey lhakhang built by the queen mother, Ashi Kesang Wangchuck, in 1984 under the guidance of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. She also had the courtyard in front of the three temples paved with stones and built a wall with 108 chortens around the whole complex. On the porch in front of the temple is a large wheel of life depicting various hells and heavens. At the bottom you can see a man being judged, with black and white stones representing his good and bad deeds. There's a mystic spiral mandala

on the opposite wall. Interior murals illustrate various monastic rules and regulations, including the strict dress codes.

The elaborately decorated **Zangto Pelri Lhakhang** is under construction a short distance south of the Kurjey Lhakhang compound and features a 3D depiction of the paradise of Guru Rinpoche.

A five-minute walk up the hillside near the entrance is the **Khurjey Drupchhu**, a sacred spring where monks come to wash their socks.

The popular Kurjey tsechu is held in June and includes a masked dance that dramatises Guru Rinpoche's defeat of Shelging Kharpo. A large *thangka*, called Guru Tshengye Thondrol, depicting the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, is unfurled in the early morning before the dances, which are performed by the monks from Trongsa.

#### DEOTHANG GOEMBA

This little-visited but charming private monastery, just north of Kurjey Goemba, was founded in 1949 by Dasho Phuntsok Wangdi. The surprisingly large main hall has a large image of Guru Rinpoche, with 12 more interesting metal statues to the side. A small, dark-skinned image of Thangtong Gyalpo stands to the left. The goemba has a basic four-roomed guesthouse.

#### THANGBI GOEMBA

The yellow-roofed Thangbi (or Thankabi) Goemba was founded in 1470 by Shamar Rinpoche and, after a dispute, was taken over by Pema Lingpa. The main chapel of the Dusum Sangay (Past, Present and Future Buddhas) is entered under another of Pema Lingpa's famous chainmails. Just over 20 *gomchen* (lay or married monks) live here, celebrating a *druk* (festival) in October.

The goemba is a 3.5km drive north of Kurjey Lhakhang on an unpaved road, branching across the river at Toktu Zampa. It's worth a visit if you are headed to Ngang Lhakhang but isn't really worth a special visit in its own right. This is also the starting point for the Bumthang Cultural trek (see p230).

#### NGANG LHA KHANG

Several hours' walk up the Chokhor Chhu from Thangbi Goemba is the small region known as Ngang-yul (Swan Land). The site was visited by Guru Rinpoche, but the present **Ngang Lhakhang** (Swan Temple) temple was

built in the 15th century by Lama Namkha Samdrup, a contemporary of Pema Lingpa.

Despite the rustic and decrepit exterior, the interior contains some lovely statues and paintings. Look also for the saddles by the entrance. The primary statue is of Guru Rinpoche, flanked by his two consorts, Yeshe Tsogyal from Tibet and Mandarava from India. There is a mural of the Zhabdrung on the wall opposite the altar and an image of Guru Rinpoche on a lotus surrounded by swans.

The upper chapel is a *goenkhang*, with statues of Tsepame, Chenresig, Vijaya and Drolma. The statue of Guru Rinpoche to the bottom right was fashioned by Pema Lingpa. Protector deities lurk in the shadows. Hanging from the rafters are masks used in the three-day Ngang Shey, a festival held here in the 10th month in honour of the temple's founder.

It's possible to drive here with a 4WD but it's a much nicer walk along the true left bank of the river. You could walk one way and arranged to be picked up at nearby Damphey.

For a map of the region see p230.

#### Eastern Side of the Valley

The best way to visit the eastern side of the Chokhor valley is to walk a couple of hundred metres north from Kurjey Lhakhang then follow a path east to cross a footbridge, then uphill to a trail on the opposite side. Downstream of the bridge you can see a natural formation named **Do Zam**, said to be the remains of a stone bridge that was built by a goddess who was trying to meet Guru Rinpoche, but the bridge was destroyed by a demon.

From here you can follow the east-bank trail south for 30 minutes to Tamshing Goemba. A

#### TERTON PEMA LINGPA

Pema Lingpa (1450–1521) was one of the five great *tertons* (treasure-finders) of Nyingma Buddhism, and the most important *terton* in Bhutan. The texts and artefacts he found, the dances he composed and the art he produced have significantly shaped Bhutan's cultural heritage. He is also considered a reincarnation of Guru Rinpoche.

He was born in the hamlet of Drangchel in Bumthang's Tang valley, near Kunzangdrak Goemba. As a boy he learned the craft of blacksmithing from his grandfather; indeed two of the chainmails he forged are still on display at Tamshing and Thangbi goembas.

At age 25 he discovered his first *terma* after he dreamed a monk handed him a scroll in dakini script that gave instructions on how to find a treasure chest deep in a pool in the Tang valley (see p177). Pema eventually managed to translate the scroll but this was a huge project, because in dakini script each word stands for 1000 human words. Later, assisted by the *khandromas* (dakinis), he used the text as a basis for teachings. His residence at the time was in Kunzangling, which is on a cliff above the Tang valley and is now the site of the Kunzangdrak Goemba (see p178).

During Pema Lingpa's life he found a total of 34 statues, scrolls and sacred relics in Bhutan and as far away as Samye in Tibet. Many of the statues and relics he discovered are preserved in lhakhangs throughout Bhutan, including Bunthang's Tamshing and Kunzangdrak goembas, which he founded.

In his visions, Pema Lingpa often visited Zangto Pelri, Guru Rinpoche's celestial paradise. During these visions he observed the dances of the *khandromas* and *yidam* (tutelary deities). He taught three of these dances, called *pa-cham*, to his disciples, and several of these are still performed as part of Bhutan's tsechu festivals.

After his death he was reincarnated in three forms, consisting of *ku* (body), *sung* (speech) and *thug* (mind) and these lineages continue to this day.

Through his six sons, one daughter and numerous reincarnations, Pema Lingpa left behind a legacy that still influences much of Bhutan. His most important son, Dawa Gyeltsen, was born in 1499 and settled in Chhume, one of Bumthang's valleys. Another of his sons, Pema Thinley, was a reincarnation of Pema Lingpa himself. This incarnation founded Gangte Goemba in the Phobjikha valley (see p152), and the Gangte Trulku lineage continues there, with Kuenzang Pema Namgyal, born in 1955, as the ninth 'mind' reincarnation.

Another of his sons, Kuenga Wangpo, born in 1505, settled in Lhuentse (known then as Kurtoe), where his great-grandsons founded Dungkhar Dzong, north of Lhuentse Dzong. The royal family of Bhutan, the Wangchuck dynasty, is descended from this line.



more interesting 45-minute detour is to take a left after the bridge for ten minutes to an impressive **rock painting** of Guru Rinpoche in the form of Dorje Drolu, astride a tiger. From here, head uphill to the **Dorji Bi Lhakhang** with its large white chorten, and then descend past a former country mansion, across a stream, to the turn-off to Pema Sambhava Lhakhang and then Tamshing Goemba. You can send your vehicle back through Jakar to meet you here.

The major influence in the temples on this side of the valley was Pema Lingpa, the great *terton* of the 16th century.

### TAMSHING GOEMBA

This goemba, formally the Tamshing Lhendup Chholing (Temple of the Good Message), is at the northern end of the eastern road, 5km from Jakar. It was established in 1501 by Pema Lingpa and is the most important Nyingma goemba in the kingdom. Pema Lingpa built the unusual structure himself, with the help of *khandromas*, who made many of the statues. On the inner walls are what are believed to be original unrestored images that were painted by Pema Lingpa, though recent research has uncovered even older paintings underneath.

The entrance to the lhakhang is via an inner courtyard lined with monks' quarters. To the left is the small Mani Dungkhor Lhakhang, built in 1914 to hold a huge prayer wheel.

The main lhakhang has an unusual design with the key chapel screened off in the centre of the assembly hall, almost like a separate building. In the chapel are three thrones for the three incarnations (body, mind and speech) of Pema Lingpa. During important ceremonies the reincarnations sit here, although a photograph is substituted if one of the incarnations is not present.

The primary statue in the inner sanctuary is of Guru Rinpoche flanked by Jampa (Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future) and Sakyamuni. This statue is particularly important because it was sculpted by the *khandromas*. The statue's eyes are looking slightly upward, following the angels in their flight; another unique aspect of the statue is that the Guru is not wearing shoes. Above the altar are two *maksaras* (mythological crocodiles) and a *garuda*. On the walls are the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, four on each side. A small statue of Pema Lingpa occupies a glass case in front of the chapel.

At the far end of the inner *kora* path is a suit of chain-mail armour made by Pema Lingpa. It weighs about 25kg and it is an auspicious act to carry it around the goemba three times.

The upper floor forms a balcony around the assembly hall. Pema Lingpa was a short man and it is said that he built the low ceiling of the balcony to his exact height. Around the outside are 100,000 old paintings of Sakyamuni. In the upper chapel is a statue of Tsepame, the Buddha of Long Life, and a large collection of masks that are used for lama dances. Also here, but closed to visitors, is a statue of Pema Lingpa fashioned by the man himself.

There are good views from Tamshing back across the river to Kurjey Lhakhang.

### KONCHOGSUM LHAKHANG

Just 400m below Tamshing is a small rural-looking **temple** – the source of many interesting stories. It was renovated in 1995 and looks quite new, but it is in fact very old, probably dating back to the 6th or 7th century. The current structure, however, dates from the 15th century, when Pema Lingpa restored it; the pillar outside the building is attributed to him. Pema Lingpa revealed *terma* on the hillside behind this goemba, and also in the lake said to be beneath the lhakhang.

There is a pedestal in the courtyard upon which a large and ancient bell used to sit. It is said that when this bell was rung, it could be heard all the way to Lhasa in Tibet. A 17th-century Tibetan army tried to steal the bell, but the weight was too great and they dropped it, which cracked the bell. It is said to comprise 10% gold, 20% silver, 50% bronze and 20% tin. After a period on display in the National Museum in Paro a fragment of the bell is now back inside the lhakhang.

The small statues of the three Buddhas (past, present and future) in the sanctuary (locked in the safe) are said to have flown here straight from Khaine Lhakhang in Dungkhar (in eastern Bhutan). Hence the name of this lhakhang is Konchogsum – *konchog* (divine being), *sum* (three).

The central figure in the lhakhang is Nampa Namse (Vairocana, one of the five Dhyani buddhas). On Vairocana's left is Chenresig, and to the right is Guru Rinpoche. Other statues are of Pema Lingpa (right), the great Nyingma scholar Longchenpa (left) and, in the far corner, the protector deity Beker Gyalpo.

### PEMA SAMBHAVA LHAKHANG

At the end of the road a short steep climb above the valley floor leads to the small **Pema Sambhava Lhakhang**. The original lhakhang was built in 1490 by Pema Lingpa around the cave where Guru Rinpoche meditated and assumed his manifestation of Padmasambhava. It was expanded by Jigme Namgyal, the father of the first king, and restored in the early 1970s.

There are several rock paintings here, as well as a representation of the local protector Terda Norbu Zangpo, and the cave itself is painted in rainbow colours. The interesting round bamboo weaving that looks like a shield is an unusual representation of the bodhisattva Chenresig. The extremely elderly caretaker has lived in this chapel since he was 15.

### TANG VALLEY

Tang is the most remote of Bumthang's valleys. As it is higher than Chokhor and the soil not as rich, there's not much agriculture here, although the valley turns bright pink with buckwheat flowers in October. The people of this valley raise sheep and, at higher elevations, yaks. For a map of the region, see p230.

From Jakar it's 10.5km to the unpaved road that branches north up the Tang valley. This road climbs past the trail to Membartsho (1.3km from the turn-off) and the new Pema Tekchok Chholing Nunnery (currently under construction), to reach the jumping-off point for the hike to Kunzangdrak, 7km from the turn-off. The road then climbs high above the river, crossing the bridge at Pangshing and then passing **Gemtshong**, a particularly

picturesque village and lhakhang perched on a ridge. After a short descent to the river it's 3km to a school at Mesithang (Tang) and 1km further to the Tang Rimochoen Lhakhang.

The road becomes rougher as it approaches the bridge at **Kizum** (Ki Zam), 22km from the road junction. This is generally the end point of the Bumthang Cultural trek, though the increasingly rough road does continue a few kilometres further to Gamling and Wobtang.

You can take in all the sites in this section in a good day trip from Jakar, or on the drive back to Jakar at the end of the Bumthang Cultural trek. Better still, overnight at the secluded Ogyen Chholing Guest House.

### Membartsho

A five-minute walk from a parking spot at a bend in the road leads to a picturesque pool in the Tang Chuu that is known as **Membartsho** (Burning Lake). Pema Lingpa found several of Guru Rinpoche's *terma* here. It's a lovely spot, where nature, religion and mythology blur into one.

A wooden bridge crosses the prayer-flag-strewn river gorge and offers a good vantage point over the 'lake'. Only the enlightened will spot the temple that lurks in the lake's inky depths. The sanctity of the site is made obvious by the numerous small clay offerings called *tsha-tsha* piled up in various rock niches.

Under a rock shrine with a carving of Pema Lingpa and his two sons is a cave that virtuous people can crawl through, no matter how big they are. Beware: it's quite small, and very dusty.

### THE BURNING LAKE

Two of Pema Lingpa's most celebrated discoveries took place at Membartsho.

The first took place when a dream told him to go to a point where the river forms a large pool that looks like a lake. After a while, standing on a large rock, he saw a temple with many doors, only one of which was open. He plunged naked into the lake and entered a large cave where there was a throne, upon which sat a life-sized statue of Lord Buddha and many large boxes. An old woman with one eye handed him one of the chests and he suddenly found himself standing on the rock at the side of the lake holding the treasure.

Pema Lingpa's second treasure find was the most famous. His previous *terma* had instructed him to return to the lake but when he did so many people gathered to watch the event and the sceptical *penlop* of the district accused him of trickery. Under great pressure to prove himself, Pema Lingpa took a lighted lamp and proclaimed: 'If I am a genuine revealer of your treasures, then may I return with it now, with my lamp still burning; if I am some devil, then may I perish in the water.' He jumped into the lake, was gone long enough that the sceptics thought they were proven right, and then suddenly he emerged back on the rock with the lamp still burning and holding a statue and a treasure chest. The lake became known as Membartsho, or Burning Lake.

## Kunzangdrak Goemba

A stiff hour-long, Stairmaster-style climb up the hillside above Drangchel leads to one of the most important sites related to Pema Lingpa. He began construction of the **goemba** in 1488, and many of his most important sacred relics are kept here.

The first chapel has a *kora* path around it, with Chenresig, Guru Nazey (a form of Guru Rinpoche) and Namkhai Ningpo inside. Walk around the back of the building to the gravity-defying Khandroma Lhakhang, spectacularly situated against a vertical rock face that seeps holy water. Ask to see the stone anvil bearing the footprint of Pema Lingpa. Finally, cross over the small bridge, past a fire-blackened cleft in the cliff, to the spooky *goenkhang*.

Figure on three to four hours for the return trip.

## Tang Rimochen Lhakhang

**Tang Rimochen Lhakhang** was built by Pema Lingpa in the 14th century to mark a sacred place where Guru Rinpoche meditated. The original name 'Tag (or Tak) Rimochen' (an impression of tiger's stripes) is derived from the tiger stripes that appear on a rock cliff behind the building.

There are footprints of the Guru and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal on the cliff face and at the top of the concrete steps leading to the temple. The two huge rocks below the lhakhang represent male and female *jachung*, as well as the bathing spot of the Guru.

Just a couple of hundred metres away, by a two-legged *khonying*, is an important cremation site.

## Ogyen Chholing Palace

From either Gamling or Kizum it's a 45-minute climb to this hilltop 16th-century **nachtshang**, or country manor, originally built by Deb Tsokye Dorje, the one-time *penlop* of Trongsa and a descendant of the terton Dorji Lingpa. The present structures, including the *tshughlakhang* (main temple), *utse* (central tower), *chamkhang* (dance house), *shagkor* (servants' quarters) and *nubgothang* (guest house) are more recent, having been rebuilt after their collapse in the 1897 earthquake.

The family that owns Ogyen (or Ugyen) Chholing has turned the complex into a **museum** ([www.geocities.com/ogyencholingmuseum](http://www.geocities.com/ogyencholingmuseum); admission Nu 100) to preserve its legacy and provide a place for religious studies, research and solitude. The fas-

cinating and well-captioned exhibits offer real insights into the lifestyle of a Bhutanese noble family. Highlights include a book of divination, a dakini dance costume made of bone and the revelation that petrified yak dung was one of the ingredients for Bhutanese gunpowder. Bring a torch. The complex is supported through the Ogyen Chholing Trust, which produces an excellent museum booklet (Nu 180).

The superbly rustic **Ogyen Chholing Guest House** (☎ 03-631221; r Nu 500-1000) in the palace grounds has two excellent suites and four smaller basic rooms and offers a tranquil overnight retreat. Proceeds go to the trust.

If you walk to the palace from Kizum it's well worth returning via the lovely village of Gamling. A 4WD track reaches the palace but at the time of research there was no road bridge over the river, due to a dispute between villagers over its proposed location.

## Thowadrak Hermitage

The remote hermitage of **Thowadrak** (or Thowa Drak) clings to the highest rocks above the north end of the Tang valley. It is said to have been founded by Mandarava, the Indian consort of Guru Rinpoche, and the Guru himself is believed to have meditated here. The goemba was built by Dorji Lingpa. There are numerous small meditation retreats on the hillside above (don't disturb the hermits) and dramatic views over the valley. Texts relate that the upper valley conceals a sealed gateway to one of Bhutan's *bey-yul*. The only sounds here are of rushing water and the rustle of bamboo.

The six-hour return hike could be done as a day trip from the Ogyen Chholing Guest House or can be tagged on to the end of the Bumthang Cultural trek (see p230). From Jakar you'd have to leave very early, figuring in a two-hour drive each way, plus an hour at the site. Bring a packed lunch. The hike is probably only really worthwhile for those with a spiritual leaning.

The trail starts near the suspension bridge to Karap, though with a 4WD you could cut off the first 45 minutes' walk. After an hour or so walking along the dirt road, five minutes past a white chorten, take the trail branching to the right, down to a wooden bridge across the river. Follow the lovely riverside trail for 20 minutes to a second bridge beside a Bhutanese-style chorten. The trail climbs to the right, past well-tended *mani* walls to a white chorten surrounded by lush dense forest. The trail continues uphill, past trailside

shrines, dakini marks, carved mantras and a stone lion-print. The last 40 minutes is a killer climb, up increasingly steep steps.

Just before the main Pema Osel Chholing chapel is a pilgrim's shelter and sin-testing rock. At the back of the chapel a log ladder leads down around the cliff face to a holy spring.

## URA VALLEY

Southeast of Jakar, Ura is the highest of Bumthang's valleys and is believed by some to have been the home of the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan.

### Jakar to Ura

48km / 1½ hours

The road crosses the bridge to the east of Jakar, then travels south along the east bank of the Chamkhar Chhu, winding around a ridge past the turn-off to the Tang valley. Just past the turn-off is an impressive new chorten. As the road climbs, look back at excellent views up the Chokhor and Chhume valleys.

The few houses and potato fields that make up Tangsibi are 24km from Jakar. The road climbs to 3420m, where there is a monument with a cross, in memory of a Indian road supervisor who died here in a 1985 road accident.

The road reaches a false summit, then finally crosses the Shertang La (3590m), also known as the Ura La. Just before the pass you'll get a view of Gangkhar Puensum (7541m) to the northwest and the yellow-roofed lhakhang of Somrang village to the south.

It's then a long descent into the Ura valley to the village of Ura, which lies below the road. The descent on foot from the pass makes for a nice hour-long walk into the village.

A couple of kilometres before the turn-off to Ura is the turn-off to Shingkar (see right).

### Ura

☎ 03 / elev 3100m

Ura is one of the most interesting villages in Bhutan. There are about 40 closely packed houses along cobblestone streets, and the main lhakhang dominates the town, giving it a medieval atmosphere. In colder weather Ura women wear a sheepskin shawl that serves as both a blanket and a cushion. Yet change is afoot; the number of people living in the village has decreased in recent years, as young people move to the towns for jobs or education, and there is now a labour shortage in the village.

Ura gets a rush of visitors during the Ura *yakchoe*, a notoriously unreliable festival that regularly changes dates at the last minute, leaving behind lots of disappointed tour groups on tight schedules. If you do decide to visit the festival, normally in May, it would be wise to budget a couple of days' leeway in your itinerary. The three days of masked dances starts on the 12th day of the third month with a procession carrying an image of Vajrapani from the nearby Geyden Lhakhang down to the main lhakhang. The eve of the festival sees the frantic brewing of *singchang* (made from millet, wheat or rice) and late-night rites of exorcism.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Hotel Arya Zambala** (azherbal05@yahoo.com) Situated alongside the main road, before the turn-off to Ura, this tavern has rooms for rent, some with attached bathrooms, and can provide basic meals. Their main business is in herbal medicines and dried mushrooms.

During the Ura festival even camping spots are at a premium and some groups commute from Jakar, 90 minutes' drive away.

### Around Ura SHINGKHAR

The traditional village of **Shingkar** (elevation 3400m, population 250), made up of only 35 households, is 9km up a good gravel side road from Ura. The small **Rinchen Jugney Lhakhang**, on a hill 50m from the Shingkar Guest House, was founded by the Dzogchen master Longchen Rabjampa (1308-63).

The village's central **Dechen Chholing Goemba** is headed by Shingkar Lama, whose predecessor featured prominently in the Bhutanese novel *Hero with The Thousand Eyes*, by Karma Ura. The central lhakhang has its floorboards exposed to show the stone teaching throne of Longchen. The protector deities are appropriately fierce, except for Rahuha who looks embarrassed wearing a gorilla mask. The Shingkar *Romney* (festival) held here in the ninth month (October) features an unusual yak dance, without the tour groups that often crowd out Ura.

There are several good hiking options in the valley. Day hikes lead up to the Singmu La, along the former trade route to Lhuentse and bordering the Thrumshing La National Park, or try the four- to five-hour return hike to the cliff-hanging Shamsul Lhakhang.

**Shingkar Guest House** (☎ 323206; fax 323718; masagang@druknet.bt; www.masagang.com; r Nu 800-1200) is a great base from where to explore the village. The rooms are basic but cosy, with mud walls and solar electricity. Meals are available. For bookings, tours and more information on the region contact Ugyen Wangdi at Masagang Tours, who can also arrange homestays in the village. You can contact Masagang through Shingkar Guest House.

## SOUTHERN DZONGKHAGS

Two dzongkhags lie on the southern border of central Bhutan. For a few years now tourists have not been permitted to travel in these regions because of the threat posed by Assamese separatist groups, but moves are afoot to reopen the region to tourism. When that happens, the Royal Manas National park in particular will offer a unique nature experience in an area of extreme biodiversity.

### ZHEMGANG DZONGKHAG

Zhemgang, along with neighbouring Mongar, was once a collection of tiny principalities, collectively known as Khyeng, absorbed into Bhutan in the 17th century. Panbang, near the Indian border, is known for its round baskets called *bangchung*.

A two-day walk from Zhemgang town leads to Nabji, where a stone pillar commemorates the settlement of the dispute between the Sindhu Raja and Naochhe that was mediated by Guru Rinpoche. (See the boxed text, p173).

### SARPANG DZONGKHAG

Sarpang is on the southern border and a large part of the district is protected within the Royal Manas National Park. Kalikhola in the far west is a border town that has no road connection with the rest of Bhutan; all travel here involves passing through Indian terri-

#### THE NABJI TRAIL

In late 2006 the Department of Tourism launched a community tourism program in Nabji in an attempt to bring tourist income directly to remote local communities, through the employment of local guides, community-owned camping grounds and local cultural activities. The proposed six-day winter trek leads through the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park and passes through several Monpa villages. It's only feasible from November to March due to the low elevations. The region only opened in 2006 and only one group is allowed on the trail at a time so you can be sure you won't bump into anyone else here. For more details, see [www.abto.org.bt](http://www.abto.org.bt).

tory. There is talk of building an airport in Gelephu.

### Gelephu

☎ 06

The large border town of Gelephu is the gateway to the south and to the Manas area. There's a good *tsachhu* (hot spring) in nearby Shershong, 15km from town and you could also check out the town's whisky distillery. A bomb exploded in the Sunday vegetable market here in September 2004, killing two and injuring 27.

There are a few hotels, including the **Hotel Chorten** (☎ 251252), **Hotel Dechen** (☎ 251293) and, best of all, **Dragon Guest House** (☎ 251019; Nu 800).

### Royal Manas National Park

There are simple lodges at Kanamakra, Rabang and Panbang, and, if the area is reopened, a tented camp can be established at Pantang. A 25km road leads from Gelephu to Kanamakra at the southwestern corner of the park. There is also a road from Tingtibi on the Trongsa–Gelephu road. This 40km road passes along the northern boundary of the park from Gomphu to Panbang village.

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