



Sikkim

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Why Go?

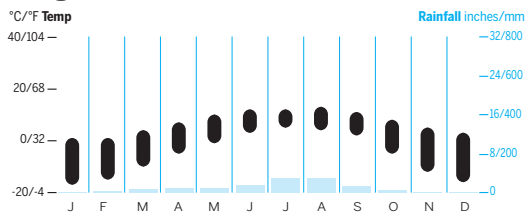
If you're suffering from too much heat, dust or crowds, then the tiny, former Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim is the perfect antidote. Fresh mountain air sweeps the lush green state; there's room to move but the people are among India's friendliest, with a charming manner that's unobtrusive and slightly shy.

Plunging mountain valleys are lushly forested, interspersed with rice terraces and flowering rhododendrons. Tibetan-style Buddhist monasteries (gompas) add splashes of white, gold and vermilion to the green ridges and are approached through avenues of fluttering prayer flags.

Sikkim's big-ticket item is the majesty of Khangchendzonga (Kanchenjunga; 8598m), the world's third-highest mountain, straddling the border between Sikkim and Nepal. Khangchendzonga's guardian spirit is worshipped in a series of spectacular autumn festivals and its magnificent white peaks and ridges create the backdrop to a dozen wonderful walks and viewpoints.

When to Go

Gangtok



Late Sep–mid-Nov

Clearlest weather for views, but high-season crowds and prices.

Apr–May

Spring blooms and warmth make up for cloudier skies.

Mid-Jun–Sep

Good for northern Sikkim but monsoon rains hide mountain views elsewhere.

Food & Drink

Sikkim's one 'don't-miss' beverage is tongba, an alcoholic millet beer that is enjoyed across the entire eastern Himalaya. The beer (also known as chhang) is sipped through a bamboo straw and the wooden container (the tongba) is topped up periodically with boiling water to let the brew gain strength. You can find tongba anywhere in northern and western Sikkim.

Traditional Sikkimese foods include *sisnoo/sochhya* (nettle soup), *ningro* (fried fiddlehead ferns), Tibetan-style *churpi* (dried yak cheese) and the Nepali speciality *gundruk ko jhol* (fermented mustard-leaf soup).

DON'T MISS

Sikkim's monastic **chaam masked dances** are the Himalaya at their most colourful. Part morality play, part country fair and part exorcism, the dances feature masked monks acting out Buddhist parables, stories from the life of Guru Rinpoche and dances representing the victory of good over evil, with a supporting crew of clowns, demons and dancing snowlions, all entertaining a crowd of spellbound locals dressed in their Sunday best. It's worth arranging your itinerary around.

Top State Festivals

- » Losar (Feb/Mar, Pemayangtse, p545, Rumtek, p536, Enchey, p530) Sikkim's biggest *chaam* (monastic masked dances) take place just before Tibetan New Year.
- » Bumchu (Feb/Mar, Tashiding Gompa, p549) *Bum* means pot or vase and *chu* means water. The lamas open a pot of holy water to foretell the year's fortunes.
- » Saga Dawa (May/Jun, all monastery towns) Religious ceremonies and parades commemorate Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death.
- » Pang Lhabso (Aug, Ravangla, p542) Prayers and religious dances are performed in honour of Sikkim's guardian deity Khangchendzonga.
- » Losoong (Dec/Jan, Old Rumtek, p536) Sikkimese New Year, preceded by *chaam* dances in many locations including Lingdum, Phodong, Phensang and Ralang.
- » Detor Chaam (Dec/Jan, Enchey Gompa, p530) *Chaam* dances.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

If entering Sikkim via Rangpo, permits are available at the border. For entry via Jorethang permits must be arranged in advance.

Fast Facts

- » Population: 607,700
- » Area: 7096 sq km
- » Capital: Gangtok
- » Main language: Nepali
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹700, \$\$ ₹700 to ₹3000, \$\$\$ above ₹3000

Top Tip

Shared jeeps are the best way to get around the hills. To avoid getting landed with a cramped sideways-facing back seat, book a seat in advance; and if you really value your personal space, book all the front seats for yourself.

Resources

- » Cultural Affairs & Heritage Department (www.sikkim-culture.gov.in) offers cultural background.
- » Government of Sikkim Tourism (www.sikkimtourism.travel) lists sights, homestays and entry formalities.
- » Sikkiminfo (www.sikkiminfo.net) provides an excellent introduction.

History

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

At their most powerful the chogyals' rule encompassed eastern Nepal, upper Bengal and Darjeeling. However, much territory was later lost during wars with Bhutan and Nepal, and throughout the 19th century large numbers of Hindu Nepali migrants arrived, eventually coming to form a majority of Sikkim's population.

In 1835 the British bribed Sikkim's chogyal to cede Darjeeling to the East India Company. Tibet, which regarded Sikkim as a vassal state, raised strong objections. In 1849, amid rising tensions, the British annexed the entire area between the present Sikkim border and the Ganges plains, repulsing a counter-invasion by Tibet in 1886. In 1903–04, Britain's ultimate imperial adventurer Francis Younghusband twice trekked up to the Sikkim–Tibet border. There, with a small contingent of soldiers, he set about inciting a fracas that would 'justify' an invasion of Tibet.

Sikkim's last chogyal ruled from 1963 to 1975, when the Indian government deposed him after a revolt by Sikkim's Nepali population. China didn't recognise India's claim to Sikkim until 2005 so prior to this, to bolster pro-Delhi sentiment, the Indian government made Sikkim a tax-free zone, pouring crores (tens of millions) of rupees into road-building, electricity, water supplies and local industry. As a result Sikkim is surprisingly affluent by Himalayan standards.

Activities

Sikkim offers considerable trekking potential. Day hikes between villages follow centuries-old footpaths and normally don't require permits: the most popular option is between Yuksom and Tashiding. For multiday treks that head into the high Himalaya, notably to Goecha La at the base of Khangchendzonga (p548), you need to book through a trekking agency to arrange permits and guides.

Tour agencies are striving to open new trekking areas, notably the fabulous route across Zemu Glacier to Green Lake in Khangchendzonga National Park. However, permits remain very expensive and take months to arrange from Delhi, while tempting routes close to the Tibetan border remain off-limits.

i Permits

STANDARD PERMITS Foreigners require an Inner Line Permit to enter Sikkim (Indians don't). These are free and a mere formality, although to apply you'll need photos and passport photocopies. Permits are most easily obtainable at Darjeeling or the Rangpo border post on arrival but can also be obtained at Indian embassies abroad when getting your visa and the following places:

Foreigners' Regional Registration Offices

(FRRO) Delhi (Map p78; ☎011-26195530; frrodeldhi@hotmail.com; Level 2, East Block 8, Sector 1, Rama Krishna (RK) Puram; ☀9.30am–5.30pm Mon–Fri); Kolkata (Map p450; ☎22837034; 237 AJC Bose Rd; ☀11am–5pm Mon–Fri); Mumbai (Map p730; ☎22620446; Annexe Bldg No 2, CID, Badaruddin Tyabji Rd, near Special Branch) Or other major branches.

Sikkim House Delhi (☎11-26883026; 12-14 Panchsheel Marg, Chankyapuri, Delhi); Kolkata (Map p450; ☎22817905; 4/1 Middleton St; ☀10.30am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10.30am–2pm Sat)

Sikkim Tourist Office

Darjeeling (☎9832438118; Nehru Rd; ☀10am–4pm Mon–Sat); Siliguri, West Bengal (SNT Terminal, Hill Cart Rd; ☀10am–5pm) For an on-the-spot Sikkim permit bring a photocopy of your passport and Indian visa, plus one photo.

EXTENSIONS Permits are generally valid for 30 days (sometimes 15 days from embassies abroad). One or two days before expiry they can be extended for a further 30 days, giving a maximum of 60 days. For the extension try these:

» Gangtok Foreigners' Registration Office (p535)

» Tikjuk District Administration Centre, Superintendent of Police, (p543), 5km below Pelling.



BLOODY LEECHES

Sikkim is generally a very safe place; the only annoyance is the famous little leeches. They aren't dangerous, just a nuisance, primarily during the summer monsoon (June to September). They're ubiquitous in damp grass so stick to dry, wide paths.

Once you leave Sikkim, you must wait three months before applying for another permit.

PERMIT VALIDITY The standard permit is valid for visits to the following areas:

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

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

For travel beyond Singhik up the Lachung and Lachen valleys foreigners need additional **restricted area permits** from the tourism department and police and, even with these, cannot go further than the Tsopta valley or Yume Samdong (Zero Point). Indian citizens need a **police permit** to travel north of Singhik, but can travel further up the Thangu valley to Gurudongmar Lake.

Foreigners also need a restricted area permit to visit Tsomgo (Changu) Lake. Indians only (no foreigners) are permitted to travel east past Tsomgo Lake to the Tibetan border at Nathu La.

Restricted area permits are issued locally through approved tour agencies and you will have to join a tour to get one. You'll need a minimum group of two, a passport photo, and copies of your existing permit, visa and passport details page. Permits take 24 hours to arrange and last for a maximum of five days.

EAST SIKKIM

Gangtok

☎03592 / POP 31,100 / ELEV 1400-1700M

Sikkim's capital is mostly a functional sprawl of multistorey concrete boxes. But, true to its name (meaning 'hill top'), these are steeply tiered along a precipitous mountain ridge. When clouds clear, typically at dawn, views are inspiring with Khangchendzonga soaring above the western horizon. While Gangtok's manmade attractions are minor, it's a reasonable place to spend a day or two organising a trek or trips to the north.

Gangtok's crooked spine is the Rangpo–Mangan road, National Hwy 31A, cryptically referred to as 31ANHWay. The tourist office, banks and many shops line the central pedestrianised Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Marg.

Sights

Namgyal Institute of Tibetology & Around

MUSEUM, VIEWPOINT

(☎281642; www.tibetology.net; Deorali; admission ₹10; ☉10am-4pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat of month) Housed in traditionally styled Tibetan architecture, this unique institute was established in 1958 to promote research into Vajrayana Buddhism and Tibetan culture. The museum hall displays Buddhist manuscripts, icons, *thangkas* (Tibetan religious paintings) and Tantric ritual objects, such as a *thöpa* (bowl made from a human skull) and *kangling* (human thighbone trumpet). There are plenty of useful explanatory captions.

Further along the same road is the **Do-Drul Chorten**, a large white Tibetan pagoda surrounded by dormitories for novice monks.

The institute sits in a park and is conveniently close to the lower station of **Damovnar Ropeway** (per person adult/child return ₹60/35; ☉9.30am-4.30pm), a cable car running from Secretariat ridge. The views are stupendous, if you can bear to look down.

Ridge

PARK

With views east and west, it's very pleasant to stroll through shady parks and gardens on the city's central ridge. Its focal point is the **Raj Bhawan** (the former Royal Palace) is closed to visitors, though the impressive **Tsuglhakhang** temple is often open early in the morning (and during major festivals) to pilgrims and curious tourists.

During the spring bloom (March and April) it's worth peeping inside the **Flower Exhibition Centre** (admission ₹10; ☉9am-5pm), a modestly sized greenhouse full of exotic orchids, anthuriums and liliium.

Enchey Gompa

MONASTERY

(☉4am-4pm Mon-Sat, 4am-1pm Sun) Approached through gently rustling conifers high above Gangtok, this monastery dating back to 1909 is Gangtok's most attractive, with some decent murals and statues of Tantric deities. The monastery founder was famous for his levitational skills. It comes alive for the colourful **Detor Chaam** masked dances in December/January (28th and 29th day of the 11th Tibetan lunar month).

Ganesh Tok & Around

VIEWPOINTS

From Enchey Gompa the main road swings northeast around the obvious telecommunications tower to a collection of prayer flags, where a footpath scrambles up in around

15 minutes to **Ganesh Tok viewpoint**. Festooned in colourful prayer flags, Ganesh Tok offers superb city views and its minicafe serves hot teas.

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

Gangtok's best view of Khangchendzonga can be found from the **Tashi viewpoint**, 4km northwest of town, beside the main route to Phodong.

Himalayan Zoological Park ZOO

(☎223191; admission ₹50, video ₹500; ☀9am-4pm) Across the road from Ganesh Tok viewpoint, a lane leads into the zoo. Red pandas, Himalayan bears and snow leopards roam around in extensive wooded enclosures so large that you'll value a car to shuttle between them.

Tours

Classic early morning 'three-point tours' show you Ganesh Tok, Hanuman Tok and Tashi viewpoints (₹500). Almost any travel agent, hotel or taxi driver offers variants, including a 'five-point tour' adding Enchey Gumpa and Namgyal Institute (₹700), or 'seven-point tours' tacking on old-and-new Rumtek (₹900) or Rumtek plus Lingdum (₹1200). Prices are per vehicle holding three or four passengers.

For high-altitude treks, visits to Tsomgo Lake or tours to northern Sikkim you'll need a tour agency. There are more than 180 agencies but only 10% of those work with foreigners; look for a company that belongs to Travel Agents Association of Sikkim (TAAS) as its members conform to ecological and culturally responsible guidelines.

Sikkim Tourism SCENIC FLIGHTS

Development Corporation (STDC; ☎203960; stdcsikkim@yahoo.co.in; MG Marg) For eagle-eye mountain views, STDC books scenic helicopter flights. Prices are for

up to five passengers (four for Khangchendzonga ridge); buzz over Gangtok (₹7590, 15 minutes); circuit of West Sikkim (₹66,000, 55 minutes); circuit of North Sikkim (₹78,500, 65 minutes); Khangchendzonga ridge (₹90,000, 75 minutes). Book at least three days ahead.

Blue Sky Treks & Travels TREKKING

(☎205113; www.himalayantourisonline.com; Tourism Bldg, MG Marg) Trekking and tours.

Ecotourism & Conservation Society of Sikkim HOMESTAYS

(ECOSS; ☎232798; www.sikkimhomestay.com; Tadong/Daragaon) Can arrange homestays (₹600 to ₹1500 per person) in Dzongu (permits required), Pastanga and Yuksom villages.

Galaxy Tours & Treks TREKKING

(☎201290; www.tourhimalayas.com; Metro Point) Tours to North Sikkim and runs several hotels in the Lachung Valley.

Hub Outdoor OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

(☎9434203848; www.gosikkim; Tibet Rd) Offers mountain biking, trekking and even canyoning, with a decent outdoor gear shop.

Modern Treks & Tours TREKKING

(☎204670; www.modernresidency.com; Modern Central Lodge, MG Marg) Trekking and North Sikkim tours.

Namgyal Treks & Tours OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

(☎203701; www.namgyaltreks.com; Tibet Rd) Trekking, mountaineering, mountain biking, tours to northern Sikkim. Also runs a homestay below Gangtok.

Potala Tours & Treks TREKKING

(☎200043; www.sikkimhimalayas.com; PS Rd) Top end of the price range.

Sikkim Tours & Travels TREKKING, BIRDWATCHING

(☎202188; www.sikkimtours.com; Church Rd) Specialises in trekking, birdwatching and botanical tours.

Sleeping

Peak seasons for Gangtok accommodation are March to May and September to November, reaching a peak in October. Decent budget hotels are in short supply any time of year. Check rooms carefully as standards can vary widely even within the same hotel.

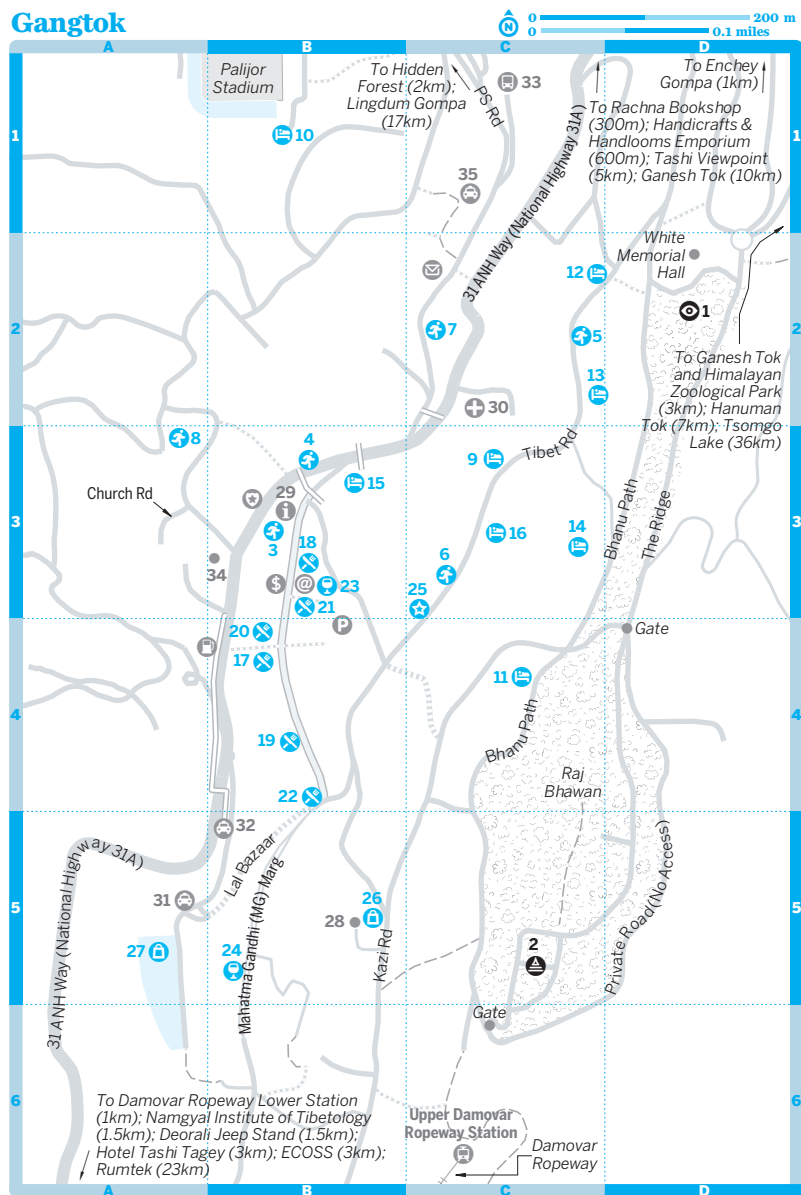
Hidden Forest GUESTHOUSE \$\$\$

(☎205197; www.hiddenforestrextreat.org; Middle Sichey Busty; s/d ₹1800/2000) A wonderful, friendly family-run hideaway on the edge of town, secluded on more than a hectare of fruit trees, orchid and flower nurseries. The



FURTHER THAN IT LOOKS

Sikkim is tiny, only approximately 80km from east to west and 100km north to south but, due to the seriously vertical terrain, it is slow to traverse. Your next destination, just across the valley, looks an hour's drive away but will probably take closer to three or four.



14 rooms are nicely furnished with Tibetan motifs, polished wood floors and private balconies, and there's fine terrace seating. The environmental credentials are also impressive: superb food comes from the solar-powered kitchen, a resident cow provides dairy

produce and all vegetable matter is composted. A taxi from the centre costs ₹80.

Mintokling Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎204226; www.mintoklingsikkim.com; Bhanu Path; s/d from ₹1250/1650; @) Set within secluded gardens far from the traffic noise, this lodge-

Gangtok

Sights

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2 Tsuglhakhang C5

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like family home of a dozen rooms is a real oasis, featuring Sikkimese fabrics, timber ceilings and prayer flags in the garden. The restaurant serves seasonal Sikkimese specialties like nettle soup and fried fiddlehead fern.

Hotel Pandim

HOTEL \$

(☎9832080172; www.hotelpandim.com; Secretariat; s/d/tr from ₹500/650/950, deluxe s/d from ₹950/1250; 🍷) Right on the top of the ridge, this well-run guesthouse is perhaps the best at the upper end of the budget options. Top-floor deluxe rooms have the best views but the cheaper basement rooms are also clean and good value with TV and a small balcony. The top-floor restaurant is particularly nice, with great views, a fine terrace and traditional meals if ordered in advance. Barking dogs can be a problem at night.

Hotel Tashi Tagey

HOTEL \$\$

(☎231631; www.tashitagey.com; 31ANHWay, Tadong; d ₹850-1650; @) For Tibetan hospitality at its best it's worth seeking out this

super-friendly place, 3km below Gangtok. There's a wide range of spotless rooms, great views from the rooftop bonsai garden and the Tibetan food is some of the best you'll ever taste (ask Nyima to make her excellent cottage cheese with tomato and basil). The main drawback is the heavy road noise, so get a room at the back. The location appears inconvenient but frequent shared taxis (₹15) shuttle between the hotel and Gangtok.

Hotel Nor-Khill

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎205637; www.elginhotels.com; PS Rd; s/d incl full board ₹6900/7200; 🍷) Oozing 1930s elegance, this sumptuous 'house of jewels' was originally the King of Sikkim's royal guesthouse. Historical photos, antique furniture and Tibetan carpets line the hallways and lobby, giving the latter a Victorian feel. The spaciouly luxurious rooms attract film stars and Dalai Lamas.

New Modern Central Lodge

HOTEL \$

(☎201361; Tibet Rd; dm ₹100, d ₹300-400, s without bathroom ₹150) A backpacker's favourite for so

long that people still come here despite somewhat dreary rooms (front-facing rooms are easily the best). With plenty of cheap options and a friendly ground-floor restaurant and budget tour agency, it will probably remain a shoestring standby. Most rooms have a toilet but only a few have hot-water showers.

Modern Central Lodge GUESTHOUSE \$
(☎221081; info@modern-hospitality.com; 31AN-HWay; d ₹500-700, tr ₹600) More rupees buy you a slightly larger room right on the main junction by MG Marg. There's good home-cooked food on the roof garden if you book ahead.

Hotel Sonam Delek HOTEL \$\$
(☎202566; www.hotelsonamdelek.com; Tibet Rd; d ₹1000-3000) This is a longstanding favourite offering good service, reliable food and a great back terrace with views over the valley. The best-value super-deluxe rooms (₹2000) come with soft mattresses and decent views. Bigger suite rooms (₹3000) have better views and balconies, but the standard rooms are a very noticeable step down – in the basement.

Chumbi Residency HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎206618; www.thechumbiresidency.com; Tibet Rd; s/d incl breakfast from ₹2600/3400; ☎) This central three-star hotel has comfortable but smallish rooms with fresh white walls, good furniture and tea-and-coffee-making equipment. There's little difference between the two grades of rooms but make sure you get a view. The cool basement Tangerine bar-restaurant is recommended.

Kanchen Residency HOTEL \$\$
(☎9732072614; kanchenresidency@indiatimes.com; Tibet Rd; d back/side/front ₹600/900/1000) Above the dismal (unrelated) Hotel Prince, this airy discovery is spacious, light and well run. Upper front rooms have good views.



Eating

Most budget hotels have cheap cafe-restaurants serving standard Chinese/Tibetan dishes, basic Indian meals and Western breakfasts.



Taste of Tibet

(MG Marg; mains ₹40-80) You'll have to grab a seat early in this bustling upstairs family-run place, and even then you'll likely have to share a table with Tibetan students or maroon-robed monks. The *momos* (Tibetan dumplings) are simply the best in town, or try a *shyabhale* (fried meat pasty).

Golden Pagoda

INDIAN \$

(MG Marg; mains ₹50-105) The rooftop of the hotel of the same name doesn't look like the location of some of the best Indian food in town but the views, service and food are all top-notch. Specialties include the Lucknow *chaat* (savoury snacks), Rajasthani and Gujarati thalis, and superb mixed raita (flavoured yoghurt).

Gangtalk

CONTINENTAL \$\$

(MG Marg; mains ₹140-270, set lunch ₹149-199) Fresh and modern is the vibe here, with a collection of retro album covers on the walls and a wide range of comfort food from burgers to bangers and mash. It's also probably the only place you'll ever see fish *momos* on the menu. Grab a seat on the fine terrace overlooking interesting MG Marg.

Tangerine

SIKKIMESE \$\$

(Ground fl, Chumbi Residency, Tibet Rd; mains ₹130-180) Descend five floors for sublime cuisine, tasty Western snacks or cocktails in the brilliant Japanese-style floor-cushioned bar area. Try the stuffed-tomato curry or sample Sikkimese specialties like *sochhya* (nettle stew). The stylishly relaxed decor adds a real splash of glam.

Parivar Restaurant

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(MG Marg; dishes ₹60-110) Eat here for good-value South Indian vegetarian food; try the various *masala dosas* for breakfast, the *choley paneer* (chickpeas with cottage cheese) or the all-inclusive mini/full thali for ₹90/150.

Bakers Cafe

BAKERY \$

(MG Marg; pastries from ₹12, mains ₹75-150; ☎8am-8pm) The perfect breakfast escape, this cosy Western-style cafe has strong coffee (₹40), croissants, tempting cakes, paninis and pizzas, though the service can be glacial.

Roll House

SNACK BAR \$

(MG Marg; rolls ₹15-30; ☎8am-8pm) In an alley just off MG Marg this hole-in-the-wall serves delicious Kolkata-style *kati* rolls, a kind of Indian enchilada.



Drinking & Entertainment

Two of the nicest locations for a quiet drink are the large terrace of the **Tashi Delek Hotel** (MG Marg) or the bar and garden of the Hotel Nor-Khil.

Cafe Live & Loud

BAR, LIVE MUSIC

(www.thriceasmuch.com; ☎8.30am-11pm; ☎) One of the northeast's main live music venues,

this cool lounge-bar hosts live rock and blues bands every Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings. There's a full bar and food menu, with some unusual Southeast Asian offerings (mains ₹110 to ₹170), and a pleasant cafe-terrace if you need a bit of peace and quiet. The bathrooms are the cleanest in Sikkim.

Indulge

BAR

(www.thriceasmuch.com; Tibet Rd; ☎11am-11pm) Big windows overlooking MG Marg add to the cool of this modern bar-restaurant, even if the blue-and-red walkway lights do feel a bit like the entrance to a Disney ride. The bar food stretches to pizza and steaks (mains ₹60 to ₹220). If you're lucky there'll be a game on the big-screen TV, if you're unlucky the karaoke will kick in.



Shopping

Several souvenir shops on MG Marg and PS Rd sell Tibetan and Sikkimese handicrafts like wooden tongba (Himalayan millet beer) pots, prayer flags and Nepali-style kukri knives.

Sikkim's tax-free status means that booze is big business. A few local liquors are available in novelty souvenir containers. Opening a 1L monk-shaped bottle of Old Monk Rum (₹220) means screwing off the monk's head! Fireball brandy comes in a bowling-ball-style red sphere.

Khangchendzonga Market

FOOD & DRINK

This covered market is interesting for its range of traditional Himalayan produce, including *churpi* (dried cheese on a string), cow skin snacks, Tibetan *tsampa* (ground roasted barley), dried *phing* noodles and circular yeast patties used for brewing chhang (millet beer).

Handicrafts & Handloom Emporium

HANDICRAFTS

(Zero Point; ☎10am-4pm Mon-Sat, daily Jul-Mar) This government initiative teaches traditional crafts to local students and markets their products – including toy red pandas, 1m by 2m hand-woven carpets (₹5500), Tibetan furniture, handmade paper and traditional Sikkimese-style dresses (₹1000 to ₹1600).

Golden Tips

FOOD & DRINK

(www.goldentipstea.in; Kazi Rd; ☎9am-9pm) Buy or taste at this inviting tea showroom with a wide selection of blends, including Sikkimese tea from Temi. Also sells tea by the cup (₹30).

Rachna Bookshop

BOOKSTORE

(www.rachnabooks.com; Development Area) Gangtok's best-stocked and most convivial bookshop also has occasional film and music events on the upstairs terrace.



Information

Many ATMS line MG Marg.

Axis Bank (MG Marg; ☎9.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1.30pm Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques and has an ATM. Stock up with rupees in Gangtok: exchange is virtually impossible elsewhere in Sikkim.

Cyber Cafe (MG Marg; per hr ₹30; ☎9am-9pm) Internet access; the entrance is opposite Roll House.

Foreigners' Registration Office (Kazi Rd; ☎10am-4pm, 10am-noon public hols) In the lane beside Indian Overseas Bank, for permit extensions.

Main post office (PS Rd, Gangtok; ☎9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun for stamps)

Police station (☎202033; 31ANHWay)

STNM hospital (☎222059; 31ANHWay)

Sikkim Tourist Information Centre (☎toll free 204408; www.sikkimtourism.travel; MG Marg; ☎8am-8pm) Offers general advice. Open 10am to 4pm outside peak seasons. For specific queries regarding trekking and permit-area travel, deal with a travel agent.



Getting There & Away

Air

The nearest airport to Sikkim is Bagdogra (p483), 124km from Gangtok, near Siliguri in West Bengal, which has flights to Kolkata, Delhi and Guwahati.

Helicopters shuttle from Gangtok to Bagdogra (₹2200, 35 minutes), departing at 11am and returning at 2.30pm, but services are cancelled in adverse weather. There's a strict maximum 10kg baggage allowance. **Sikkim Tourism Development Corporation** (☎203960; MG Marg) sells the tickets for this and scenic flights.

Fixed-price Maruti vans/sumos (jeeps) go directly to Bagdogra (₹1500/1700, 4½ hours). You'll get the best rates from returning vehicles, so look for West Bengal (WB) number plates.

Sikkim's first airport is planned at Pakyong, 35km from Gangtok, with a tentative completion date of 2012.

Bus

Buses run from the government **SNT bus station** (PS Rd) at 7am to Jorethang (₹80), Kalimpong (₹80) and Namchi (₹80), at 1.15pm to Pelling (₹122) and hourly to Siliguri (₹115 to ₹220, 6am to 1pm). In general you are better off taking the faster and more frequent shared jeeps.

Shared Jeeps

Some jeep departures are fixed, others leave when all the seats are filled. Departures usually start at 6.30am for the more distant destinations and continue up to about 2pm.

From the hectic but relatively well-organised **Deorali jeep stand** (31ANHWay), 1.5km below Gangtok, shared jeeps depart every 30 minutes or so to Darjeeling (₹140, five hours), Kalimpong (₹150, three hours) and Siliguri (₹140, four hours), some continuing to New Jalpaiguri train station. There are daily jeeps to Kakarbhitta (₹180, four hours, 6.30am) on the Nepalese border and Jaigaon (₹250, four hours, 8am) on the Bhutanese border. Buses to Siliguri (₹100) also run from here. Purchase tickets in advance. The stand is hidden in the alleys below the lower ropeway station.

West Sikkim vehicles depart from **Southwest jeep stand** (Church Rd) for Geyzing (₹140, 4½ hours, four daily), Ravangla (₹90, three hours, four daily), Namchi (₹110, three hours, every half-hour) and Jorethang (₹110, three hours, hourly). Jeeps for Yuksom, Tashiding and Pelling (₹150 to ₹180, five hours) depart around 7am and possibly again around 12.30pm. For independent travel, small groups can charter a vehicle.

Train

The nearest major train station is over 120km away at New Jalpaiguri (NJP). There's a computerised **railway booking counter** (☺8am-2pm Mon-Sat, 8am-11am Sun & public hols) at the SNT bus station.

i Getting Around

There's a taxi stand in Lal Bazaar opposite the Denzong Cinema, and another in PS Rd just north of the post office. Shared taxis to Tadong (₹15, every 10 minutes) depart from just under the pedestrian bridge on the National Hwy.

Around Gangtok

Rumtek and Lingdum gompas make for a great day trip from Gangtok. Viewing the temples takes less than an hour each, but the winding country lanes that link them is a big part of the attraction, curving through mossy forests high above river valleys and artistically terraced rice slopes.

RUMTEK

☎03592 / ELEV 1690M

Facing Gangtok distantly across a vast green valley, Rumtek village is entirely dominated by its extensive gumpa complex. Spiritually the monastery is hugely significant as the home in exile of Buddhism's Kagyu (Black Hat) sect. Visually it is not Sikkim's most

spectacular sight and during high season it can get quite crowded. To experience Rumtek at its most serene, stay the night and hike around the delightful nearby hilltops at dawn.

👁 Sights

Rumtek Gumpa

MONASTERY

(☎252329; www.rumtek.org) This rambling and walled complex is a village within a village, containing religious buildings, schools and several small lodge-hotels. To enter, foreigners must show both passport and Sikkim permit. Unusually for a monastery, this place is guarded by armed police, as there have been violent altercations, and even an invasion, by monks who dispute the Karmapa's accession.

The main **monastery building** (admission ₹10; ☺6am-6pm) was constructed between 1961 and 1966 to replace Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet, which had been partially destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution (there's a mural of the original monastery beside the metal detector). The giant throne within awaits the crowning of Kagyu's current spiritual leader, the (disputed) 17th Karmapa.

Exit to the side and take the rear stairs past a snack shop (good tea and *momos*) up to the **Golden Stupa** (☺6-11.45am & noon-5pm). The smallest room holds the ashes of the important 16th Karmapa in an amber, coral and turquoise-studded reliquary to which pilgrims pay their deepest respects. If locked, someone from the colourful Karma Shri Nalanda Institute of Buddhist Studies opposite can usually open it for you.

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

Old Rumtek Gumpa

MONASTERY

About 1.5km beyond the gumpa towards Sang, a long avenue of white prayer flags and flowers leads photogenically down to the powder-blue Old Rumtek Gumpa. Despite the name, the main prayer hall has been thoroughly renovated. The interior is a riotous festival of colour and the lonely location is idyllic with some wonderful west-facing views. Two days before **Losoong** (Sikkimese New Year), Old Rumtek holds the celebrated **Kagyed Chaam** dance.

Lingdum Gumpa

MONASTERY

(www.zurmangkagyud.org) Only completed in 1998, peaceful Lingdum Gumpa is visually

THE KARMAPA CONTROVERSY

The 'Black Hat' sect is so named because of the priceless ruby-topped headgear used to crown the Karmapa (spiritual leader) during key ceremonies. Being woven from the hair of *dakinis* (angels), the hat must be kept locked in a box to prevent it from flying back to the heavens. Or at least that's the official line. Nobody has actually seen the hat since 1993, after the death of the 16th Karmapa.

Since then the Kagyu school has been embroiled in a bitter controversy between two rival candidates. The main candidate, **Ogyen Trinley Dorje** (www.kagyuoffice.org), fled Tibet in 2000 but currently remains based at Dharamsala: Indian authorities are believed to have prevented him from officially taking up his Rumtek seat for fear of upsetting Chinese government sensibilities. The rival candidate, **Thaye Dorje** (www.karmapa.org), lives in nearby Kalimpong in West Bengal. Supporters of the two are locked in a legal dispute over who can control Rumtek. To learn more about the controversy, read *The Dance of 17 Lives* by Mick Brown.

Only when the dispute is resolved and the 17th Karmapa is finally crowned will anyone dare to unlock the box and check whether the sacred black hat is actually still there.

more exciting than Rumtek. Its structure grows out of the forest in grand layers, with pleasant side gardens and a photogenic chorten. The extensively muralled main prayer hall enshrines huge statues of Sakya-muni (historic) Buddha, Guru Rinpoche and the 16th Karmapa. Sonorous chanting at the 7.30am and 3.30pm *puja* (prayers/offerings) adds to the magical atmosphere. There's a nice outdoor cafe by the entrance and an interesting souvenir shop selling Buddhist accessories and Tibetan cloth.

Sleeping & Eating

Sungay Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

(☎252222; r ₹250-600) The friendly Tibetan management make this a great alternative to rushing back to Gangtok. Rooms are comfortable and good value, with hot-water bathrooms, and many come with balconies. It's just inside Rumtek's main entrance gate.

Bamboo Retreat

ECO RESORT \$\$

(☎252516; www.bambooretreat.in; Sajong; s/d incl breakfast & dinner from ₹3300/3900; 📶) This Swiss-run rural resort just below Rumtek is a destination in its own right. There's plenty to keep you busy, with mountain bikes for hire and guided hikes, or just relax with a herbal bath and massage. The 12 colourful rooms are all uniquely decorated. Culinary highlights include an authentic Italian pizza oven and Sikkimese food grown in the organic garden.

Sangay Hotel

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎252238; d ₹350, s/d without bathroom ₹150/250.) A simple but decent budget option just below Rumtek.

Getting There & Away

Rumtek is 26km (1½ hours) from Gangtok by a winding but scenic road. Lingdum Gumpa is a 2km walk from Ranga or Ranka village, reached by rough backlanes from Gangtok. Shared jeeps run to Rumtek (₹30) every hour or so, with the last jeep returning to Gangtok between 2pm and 3pm. A return taxi costs around ₹600. Linking the two sites requires private transport (₹1000 to ₹1200).

Towards Tibet

TSOMGO (CHANGU, TSANGU) LAKE

ELEV 3780M

Pronounced Changu, this scenic high-altitude lake about three hours' drive from Gangtok is a popular excursion for Indian visitors, but restricted area permits are required for foreign visitors. To get one, sign up for a tour by 2pm and most Gangtok agents can get the permit for next-day departure (two photos required). A budget tour will cost around ₹2600 to ₹3500 per vehicle or ₹500 per person if you can get a group together.

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

NATHU LA

Indian citizens are permitted to continue 18km along the spectacular road from **Tsomgo Lake** to the 4130m **Nathu La** (Listening Ears Pass), whose border opened with much fanfare in 2006 but to local traffic only.

A few kilometres southeast of Nathu La, **Jelep La** was the pass used by Francis Younghusband in the British Great Game-era attack on Tibet (1903-04). Until 1962 Jelep La was the main trade route between Kalimpong and Lhasa, but it shows no signs of reopening.

NORTH SIKKIM

📍 03592

The biggest attractions in North Sikkim are the idyllic Yumthang and Tsopta Valleys. Reaching them and anywhere north of Singhik requires a special permit (p530), which is easy to obtain if you sign up for a tour. It's possible to visit Phodong and Mangan/Singhik independently using public jeeps but they can also be conveniently seen during brief stops on any Yumthang tour and at no extra cost.

The Yumthang and Tsopta Valleys are very cold by October and become really fingertip numbing between December and February.

Gangtok to Singhik

The narrow but mostly well-paved 31AN-HWY clings to steep wooded slopes above the Teesta River, occasionally descending in long coils of hairpins to a bridge photographically draped in prayer flags, only to coil right back up again on the other side. If driving, consider brief stops at Tashi Viewpoint (p531), Kabi Lunchok, Phensang and the Seven Sisters waterfall.

Kabi Lunchok, an atmospheric glade 17km north of Gangtok, decorated with memorial stones, is the site of a 13th-century peace treaty between the chiefs of the Lepcha and Bhutia peoples. They swore a blood brotherhood until the River Rangit ran dry and Khangchendzonga ceased to exist.

The small 290-year-old Nyingmapa-school **Phensang Gompa** is further north, 1km off the main road. It has beautifully decorated lower and upper-floor prayer halls. It's all recent, though, as the monastery was rebuilt after a 1957 fire. A **Chaam festival** is celebrated here on the 28th and 29th days of the Tibetan 10th month, usually December.

Just over 30km north of Gangtok, **Seven Sisters Waterfall**, a multistage cascade, cuts a chasm above a roadside cardamom grove and plummets into a rocky pool. It's fine spot for a photo and a welcome chai break.



NORTH SIKKIM TOUR TIPS

- » A group size of four or five people is ideal for sharing costs while not overfilling the jeep.
- » To find jeep-share partners, try asking around at the cafe at New Modern Central Lodge (p533) in Gangtok, around 6pm a few days before you plan to travel.
- » Less than four days is too rushed to comfortably visit both Yumthang/Lachung and Lachen. Three days is enough to see just Yumthang. Three-night, four-day tours range from around ₹6500 to ₹8000 per person for groups of four, depending on accommodation and vehicle standards. A budget two-night, three-day tour starts around ₹4000 per person in a group of seven.
- » Leave Gangtok early on the first day: it's a shame to arrive in the dark.
- » Your (obligatory) 'guide' is actually more of a translator. Don't assume he'll stop at all potential points of interest without prodding.
- » Bring a torch (flashlight) and warm clothes.

The little strip of roadside restaurants at **Phodong** (1815m) make it a popular lunch stop. About 1km southeast, near the Km39 post, a 15-minute walk along a side road leads to the **Phodong Gompa** (established in 1740), belonging to the Kagyu sect. The beautiful two-storey prayer hall contains extensive murals and a large statue of the 9th Karmapa. A rear room contains a hidden statue of Mahakala, a protective deity of the monastery.

Drive or walk on another 1.5km uphill to the much more atmospheric **Labrang Gompa** (established in 1884), home to 100 monks. The inner walls of the eight-sided main building are lined with over 1000 icons of Padmasambhava, while upstairs a fearsome statue of the guru sports a necklace of severed heads. *Chaam* dances take place at the end of December.

Between the two monasteries, just below the road lie the 19th-century foundations of **Tumlong**, Sikkim's third capital. The enigmatic palace ruins are worth a quick scramble.

North Sikkim's district headquarters, **Mangan** (Km67 post; ie 28km from Phodong) proudly declares itself to be the 'Large Cardamom Capital of the World'. Some 1.5km beyond, concrete stupas on a sharp bend mark a small footpath; a three-minute descent leads to a panoramic **viewpoint** and an excellent tea stop.

Beyond Singhik

With relevant permits and an organised tour you can continue north beyond Singhik. At Chungthang, the next settlement, the road branches up the Lachung Chu and Lachen Chu valleys. If you only have time to visit one valley, the Lachung Chu has the most impressive scenery.

Accommodation is available in Lachung and Lachen, with some basic options in Thanggu. We have listed a few favourites but your tour agency will normally preselect for you. Cheaper hotels tend to have a mixed bag of rooms with prices the same whether or not the room has geyser, shower, heating, window or balcony. Try to see a few different rooms even if you can't choose your hotel.

LACHUNG

☎3592 / ELEV 2630M

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

Over a dozen hotels are dotted around Lachung. Many outwardly modern places maintain traditional Tibetan-style wood-fire kitchens that are a cosy place to linger over a butter tea or a tongba of chhang. Some of the better places:

Modern Residency (Taagsing Retreat;

☎214888; www.modernresidency.com; Singring village; d ₹2500) Rooms are comfortable and well decorated, though walk-in prices are steep. Even if you don't stay, the gompa-style building 3km south of Lachung is worth visiting for its upper-floor mini-museum, library and bar. Staying here is one advantage of booking a tour with Modern Treks & Tours in Gangtok.

Mayfair Yarlam (☎9434330030; www.yarlamresort.com; r from ₹8000) The top place in town.

Sila Inn (☎9474016226; d ₹1000) Family run and friendly, with a mixed bag of rooms above a friendly hostel-restaurant. The best rooms are on the top floor.

Crown Villa (crownhotels@gmail.com) New resort under construction at time of writing.

YUMTHANG VALLEY

The main reason to come to Lachung is to continue 23km further north to admire the majestic Yumthang Valley, which starts some 10km after leaving Lachung. This point is also the entry to the **Singba Rhododendron Sanctuary**, whose network of hiking trails offers a welcome chance to get out of the jeep. From March to early May a host of primulas, 24 species of rhododendrons and other flora bursts into flower to carpet the valley floor.

At the Km23 point there are a number of snack shacks that open up in the high season. Don't bother with the **hot springs**, a grimy, 2-sq-metre pool in a rubbish-ringed hut on the other side of the river. As the valley widens and flattens, the scenery becomes 100% Himalayan, with jagged peaks, lush pasturage and bridges draped with colourful prayer flags.

From Yumthang you can continue up switchbacks for 14km onto the snowy plateau of **Yume Samdong (Zero Point)** at a head-pounding 4640m, where a candelabra of jagged peaks rises towards Tibet. This is as far as you can go. The road starts to get blocked by snow from mid-October.

LACHEN

POP 2000 / ELEV 2700M

The traditional mountain village of Lachen is changing fast with the construction of concrete tourist hotels. Nonetheless, alleyways remain sprinkled with old wooden homes on sturdy stone bases and decorated with colourful Tibetan-style window frames. Logs are stacked everywhere for winter fuel.

Lachen (Nyudrup Choeling) Gompa is about 15 minutes' walk above the town and is most likely to be open early morning or late afternoon. At the beginning of town, beside a giant cypress tree, is a huge mounted prayer wheel and a spooky collection of geometric threads designed to trap evil spirits.

Lachen is the trailhead for eight-day expeditionary treks to **Green Lake** (5050m) along the yeti-infested **Zemu Glacier**

towards Khangchendzonga's northeast face. These require long advance planning and very expensive permits.

Most groups stay in either the Shangrila Residency, Bayul Inn or Twin Peak Lodge, with rooms from around ₹500 to ₹800. A step up is the **Lachen View Point** (☎9434867312; ₹1500-4000). Best of the bunch is the luxurious **Apple Orchard Resort** (www.theappleorchardresort.com; ₹4830-6050), above the village next to the *ani gompa* (nunnery). The new Blue Pine Hotel at the entry to town looks as if it will have great views when finished.

THANGGU & TSOPTA

Beyond a sprawling army camp 32km north of Lachen, **Thanggu** (3850m) has an end-of-the-world feel. There are no phones (mobile or otherwise), the electricity is solar generated and the Chinese are only 15km away.

Misleadingly named **Thanggu Resort** (d & tr ₹500; ☺May-Nov) is a simple wooden house incorporating a traditional-styled kitchen and tongba-drinking den (tongba ₹20) that offers a popular breakfast stop. There are couple of grubby rooms upstairs.

A boulder-strewn stream leads on 2km to the **Tsopta Valley**. Just above the tree line, the scenery feels rather like Glencoe (Scotland), with the added drama of a glacier-toothed mountain wall framing the western horizon. A two-hour hike leads up to a pair of meditation caves, one of which was used for two years by the famous French traveller and mystic Alexandra David-Neel.

Indian visitors can continue 30km north to spectacular **Gurudongmar Lake** (5150m), right on the border with Tibet, but the glacial lake is off-limits to foreigners.

SOUTH SIKKIM

The main sights in South Sikkim are Namchi's gigantic statues but there are plenty of other villages and viewpoints to explore here in little-visited villages like Rinchenpong, Uttarey and Hillyay – for trip ideas see www.sikkimtourismuttarey.com. Ravangla falls administratively within South Sikkim, but we cover it in the Gangtok to Pelling section (West Sikkim), where it fits more logically.

Namchi

☎03595 / ELEV 1525M

Few travellers would linger in Namchi were it not for the two huge statues, one Hindu,

the other Buddhist, that face each other across the town from opposite hillsides.

There are several internet cafes in the central pedestrianised plaza, along with an Axis Bank, two ancient bodhi and pipal trees and, oddly, a piranha aquarium.

👁 Sights

Samdruptse

MONUMENT

(Indian/foreigner ₹10/20; ☺dawn-dusk) Painted in shimmering copper and bronze, the impressive 45m-high Padmasambhava statue dominates the forested Samdruptse ridge and is visible for miles around. Known as Guru Rinpoche in Tibetan, Padmasambhava was the 8th-century holy man, magician and Tantric master widely credited with introducing Tantric Buddhism across the Himalayan region. Completed in 2004 on a foundation stone laid by the Dalai Lama, the statue is starting to look a bit weathered but is still impressive atop its lotus plinth. The site is 7km from Namchi, 2km off the Damthang/Ravangla road.

Taxis charge around ₹500 return. Alternatively, pay ₹300 for a one-way drop and walk back to Namchi, either by shortcutting down steps through the **rock garden** (admission ₹20) or, more interestingly, following the road down to **Ngadak Gompa**. A large new gompa is under construction at Ngadak, just uphill from a spooky Gönsö Lhakhang (protector chapel) but of most interest is Ngadak's ruined and neglected **old dzong**, dating back to 1717, which still exudes a sense of old Sikkim. Its unpainted stone exterior incorporates lovely carved door pillars and, upstairs, intriguing but decrepit fragments of painting remain on the peeling old cloth wallpaper. Bring a torch (flashlight).

A cable-car style ropeway is currently under construction to link the statue with Namchi centre via the rock garden.

Solophuk

MONUMENT

Even grander than the Samdruptse Guru is the massive 33m Shiva statue, currently being finalised on the memorably named Solophuk hilltop, 5km south of Namchi. A huge complex of guesthouses, temples and pagodas surround the statue, including replicas of the Chor Dam, India's four sacred Hindu pilgrimage sites. Everything here is on an epic scale – even the prayer beads that Shiva holds in his hand are the size of cannonballs. A taxi here costs ₹500/300 for a return/one-way drop.

Not satisfied with two statues, the town is planning an equally epic statue of the goddess Devi on nearby Shakti Hill.

Sleeping & Eating

Dungmali Heritage Resort GUESTHOUSE \$\$
(☎9434126992; rairashmi_27@yahoo.co.in; Solophuk Rd; s ₹500, d ₹900-1500, deluxe ₹2500-4000) This friendly family-run guesthouse is an excellent option. All the rooms are spotless and fresh, and most come with a balcony and great views. The family grows its own organic vegetables and offers bird-watching walks in 2.4 hectares of private jungle. It's 4km from town on the road to Solophuk.

TOP CHOICE **Seven Hills Resort** RESORT \$\$
(☎9647783038; www.sevenhillsresort.com; Phalidara; d ₹2800-3200) If it's peace and quiet you want, head to this relaxing resort on a remote ridge, 7km northeast of Namchi. A dozen rustic but comfortable cottages with private balconies are dotted around gardens of passion-fruit, bamboo and orchids, and the views are superb. Warm up on cold evenings with a glass of house-made rhododendron brandy.

Hotel Samdruptse HOTEL \$\$
(☎264806; Jorethang Rd; d ₹600-1000) The higher the room rate the better the Khangchendzonga views from this decent but slightly scruffy concrete place. The hotel is 300m west of the centre, along the road to Jorethang, and includes Namchi's most pleasant restaurant (mains ₹50 to ₹130).

Hotel Zimkhang HOTEL \$
(☎263625; s/d ₹300/450) An acceptable budget option in the main pedestrian plaza.

Getting There & Around

Share jeeps leave frequently when full to Jorethang (₹30, one hour) from near the Hotel Samdruptse; to Ravangla (₹40, one hour) and Gangtok (₹110, 3½ hours) from the northwest junction; and to Siliguri (₹120, three hours) from a stand at the southern end of the pedestrian mall. Services dry up around 3pm.

Buses leave from the ground floor of the huge new transport complex on the east of town. There are one or two departures each morning to Jorethang (₹20), Ravangla (₹25) and Gangtok (₹80).

Jorethang (Naya Bazaar)

☎03595 / ELEV 520M

This bustling but charmless transport hub between West Sikkim, Namchi and Darjeeling/Siliguri is just a place to change jeeps.

If you get stuck here, the brightest, friendliest accommodation option remains the recently renovated **Hotel Namgyal** (☎276852; d ₹450), on the main drag, 70m east of the bridge, just before the SNT bus station.

Across the road beside the Darjeeling jeep stand is a helpful **tourist office** (☎8am-4pm Mon-Sat Dec-Feb & Jun-Aug, 10am-8pm rest of yr).

Jeep services are expected to move to a large new transport complex on the east end of town. Until then, shared jeeps leave regularly from next to the tourist office for Darjeeling (₹100, two hours). Jeeps for Gangtok (₹110, four hours), Geyzing (₹60, two hours), Namchi (₹40, one hour) and Siliguri (₹100, three hours) leave from a chaotic stand 100m east. For Nepal there's a 7am jeep to Kakarbhitta (₹150, four hours). Buy tickets before boarding.

Jeeps for Tashiding (₹70, two hours) and Yuksom (₹100, three hours) leave from a third stand just to the west of this one.

Less frequent and slower buses run from the SNT bus station to Gangtok (₹85, 12.30pm), Namchi (₹24, noon), Pelling (₹50, 2.30pm), Ravangla (₹45, noon) and Siliguri (₹83, 9.30am)

WEST SIKKIM

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

Ravangla (Rabongla)

☎03595 / ELEV 2010M

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

The town has little aesthetic distinction, but is useful as a hub to visit the interesting surrounding sights. Joining the main highway is Main Bazaar, a concentration of shops, cheap hotels, the jeep stand and the **Cyber Cafe** (per hr ₹30; ☎8.15am-7pm).

Sights

Mane Choehorling Gompa MONASTERY

Steps lead up from the end of Main Bazaar to this handsome new stone-and-wood gompa. The festival ground here is the site of the annual **Pang Lhabsol festival** (www.panglhabsol.blogspot.com), held each August in honour of Kanchendzonga. *Chaam* dances take place on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month.

Sakyamuni Complex MONUMENT

Just behind the gompa is the huge new **Sakyamuni Complex** (www.sakyamuniproject.com), centrepiece of which is a giant 41m tall Buddha statue. The statue holds Buddhist relics from 13 countries and will eventually include a meditation and hotel complex when completed in 2012. The Dalai Lama blessed the site in 2010.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel 10-Zing GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9434241324; s ₹250, d ₹400-500) At the main junction, this friendly and helpful place just has a few rooms so is often full. Doubles have geysers; otherwise it's free bucket hot water. The good restaurant has nice outdoor seating.

Mt Narsing Resort RESORT \$\$

(☎03592-226822; www.yuksom-tours.com; s/d lower resort from ₹800/900, upper annexe from ₹1700/2000) There are two wings at this rustic bungalow place 5km southwest of Ravangla. The lower main building is cheaper but the ambience and views are better at the upper resort, which offers a characterful lodge with a fire pit, good food and fine views over the lawn towards Narsing and Pandim peaks. A taxi to the lower/upper resort costs ₹70/200.

Kookie Restaurant TIBETAN \$

(☎7am-8pm; mains ₹40-80) This clean and fresh Tibetan-run restaurant is easily the best in town. The menu includes rice and curry sets, Chinese sizzlers and good *momos* and noodle soups, and the tables are even decorated with fresh flowers. Leave a note on the 'We Were Here' noticeboard.

Getting There & Away

Luckypo Travels on the main highway books shared jeeps to Gangtok (₹90, 8am to noon), Pelling (₹90, 1pm), Siliguri (₹150, 7am to 8am) and Geyzing (₹70, 9am); for Yuksom, change at

Geyzing. Jeeps to Namchi (₹45, one hour) and Legship (₹40) leave from near Hotel 10-Zing.

The SNT bus booking office is part of Hotel 10-Zing. Buses run to Namchi (₹26, one hour, 9am and 1pm) and Siliguri (₹130 to ₹140, five hours, 6.30am).

Around Ravangla

At **Ralang**, 13km below Ravangla, the splendid and active 1995 **Palchen Choeling Monastic Institute** (New Ralang Gompa) is home to about 200 Kagyu-order monks. Arrive early morning or around 3pm to hear them chanting in mesmerising unison. There's a 9m-high golden statue of the historical Buddha in the main hall, and locally the gompa is famous for elaborate butter sculptures. Peek into the side room to see the amazing effigies used in November's impressive **Mahakala dance**.

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

A chartered taxi to Ralang costs around ₹500 from Ravangla (return with two hours' wait).

Beside the main Legship road, 5.5km from central Ravangla, small but fascinating **Yungdrung Kundrakling** is the only Bon monastery in Sikkim. The originally animistic Bon faith preceded Buddhism in Tibet but has since been largely subsumed by it. You'll have to look closely to notice that the deities are slightly different and that the prayer wheels are turned anticlockwise. Non-flash photography is allowed inside. You can get here from Ravangla on a shared jeep to Kewzing (₹20).

On the way back you could stop at the roadside Cloud's End Retreat for a tea before descending the stone steps for ten minutes to **Sakyamuni** (Doling Gompa), a monastery complex.

Back in town, a steep three- to four-hour hiking trail leads from above the Sakyamuni statue to the top of **Maenam Hill** (3150m), looming just above the town of Ravangla, through the springtime rhododendrons and magnolia blooms of the **Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary**. The views are wonderful and you just might see rare red pandas and monal pheasants (Sikkim's state bird). From the summit continue 2km to **Bhaledunga rock**, where the government is planning to build an observation 'skyway'. A guide is useful to avoid getting lost in the forest on your

return; arrange one for around ₹400 at the forestry check post.

Geyzing, Tikjuk & Legship

📍03595

The following three towns have little to offer a visitor apart from a permit extension at Tikjuk and transport changes at Geyzing. Geyzing is West Sikkim's capital, but for permit extensions you need Tikjuk, half way to Pelling.

Tikjuk is the District Administrative Centre for West Sikkim. Permits can be extended at the **Superintendent of Police office** (Side wing, 3rd fl; ☎10am-4pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat of month).

Apart from its vaguely interesting Sunday market, **Geyzing** is most useful as West Sikkim's transport hub. Frequent shared jeeps go to Jorethang (₹60, 1½ hours), Legship (₹25, 30 minutes), Pelling (₹25, 20 minutes), Tashiding (₹60, 1½ hours) and Yuksom (₹70, 2½ hours). Several serve Gangtok (₹140, seven to nine hours, 7am to 12.30pm), Ravangla (₹68, one hour, 9am and 11.45am) and Siliguri (₹150, four hours, 7am and 12.30pm).

When no other transport is available, especially to or from Tashiding, try connecting at **Legship**. Should you get stranded, **Hotel Trishna** (📍250887; d/tr ₹200/300) is simple, with private bathrooms, bucket hot water and a rooftop terrace.

Just 5km south of Legship, across the river, the **Phursangchu** hot springs and **Guru Rinpoche** cave are worth a quick stop if you have your own transport.

Pelling

📍03595 / ELEV 2085M

Pelling's raison d'être is its stride-stopping view of Khangchendzonga at dawn. It's not so much a town as a 2km string of tourist hotels, but don't be put off. The view *is* worth it. Despite hordes of visitors, locals remain surprisingly unjaded, and the best budget hotels are great for meeting fellow travellers. The helipad to the west of the centre gives magnificent panoramic views, especially at dawn.

Pelling is nominally divided into Upper, Middle and Lower areas, though these effectively merge. A focal point of Upper Pelling is a small roundabout where the main road from Geyzing turns 180 degrees in front of Hotel Garuda. At the same point, minor

roads branch south to Dentam and southwest to the helipad and tourist office.

👉 Tours

Most hotels and travel agencies offer one-day tours. Popular options visit Yuksom via Khecheopalri Lake and three waterfalls (₹2000 to ₹2500 per jeepload) or combine Khecheopalri Lake, Pemayangtse Gumpa and Rabdentse (₹1800 to ₹2000).

Hotel Garuda (📍258319; Upper Pelling; tours per day per jeep ₹1800) Half-day tours to Khecheopalri Lake cost ₹1200; to Pemayangtse and Rabdentse costs an extra ₹600.

Hotel Kabur (📍258504; deepesh83@yahoo.co.in; Upper Pelling; day tours ₹2000) Local tours and more; ask about the treks from Ribdi.

🛏 Sleeping

Most of Pelling's hotels cater primarily to midrange domestic tourists. Rates typically drop 30% in low season and are highly negotiable during low occupancy.

Hotel Garuda

HOTEL \$

(📍258319; Upper Pelling; dm ₹100, r ₹250-600, deluxe ₹900-1100; 📞) A well-run backpacker favourite, with clean, spacious rooms, all with hot shower and TV, good Khangchendzonga views and a good-value restaurant ideal for hooking up with other travellers. The owner is very knowledgeable about the region and offers guests a handy schematic guide map.

Hotel Kabur

HOTEL \$

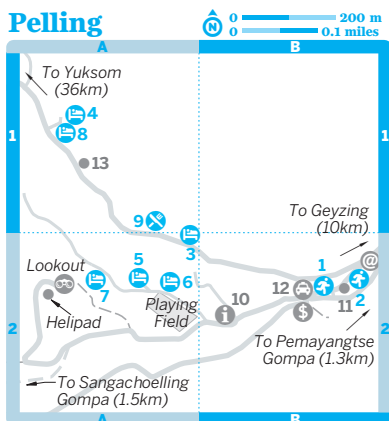
(📍258504; deepesh83@yahoo.co.in; Upper Pelling; r ₹150-600) Entry is via the top floor, which is a delightful restaurant backed by a verandah that looks out onto the mountains. Rooms have towels, soap, toilet paper and heaters in winter – all usually absent in rooms of this price, though rooms without a view can be dark and cold. If you need to know something, do something or go somewhere, the owners Deepen and his identical twin Deepesh are the people to ask (even if you're never quite sure which one you're talking to!).

Norbu Ghang Resort

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍258272; www.norbughangresort.com; Upper Pelling; s/d from ₹2800/3000; 📞) A spread of pretty cottages (some private, some duplexes) dots the hillside of this resort. Most have fine views, so you can savour the dawn views from the toasty-warm comfort of your own bed. An afternoon beer on the lawn is another

Pelling



highlight. A second Norbu Ghang resort and spa is under construction behind this one.

Elgin Mount Pandim HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎250756; www.elginhotels.com; s/d incl full board ₹5600/5900; 📞@) Pelling's most historic hotel is a five-minute stroll from Pemayangtse gumpa, with arguably the best mountain views in all of Sikkim. The fairy godmother of renovation has been generous with the parlour-room wicker and antiques and the Aussie-Tibetan managers add a personal warmth to the elegant charm. Request a mountain-view room.

Hotel Sonamchen HOTEL \$\$
(☎258346; sonamchen07@yahoo.com; s/d from ₹1000/1200) The rooms here can't deliver on the expectations created by the ornately decorated lobby but most do have superb Khangchendzonga views, with rates decreasing in price as you descend the floors. The standard rooms with balcony offer the best value.

Pelling has over 80 hotels. Other options:

Touristo Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎258206; Lower Pelling; d ₹500-1000) Only the best rooms have good Khangchendzonga views.

Hotel Rabdentse Residency HOTEL \$\$
(☎258612; www.saikripa.in; Lower Pelling; d from ₹850-1050, ste ₹1800-3300) Downstairs behind the Touristo, with some views and a good restaurant.



Eating & Drinking

Pelling's best dining is in the hotels. The Norbu Ghang, Garuda, Kabur and Rabdentse Residency are the best bets.

Pelling

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 Hotel Garuda.....B2
- 2 Hotel Kabur.....B2

Sleeping

- 3 Hotel Parodzong.....A2
- 4 Hotel Rabdentse Residency.....A1
- 5 Hotel Simvo.....A2
- 6 Hotel Sonamchen.....A2
- 7 Norbu Ghang Resort.....A2
- 8 Touristo Hotel.....A1

Eating

- 9 Melting Point.....A1

Information

- 10 Tourist Office.....B2

Transport

- 11 Father Tours.....B2
- 12 Shared Jeeps to Geyzing.....B2
- 13 SNT Counter (Hotel Pelling).....A1

Melting Point

MULTICUISINE \$

(Middle Pelling; mains ₹60-110) It's a short stroll downhill to this friendly restaurant, which offers cosy indoor seating or excellent terrace views. The wide menu ranges from baked potatoes to Sikkimese fixed meals (₹350; ordered in advance). There's 20% discount between 5pm and 7pm.

Information

Paylink Cyber Zone (per hr ₹50; ☺8am-7pm)
Just below Hotel Kabur.

SBI ATM Opposite the Hotel Garuda.

Tourist office (☎9434630876; ☺9am-5pm)

Getting There & Away

SNT buses run to Siliguri (₹135, four hours, 7am) via Jorethang (₹40, 2½ hours); book at the **SNT counter** (Hotel Pelling) in Lower Pelling from where the buses depart.

Father Tours (☎258219; Upper Pelling) runs shared jeeps at 7am for Gangtok (₹200, five hours) and Siliguri (₹200, 4½ hours).

If nothing is available ex-Pelling, change in Geyzing. Shared jeeps to Geyzing (₹25, 20 minutes) leave frequently from near the Hotel Garuda, passing close to Pemayangtse, Rabdentse and Tikjuk district administrative centre.

For Khecheopalri Lake (₹60) or Yuksom (₹60) jeeps start from Geyzing, passing through Pelling between noon and 1pm. The Kabur and Garuda

hotels can book seats for you, or simply join a day-trip tour and throw away the return ticket.

Around Pelling

PEMAYANGTSE GOMPA

Literally translated as 'Perfect Sublime Lotus', the 1705 **Pemayangtse gompa** (Indian/foreigner ₹10/20; ☀7am-5pm) is one of Sikkim's oldest and most significant Nyingmapa gompas. Magnificently set on a hilltop (2100m) overlooking the Rabdentse ruins, the atmospheric compound is ringed by gardens and traditional cottages used by the resident monks. The ground floor features a central Buddha, while upstairs fierce-looking statues depict all eight reincarnations of Padmasambhava. On the top floor is an astounding seven-tiered model representing Padmasambhava's heavenly abode of Zangtok Pelri, handmade over five laborious years by a single dedicated lama.

During February/March impressive *chaam* dances celebrating **Losar** culminate with the unfurling of a huge *gyoku* (giant embroidered *thangka*) and the zapping of evil demons with a great fireball.

Pemayangtse is 1.5km from Upper Pelling, along the road to Geyzing, and is easily combined with a visit to Rabdentse. The signposted turn-off is near an obvious stupa.

RABDENTSE

The royal capital of Sikkim from 1670 to 1814, the now-ruined **Rabdentse** (admission free; ☀dawn-dusk) consists of chunky wall-stubs with a few inset inscription stones. These would look fairly unremarkable were they not situated on such an utterly fabulous viewpoint ridge. The entrance to the site is around 3km from Upper Pelling, along the road to Geyzing. The ruins are a 10-minute walk from the site's yellow gateway. As the sign says, 'Do not get tired. Great excitement is awaiting!'

SANGACHOELING GOMPA

The second-oldest gompa in all of Sikkim, charming **Sangachoeiling** has some beautiful murals and a peaceful ridgetop setting. It's a steep 2km walk from Pelling starting along the dirt track that veers left where the asphalted road rises to Pelling's new helipad. A huge statue of Chenresig, the Buddhist Bodhisattva of Compassion, is currently under construction just behind the monastery

A jungle trek continues 10km beyond Sangachoeiling to **Rani Dhunga** (Queen's

Rock), supposedly the scene of an epic Ramayana battle between Rama and 10-headed demon king Ravana. Arrange a guide (₹300 to ₹400) from the Kabur or Garuda hotels.

The Monastery Loop

Day-long and overnight jeep tours from Pelling take in the major sights here, or you can do a great adventurous three-day trip from Pelling to Tashiding via Khecheopalri Lake, using a combination of jeeps and hiking. Alternatively, consider catching a ride to wonderful Yuksom via Khecheopalri Lake using tour jeeps and hiking from there to Tashiding.

PELLING TO YUKSOM

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

Pronounced 'catch-a-perry', the holy **Khecheopalri Lake** (1950m) is highly revered by both Sikkimese Buddhists and Lepcha animists who believe that birds assiduously remove any leaves from its surface. During **Khecheopalri Mela** (March/April), butter lamps are floated out across the lake. Prayer wheels line the lake's jetty, which is backed by fluttering prayer flags and Tibetan inscriptions, but the setting, ringed with forested hills, is serene rather than dramatic. The best way to appreciate the site is to stay overnight and visit once the tourists have left.

Around the car park is a Buddhist nunnery, a couple of shops and the simple

WORTH A TRIP

If you are headed to or from Pemayangtse Monastery, pop into the **Lotus Bakery** (cake ₹25-30; ☀8am-5pm), 15 minutes' walk above Pelling, for a restorative slice of carrot or banana cake. All money raised goes to the nearby Denjong Pema Choling Academy.

Jigme Restaurant serving tea and chow mein. From the car park a path to the left leads uphill for 20 minutes to **Khecheopalri Gompa** and stupa, high above the lake. A hiking trail from here leads up for a couple of hours to the Duphuk meditation cave and viewpoint, where the outline of the lake below looks like a footprint. There are other viewpoints to explore around the lake.

Just beside the gompa and run by a local lama is **Pala's Guest House** (☎9832471253; per person incl 3 meals ₹300), with more rooms available at next-door Sonam's nicer annexe. The wooden rooms are simple, but it's a great opportunity to slow things down a bit, do some hiking and even learn some meditation.

Deepen Pradhan also operates a good **homestay** (☎9735945598; per person incl one meal ₹450), five minutes' walk away; for details ask at the Kabur Hotel in Pelling.

Shared jeeps to Geyzing (₹70, two hours) leave the parking lot at 6am, travelling via Pelling.

A hiking trail to Yuksom (9km, three to five hours) leaves the road about 400m before the car park and descends steeply in 90 minutes to the main road (take the right branch after crossing the Runom Khola river), emerging near the Khangchendzonga Falls. After the road suspension bridge, follow the concrete steps uphill to meet the Yuksom road, about 2km below Yuksom village. Alternatively hitch a ride (₹30) once you get to the road.

YUKSOM

☎03595 / ELEV 1780M

Lovable little Yuksom is historic, charming and unspoilt. Domestic tourists avoid it as it lacks the mountain views and it hasn't become a travellers' ghetto like Hampi or Manali. The town is the main trailhead for the treks towards Mt Khangchendzonga.

👁 Sights

Norbugang Park

SACRED SITE

Yuksom means 'meeting place of the three lamas', referring to the trio of Tibetan holy men who crowned the first chogyal of Sikkim here in 1641. The charming site is now Norbugang Park, which contains a small temple, huge *mani khorlo* (prayer wheel), chorten (stupa) and the supposedly original **Coronation Throne** (Norbugang). Standing beneath a vast cryptomeria pine, it looks something like an ancient Olympic podium made of whitewashed stone. Just in front of

the throne is a spooky footprint fused into the stone, believed to be that of one of the crowning lamas: you can see a distinct impression of sole and toes.

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

Tashi Tenka

RUINS

When Yuksom was Sikkim's capital, a royal palace complex known as Tashi Tenka sat on a ridge to the south with superb almost 360-degree views. Today barely a stone remains but the views are still superb. To find the site head south out of town and take the small uphill path marked by two weathered stupas near the school football pitch. The site is 10 minutes' walk away through the charming village of Gupha Dara.

Dubdi Gompa

MONASTERY

High on the ridge above Yuksom, Dubdi (Hermit's Cell) Gompa is set in beautifully tended gardens behind three coarsely hewn stupas. Established in 1701, it is said to be Sikkim's oldest monastery, though the current chapel looks much newer. Start the steep 40-minute climb from upper Yuksom's primary health centre; the clear path rises through thickets of trumpet lilies and some lovely mature forest.

Kathok Wodsallin Gompa

MONASTERY

Yuksom has two photogenic new gompas. Kathok Wodsallin Gompa, near Hotel Tashi Gang, has an impressively stern statue of Guru Padmasambhava surrounded by a collection of yogis, gurus and lamas in glass-fronted compartments. The entry is up a path opposite the Tashigang Hotel.

Ngadhak Changchub

Choling Gompa

MONASTERY

This other new and similarly colourful gompa is accessed through an ornate gateway opposite Hotel Yangri Gang. The main statue is of an 11-headed Chenresig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

👣 Activities

Several trekking agencies in Yuksom can organise a **Khangchendzonga trek** given a couple of days warning. Prices start around US\$40 per person per day assuming a group of four. The best:

Alpine Exodus Tours & Travel

TREKKING

☎9735087508; nawang.bhutia@gmail.com; Hotel Yangri Gang

Desire Earth Treks & Expeditions TREKKING
(☎9733052919; www.trekinsikkim.com) Next to Hotel Pemathang

Mountain Tours and Treks TREKKING
(☎9641352656; www.sherpatreks.in)

Sleeping & Eating

Foreign trekking groups often book out the Tashi Gang and Yuksom Residency hotels so it's wise to make reservations for these places. Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (p547) arranges **homestays** (per person full board ₹500-700), offering travellers the chance to connect with locals, eat local food and even share in chores like milking the cows.

Hotel Demazong HOTEL \$
(☎9775473687; dm ₹80-100, r ₹500, without bath-room ₹200) The concrete exterior isn't exactly charming but the rooms here are spacious, clean and decent value, making this the most popular budget option.

Hotel Tashi Gang HOTEL \$\$
(☎9733077249; hoteltashigang@gmail.com; s/d from ₹1200/1500) The traditional bedspreads, painted furniture and decorative *thankas* add an element of Sikkimese style to this good-value place. Rooms are large (some with balconies), beds are comfortable and there's a nice lawn.

Yuksom Residency HOTEL \$\$
(☎241277; www.yuksomresidency.com; s/d from ₹2500/2700; 🍷) The plushiest place in town has clean spacious rooms, a pleasant garden and even a meditation hall; perfect for re-

turning trekkers in need of a hot shower and a splash of decadence.

Hotel Yangri Gang HOTEL \$
(☎241217; d ₹500-800, without bathroom ₹300; @) The basement rooms are functional concrete cubes, but the upstairs options are airy with clean wooden floors, wooden half-panelling and good hot showers. It's a good upper budget option favoured by trekkers.

Eating

Gupta Restaurant MULTICUISINE \$
(mains ₹35-90; ☺5am-9pm) Beers, curries, pizza, breakfasts and almost anything else you could dream up (including quesadillas!) are available in this popular backpacker cafe. Sit outside at the sociable thatched cabana or keep warm in the cosy interior. The next-door **Yak Restaurant** is similar but has a smaller menu.

Information

Community Information Centre (internet per hr ₹50; ☺10am-3pm Mon-Sat) Offers internet connections in an unlikely hut near Kathok Lake.

Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (☎9733158268; www.kccsikkim.org; ☺10am-4pm) An impressive local environmental group that offers information on local ecotourism options, recycling initiatives and homestays. An internet cafe is planned. The office is at the top of town, 300m past the Gupta Restaurant.

Getting There & Away

Around 6.30am, several shared jeeps leave for Jorethang (₹100, four hours) via Tashiding

WORTH A TRIP

YUKSOM TO TASHIDING HIKE

Starting in Yuksom is easier than coming the other way for this long but highly rewarding one-day hike. No trekking permits are required. Figure on six hours of walking (19km), plus another two hours visiting the monasteries. Porter-guides are available in Yuksom for around ₹400.

Start by ascending to **Dubdi Gompa** (p546), from where a path dips into a side valley for 40 minutes to **Tsong**, where the trail divides. The lower route returns to Yuksom, while the upper route leads uphill past cardamom fields to lonely **Hongri Gompa**, a small, unusually unpainted ancient monastery with a superlative ridge-top location. Local folklore claims the gompa was moved here from a higher spot where monks kept being ravaged by yeti.

A signpost points the way downhill for 20 minutes to **Nessa** hamlet, continuing down to the new road 10 minutes before the village of **Pokhari Dara** (four hours from Yuksom). Follow the road until a footpath branches towards **Sinon Gompa** (built 1716), high above Tashiding. The path then drops steeply down steps behind the yellow monastic school, following village trails down to Tashiding. The switchbacking road takes much longer.

(₹50, 1½ hours), and Geyzing via Pelling (₹70, approximately 2½ hours). Jeeps to Gangtok (₹180, six hours) leave early in the morning and, less reliably, in the afternoon. Try to book the day before, either at the shop next to the Gupta Restaurant or at the hut opposite.

DZONGRI & GOECHA LA – THE KHANGCHENDZONGA TREK

For guided groups with permits, Yuksom is the starting point of Sikkim's classic seven-to-10-day trek to **Goеча La**, a 4940m pass with quite fabulous views of Khangchendzonga.

Trek costs start at US\$40 to US\$60 per person per day (assuming a group of four), including food, guides, porters and yaks. You have to arrange your trek through a trekking agency, who will sort out the permits. Paperwork must be done in Gangtok but, given two or three days, agents in Pelling or Yuksom can organise things by sending a fixer to the capital for you.

Don't underestimate the rigours of the trek. Don't hike too high too quickly: altitude sickness often strikes those who are fittest and fastest. Starting early makes sense, as rain is common in the afternoons, spoiling views and making trail sections annoyingly muddy. Check all your equipment before setting off, making sure there are enough good-quality sleeping bags to go around. Bring a torch (flashlight). For full details of the trek see Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Indian Himalaya*.

March to May is an ideal time to trek. By the end of May the monsoon rains have started to arrive. Clearest skies are from October to December, when snow starts to block the trails.

The route initially follows the Rathong Valley through unspoiled forests then ascends steeply to **Baktim** (Bakhim; 2750m) and the rustic Tibetan village of **Tsokha** (3050m), established in 1969 by Tibetan refugees and the last village on the trail, where spending two nights helps with acclimatisation.

The next stage climbs to pleasant meadows around **Dzongri** (4020m). Consider another acclimatisation day here spent strolling up to **Dzongri La** (4550m, four-hour round-trip) for fabulous views of Mt Pandim (6691m).

From Dzongri, the trail drops steeply to **Kokchurong** then follows the river to **Thangsing** (3930m). Trekkers have recommended spending an extra day here to visit the beautiful lake at Lampokhari,

three hours' walk away. Next day takes you to camping at **Lamuni**, 15 minutes before **Samiti Lake** (4200m), from where a next-morning assault takes you to head-spinning **Goеча La** (4940m) for those incredible views of Khangchendzonga. A further viewpoint, an hour's walk further, offers even closer views.

The return is by essentially the same route. Alternatively at Dzongri you could cut south for about a week following the **Singalila Ridge** along the Nepal-Sikkim border to emerge at **Uttarey**, from where public transport runs to Jorethang.

There are government-run **trekkers' huts** at Baktim, Tsokha, Dzongri, Kokchurong and Thangsing, but most have neither furniture nor mattresses and huts sometimes get booked out with noisy student groups during high season. It's far better to bring all camping equipment and food.

TASHIDING

ELEV 1490M

Little Tashiding is just a single, sloping market street forking north off the Yuksom-Legship road, but its south-facing **views** are wide and impressive.

Walking 400m south from the junction towards Legship takes you down past a series of **mani walls** with bright painted mantras to a colourful **gateway**. A 2.5km

KHANGCHENDZONGA TREK SCHEDULE

STAGE	ROUTE	DURATION
1	Yuksom to Tsokha, via Baktim	6-7 hr
2	Optional acclimatisation day at Tsokha	1 day
3	Tsokha to Dzongri	4-5 hr
4	Acclimatisation day at Dzongri, or continue to Kokchurong	1 day
5	Dzongri (or Kokchurong) to Lamuni, via Thangsing	6-7 hr
6	Lamuni to Goеча La, then down to Thangsing	8-9 hr
7	Thangsing to Tsokha	6-7 hr
8	Tsokha to Yuksom	5-6 hr

uphill driveable track (and much shorter footpath) leads to a car park from where a footpath leads up between an avenue of prayer flags to the atmospheric Nyingmapa-school **Tashiding Gompa**, about 30 minutes' walk away.

Founded in 1641 by one of the three Yüksom lamas (see p546), the monastery's five colourful religious buildings are strung out between more functional monks' quarters. Notice the giant-sized prayer wheel with Tibetan script picked out in gilt. Beautifully proportioned, the four-storey **main prayer hall** has a delicate filigree topknot, with wonderful views across the semi-wild flower garden towards Ravangla. The Dalai Lama chose the magical spot for a two-day meditation retreat in 2010.

Beyond the last monastic building, an unusual compound contains dozens of white chortens, including the **Thongwa Rangdol**, said to wash away the sins of anyone who gazes upon it. Smaller but more visually exciting is the golden **Kench Chorgi Lorde** stupa. Propped up all around are engraved stones bearing the Buddhist mantra *om*

mani padme hum; at the back of the compound is the engraver's lean-to.

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

The central wooden **Mt Siniolchu Guest House** (☎243211; r without bathroom ₹200) is a basic but friendly budget option. Concrete **New Tashiding Lodge** (☎243249; tr without bathroom ₹300-350), 300m south of the market, has fine views from Rooms 3, 4 and 5 and even better ones from the shared bathroom.

Yatri Niwas (☎9832623654; kabirbista@yahoo.com; s/d ₹1000/1200) is an excellent mid-range place down at the base of town by the turn-off to the monastery, offering spacious rooms, lovely gardens and a good restaurant.

Shared jeeps to Gangtok (₹130, four hours), Jorethang (₹70, two hours) and Geyzing (₹60, 1½ hours) leave from the main junction between 6.30am and 8am. A few jeeps to Yüksom pass through during early afternoon.

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