

Ü དབུས་



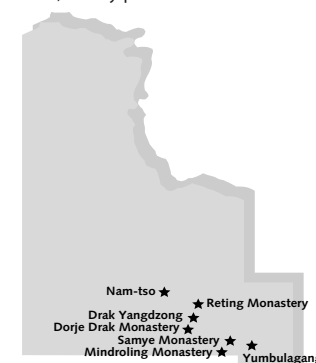
The traditional province of Ü is very much the historical, cultural and modern heartland of Tibet and, along with Tsang to the west, forms the power centre of central Tibet. The Tibetans trace the very birth of their nation to the valleys of the Yarlung and Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra), in particular the Monkey Cave above Tsetang. The nearby Yumbulagang Palace is claimed as Tibet's oldest building. Centuries later Guru Rinpoche meditated at caves in Sheldak and Chimphu and battled demons on the bank of the nearby Yarlung Tsangpo, before founding Tibet's first monastery at nearby Samye. It was from the Yarlung Valley that the earliest Tibetan kings launched their 6th-century unification of the plateau and it is in the nearby Chongye Valley that they lie buried.

It's not all ancient history. With a gorgeous turquoise hue, Nam-tso, an immense salt-water lake, is far and away the region's most popular natural attraction. The dramatic desert landscapes of the Yarlung Tsangpo, Tibet's most important river, are a surreal highlight. Mysterious Lhamo La-tso, a hard-to-reach lake southeast of the capital, is the only place where access remains a real challenge.

For those wanting to explore Tibet by themselves, there's fantastic scope for independent exploration. The valleys of the Yarlung Tsangpo shelter a wealth of monasteries that rarely see a foreigner. Reting Monastery remains one of the most serene in Tibet. Travellers with limited time have discovered a gem of a destination in Drigung Til Monastery and the hot springs at nearby Tidrum. Ü is best experienced on foot, whether on day hikes to side monasteries or on the classic multiday treks from Ganden to Samye (p288), or Tsurphu to Yangpachen (p292). With most of the sights in this chapter not requiring those pesky travel permits, this is the place to get out of the Land Cruiser, stick your thumb out and go exploring.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Get a taste of the northern Changtang at the turquoise waters, snowy peaks and nomads' tents of stunning high-altitude lake **Nam-tso** (p147)
- Soak up the fabulous location and spectacular circular complex of **Samye** (p168), Tibet's first monastery
- Hike the Yarlung Valley, including the iconic **Yumbulagang** (p175) – the first building in Tibet – and the ruins of **Rechung-puk** (p176)
- Overnight at one of central Tibet's peaceful monasteries – either beside the sand dunes of **Dorje Drak** (p165), beneath the juniper-clad hills of **Reting** (p151) or at the vibrant monastic centre of **Mindroling** (p167)
- Squeeze, drag and giggle yourself silly through the sacred cave complexes of **Drak Yangdzong** (p166), an adventurous overnight pilgrim destination



Permits

The good news is that travel in Lhasa prefecture (central and northern Ü) does not require a travel permit. This includes such places as Tsurphu, Nam-tso, Reting, Drigung Til, Lhundrub and Nyemo. In theory most of the Yarlung Tsangpo Valley (formally Shannan prefecture) does require permits (see p323), but the only place where you might actually be asked for one is at Samye and the Yarlung Valley around Tsetang. The area around the airport at Gongkar does not require permits, so you could use it as a base from which to explore the surroundings.

NORTHERN Ü འབྲུག་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་

The featured sights in this section are often visited on separate trips: to the northwest (Tsurphu and Nam-tso), north (Lhundrub, Talung and Reting) and east (Tidrum and Dri-gung Til). You can also combine destinations for a five-day Land Cruiser trip to Nam-tso, Reting Monastery and the Lhundrub Valley, or a six-day trip to Nam-tso, Reting and Dri-gung Til/Tidrum.

Although you'll need to be self-sufficient with food and have some time, it's possible to get to all the sights in this section through a persistent combination of hitching and hiking. (For information on the risks associated with hitchhiking, see p344.) Permits are not required for the sights in this section.

TSURPHU MONASTERY མཚོན་ལུ་དགོན་པ་ 楚布寺
elev 4480m

Around 65km west of Lhasa, **Tsurphu Monastery** (Chubu Si; admission Y45) is the seat of the Karmapa branch of the Kagyupa order of Tibetan Buddhism. The Karmapa are also known as the Black Hats, a title referring to a mythical crown, a copy of which was given to the fifth Karmapa by the Chinese emperor Yong Lo in 1407. Said to be made from the hair of *dakinis* (celestial beings, known as *khandroma* in Tibetan), the black hat, embellished with gold, is now kept at Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim, India. You'll see images of the 16th Karmapa wearing the hat, holding it with his hand to stop it flying away (that's how powerful it is).

It was the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa (1110–93), who instigated the concept of re-

incarnation and the Karmapa lineage has been maintained this way ever since.

The respected 16th Karmapa fled to Sikkim in 1959 after the popular uprising in Lhasa and founded a new centre at Rumtek. He died in 1981 and his reincarnation, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, an eight-year-old Tibetan boy from Kham, was announced amid great controversy by the Dalai Lama and other religious leaders in 1992 (see p146). Over 20,000 Tibetans came to Tsurphu to watch the Karmapa's coronation that year. In December 1999, the 17th Karmapa undertook a dramatic escape from Tibet into India via Mustang and the Annapurna region.

Tsurphu has an annual festival around the time of the Saga Dawa festival, on the ninth, 10th and 11th days of the fourth Tibetan month (around May). There is plenty of free-flowing *chang* (Tibetan barley beer), as well as ritual *cham* dancing and the unfurling of a great thangka on the platform across the river from the monastery.

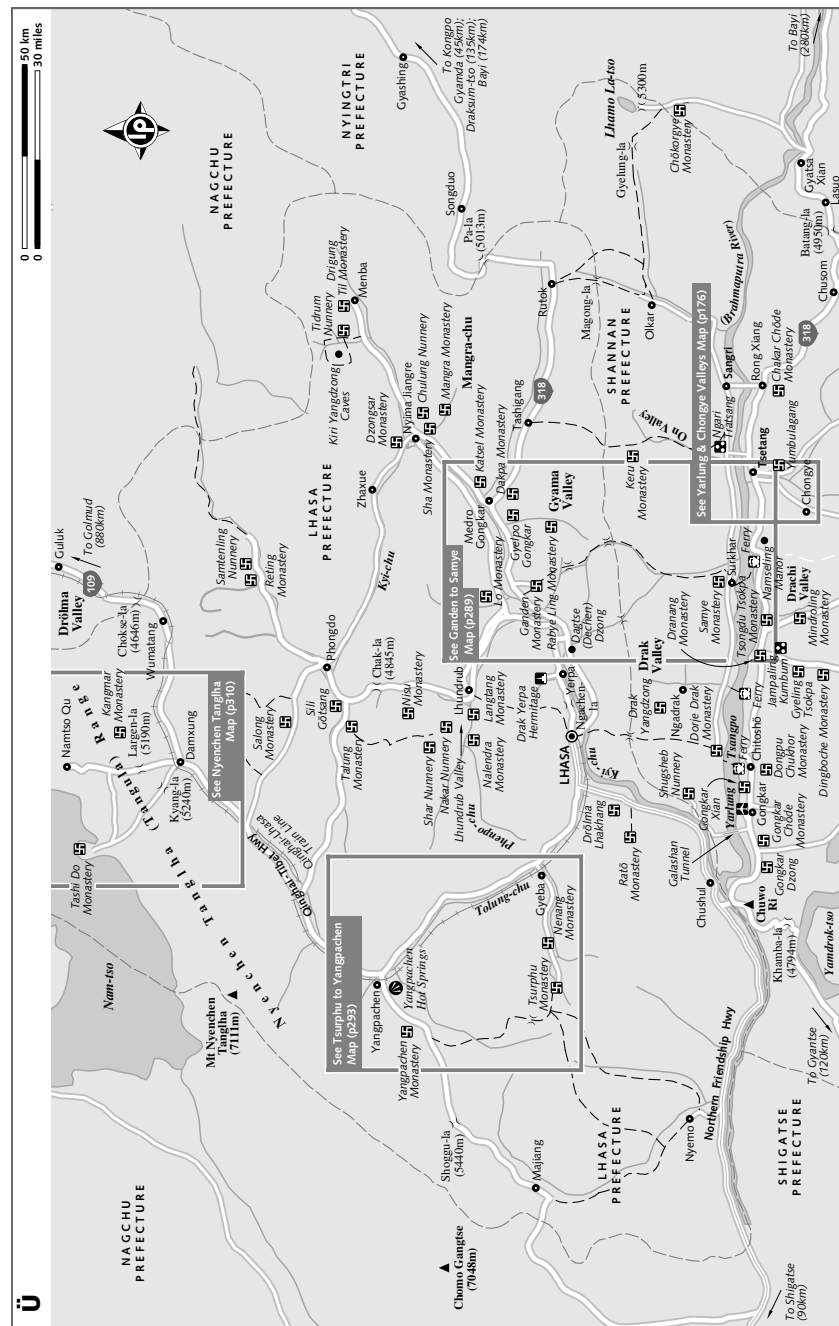
History

Tsurphu was founded in 1187 by Dusum Khyenpa, some 40 years after he established the Karmapa order in Kham, his birthplace. It was the third Karmapa monastery to be built and, after the death of the first Karmapa, it became the head monastery for the order.

The Karmapa order traditionally enjoyed strong ties with the kings and monasteries of Tsang, a legacy that proved a liability when conflict broke out between the kings of Tsang and the Gelugpa order. When the fifth Dalai Lama invited the Mongolian army of Gushri Khan to do away with his opponents in Tsang, Tsurphu was sacked (in 1642) and the Karmapa's political clout effectively came to an end. Shorn of its political influence, Tsurphu nevertheless bounced back as an important spiritual centre and is one of the few Kagyud institutions still functioning in the Ü region. When Chinese forces invaded in 1950, around 1000 monks were in residence. Now there are about 300 monks.

Viewing the Monastery

The large **assembly hall** in the main courtyard houses a chörten (stupa) containing relics of the 16th Karmapa, as well as statues of Öpagme (Amitabha), Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa), and the eighth and 16th Karmapas. Upstairs are the private quarters of the



THE KARMAPA CONNECTION

Anyone who thinks of Tibetans as lofty, spiritually absorbed people should think again. Tibetan history has been dogged by factional intrigue, continuing into the 21st century.

In 1981 the 16th Karmapa died in Chicago. Administration of the Karmapa sect in Sikkim was passed down to four regents, two of whom, Situ Rinpoche and Shamar Rinpoche, have become embroiled in a dispute that has caused a painful rift in the exiled Tibetan community.

In early 1992 the four regents announced the discovery of a letter written by the 16th Karmapa that provided critical clues as to the whereabouts of his reincarnation, eight-year-old Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

Two weeks after one of the regents was killed in a road accident, Shamar Rinpoche announced that the mystery letter was a fraud, but it was too late. By early June clues from the letter had been deciphered, Ogyen Trinley Dorje had been found in eastern Tibet and the Dalai Lama had made a formal announcement supporting the boy's candidature.

Shamar Rinpoche opposed the Dalai Lama's decision and began a letter-writing campaign. Meanwhile, the Chinese authorities formally enthroned the 17th Karmapa at Tsurphu, using the occasion to announce that they had a 'historical and legal right to appoint religious leaders in Tibet'. In March 1994, Shamar Rinpoche announced that he had discovered the rightful reincarnation, a boy named Tenzin Chentse (also known as Thaye Dorje), who had been spirited out of China to Delhi.

In December 1999, the then 14-year-old 17th Karmapa dramatically fled Tibet into India. In a letter left behind at Tsurphu he told the Chinese he was going to collect the black hat of the Karmapa (taken to India by the 16th Karmapa when he fled Tibet in 1959), as well as several relics, including a human skull encased in silver.

The stakes are high. The Karmapa sect has assets estimated to be worth US\$1.2 billion and up to one million followers, including many in the USA. Sikkim's Rumtek Monastery (now the head Karmapa monastery) was briefly occupied in 1993 by Indian troops to break up brawling by monks divided over the issue. Both Karmapas have received death threats.

The flight of the Karmapa was a particular blow for the Chinese. The Karmapa ranks as the third-most important lama in Tibet after the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama and is the only high-level reincarnation recognised by both the Chinese and Tibetan authorities. China's fury over the escape was levelled at the Karmapa's tutor Yongzin Nyima who spent 15 months in jail for his alleged involvement.

For the moment, at least, there is a stalemate. The Karmapa has been granted refugee status and residence at the Gyuto Monastery in Dharamsala, but the Indian authorities, in an attempt to avoid a political dispute with China, have not allowed him to travel to Rumtek (until recently China did not recognise India's claim to Sikkim).

For more on the starkly differing viewpoints, see the pro-Karmapa website at www.rumtek.org and the pro-Shamar Rinpoche sites at www.karmapa.org and www.karmapa-issue.org. Mick Brown's very readable book *The Dance of 17 Lives* is a good investigation into the controversy.

Karmapa, complete with an eclectic collection of English books ranging from birdwatching to astronomy.

Walking west (clockwise) around the monastery complex you pass a large *darchen* (prayer pole) covered in yak hide and prayer flags to come to the main **protector chapel** (*gönkhang*). There are five rooms, all stuffed to the brim with wrathful deities. A row of severed animal heads lines the entry portico.

The first room is dedicated to Tsurphu's protector deity, an aspect of blue Nagpo Chenpo (Mahakala) called Bernakchen. There

are also statues of Palden Lhamo (Shri Devi) and Tamdrin (Hayagriva), as well as a spirit trap and several dead birds.

The third room features Dorje Drolo, a wrathful form of Guru Rinpoche astride a tiger, and the fourth room features the Kagyud protector Dorje Phurba holding a ritual dagger. The fifth room contains a statue of Tseringma, a protectress associated with Mt Everest, riding a snow lion.

The large building behind the *gönkhang* is the **Serdung Chanpo**, which once served as the residence of the Karmapa. The

side chapel features new statues of all 16 previous Karmapas.

The **Lhakhang Chenmo**, which is to the right of the Serdung Chanpo, houses a new 20m-high statue of Sakyamuni that rises through three storeys; this replaced a celebrated 13th-century image destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

Behind the Serdung Chanpo and Lhakhang Chenmo is the sprawling **Chökang Gang Monastery**, the residence of the exiled regent of Tsurphu.

The outer walls of the monastery are marked at four corners by four coloured chörtens.

Tsurphu Kora

The Tsurphu kora, a walk of around two hours, is quite taxing if you are not acclimatised to the altitude. It ascends 150m, past springs, shrines and meditation retreats, providing splendid views of Tsurphu below.

To follow the kora take the track west of Tsurphu that leads up past walls of mani stones to a walled garden (see p292). Bear right here up to a sky burial site (*dürtro*) and follow the cairns that snake up the hill to a small pass marked by prayer flags. The kora then winds in and out of the ridges above the monastery and detours up to the Samtenling retreat, before descending eastward into a gully to the chörtens at the northeastern corner of the monastery.

Sleeping

The small **Monastery Guesthouse** (dm Y25), opposite the main assembly hall, has damp and dark dorm rooms with four or six beds on concrete floors.

Getting There & Away

About 40km west of Lhasa, the road to Tsurphu crosses the Tolung-chu near the railroad bridge. From here it's another 25km up a rough dirt track to the monastery.

A minibus goes to Tsurphu (one way/return, Y15/25, two hours) from Lhasa's Barkhor Sq around 7am, leaving when full. It heads back to Lhasa at around 2pm, but confirm this with the driver. If you miss the monastery bus then take Lhasa city bus 108 to its terminus at Gyeba village at the mouth of the valley and hitch from there. (We got a lift with an electricity company car that stopped every 400m to read the meter and hand out electricity bills – it took hours!).

You could hire a Land Cruiser for Y500 return or, better, tag a visit here onto a trip to Nam-tso. You should organise this in advance with your travel agency. Some will let you detour to Tsurphu for free, others will add up to Y150 to the price of the tour. The road to Tsurphu passes **Nenang Monastery**, home to the young 11th Powa Rinpoche, which is worth a quick stop if you have your own transport.

NAM-TSO གནམ་མཚོ་ 纳木错 elev 4730m

Approximately 240km northwest of Lhasa, **Nam-tso** (Namcuo; admission Y80) is the second-largest saltwater lake in China and one of the most beautiful natural sights in Tibet. It is over 70km long, reaches a width of 30km and is 35m at its deepest point. When the ice melts in late April, the lake is a miraculous shade of turquoise and there are magnificent views of the nearby mountains. The wide open spaces, dotted with the tents of local *drokpas* (nomads), are intoxicating.

The Nyenchen Tanglha (Tangula) range, with peaks of more than 7000m, towers over the lake to the south – it was these mountains that Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschnaiter crossed on their incredible journey to Lhasa (their expedition is documented in the book *Seven Years in Tibet*).

Whatever you do, do not sign up for a lift out here until you have been in Lhasa for at least a week. It is not unusual for visitors to get altitude sickness on an overnight stay out at the lake. The sudden altitude gain of 1100m is not to be treated lightly.

For more on the trek to Nam-tso over the Kyang-la, see p308. Those seeking detailed information on Nam-tso should refer to *Divine Dyads: Ancient Civilization in Tibet* by John Vincent Bellezza (though this book may be hard to find).

Tashi Do Monastery བཟ་ཤེས་མཛོད་དགོན་པ་

Most travellers head for Tashi Do, situated on a hammerhead of land that juts into the southeastern corner of the lake. Here at the foot of two wedge-shaped hills are a couple of small chapels with views back across the clear turquoise waters to the huge snowy Nyenchen Tanglha massif (7111m).

The first **chapel** is the smaller but more atmospheric of the two. The main statue is of Luwang Gyelpo, the king of the *nagas* (snake

spirits). Pilgrims test their sin by lifting the heavy stone of Nyenchen Tanglha, the god who resides in the nearby mountain of the same name (and who is also the protector of Marpo Ri, on which the Potala is built).

The second, main **chapel** features a central Guru Rinpoche statue and the trinity of Öpagme, Chenresig and Pema Jigme, known collectively as the Cholong Dusom. Protectors

include Nyenchen Tanglha on a horse and the blue-faced Nam-tso, the goddess of the lake, who rides a water serpent. Both gods are rooted deep in Bön belief. Several other chapels and retreats are honeycombed into the surrounding cliffs.

There are some fine walks in this area. The short **kora** takes less than an hour. It leads off west from the accommodation area to a

NOMADS

One attraction of a trip to Nam-tso is the opportunity to get a peek at the otherwise inaccessible life of Tibet's *drokpas*, seminomadic herders who make their home in the Changtang, Tibet's vast and remote northern plateau. (You may also get the chance to visit a *drokpa* camp along the road from Sok to Nagchu or on the trek from Ganden to Samye.)

Nomad camps are centred on their spider-like brown or black yak-hair tents. These are usually shared by one family, though a smaller subsidiary tent may be used when a son marries and has children of his own. The interior of a nomad tent holds all the family's possessions. There will be a stove for cooking and boiling water and also a family altar dedicated to Buddhist deities and various local protectors, including those of the livestock, tent pole and hearth. The principal diet of nomads is *tsampa* (roasted-barley flour) and yak butter (mixed together with tea), dried yak cheese and sometimes yak meat.

Tending the herds of yaks and sheep is carried out by the men during the day. Women and children stay together in the camp, where they are guarded by one of the men and the ferocious Tibetan mastiffs that are the constant companions of Tibet's nomads. The women and children usually spend the day weaving blankets and tanning sheepskins.

With the onset of winter it is time to go to the markets of an urban centre. The farmers of Tibet do the same, and trade between nomads and farmers provides the former with *tsampa* and the latter with meat and butter. Most nomads these days have a winter home base and only make established moves to distant pastures during the rest of the year.

Nomads' marriage customs differ from those of farming communities. When a child reaches a marriageable age, inquiries are made, and when a suitable match is found the two people meet and exchange gifts. If they like each other, these informal meetings may go on for some time. The date for a marriage is decided by an astrologer, and when the date arrives the family of the son rides to the camp of the prospective daughter-in-law to collect her. On arrival there is a custom of feigned mutual abuse that appears to verge on giving way to violence at any moment. This may continue for several days before the son's family finally carry off the daughter to their camp and she enters a new life.

The nomads of Tibet have also traditionally traded in salt, which is collected from the Changtang (northern plateau) and transported south in bricks, often to the border with Nepal, where it is traded for grain (see the documentary *The Saltmen of Tibet*, p17). These annual caravans are fast dying out. Traditional life suffered its greatest setback during the Cultural Revolution when nomads were collectivised and forcibly settled by the government. In 1981 the communes were dissolved and the collectivised livestock divided equally, with everyone getting five yaks, 25 sheep and seven goats.

Drokpas now number around two million across the plateau, half of their pre-1950 population. Government incentives are forcing the settlement of nomads, further reducing their numbers and grazing grounds. The introduction of the motorbike has further transformed nomad life. Pressure also comes in the form of enforced migration dates and winter housing, as well as attitude changes within the *drokpas* themselves as young people are fleeing the grasslands in search of a 'better life' in urban centres. How far into the 21st century their way of life will persist is a matter for debate among Tibetologists.

hermit's cave hidden behind a large splinter of rock. The trail continues round to a rocky promontory of cairns and prayer flags, where pilgrims undertake a ritual washing, and then continues past several caves and a *chaktsal gang* (prostration point). The twin rock towers here look like two hands in the *namaste* greeting and are connected to the male and female attributes of the meditational deity Demchok (Chakrasamvara). Pilgrims squeeze into the deep slices of the nearby cliff face as a means of sin detection. They also drink water dripping from cave roofs and some ingest 'holy dirt'.

From here the path curves around the shoreline and passes a group of ancient rock paintings, where pilgrims test their merit by attempting to place a finger in a small hole with their eyes closed. At the northeastern corner of the hill is the **Mani Ringmo**, a large mani (prayer) wall at whose end is a chörten with a *chakje* (handprint) of the third Karmapa. From here you can hike up to the top of the hill for good views.

If you have enough time, it's well worth walking to the top of the larger of the two hills. There are superb views to the north-east of the Tanglha (Tangula) range, which marks the modern border between Tibet and Qinghai (Amdo).

Sleeping & Eating

The good news is that there are now half a dozen places to stay at Tashi Do, which these days resembles a tented village. The bad news is that development has also brought generators, motorbikes and rising levels of rubbish – all of which are beginning to take their toll.

Bedding is provided at all places but nights can get very cold, so it's a good idea to bring a sleeping bag and warm clothes. Between the altitude, cold and the barking dogs, most people sleep fitfully at best. Accommodation is only available between April and October. There are plenty of decent camping spots far away from the hubbub if you are prepared for the cold.

Tent restaurants offer Sichuanese dishes at slightly inflated prices. Several places sell delicious locally made yoghurt.

There's not much between the following places to stay. Things to check for include the thickness of the mattress, cleanliness of the duvet and proximity of rabid dogs.

Gesang's (dm Y25) The latest arrival, with proper beds in spacious five-person tents, but it's close to psychotically barking dogs, so bring your ear plugs.

Tashi Island Hotel (扎西岛宾馆; Zhaxidao Binguan; dm Y25-35) Perhaps the best place at present, with pleasant partitioned four-bed tents or larger octagonal tents, the latter close to a noisy generator.

Fangniu Binguan (☎ 0891-650 1854; dm Y35-70) Has proper beds in a clean, sterile cabin (Y60 to Y70) or a four-person tent (Y45 to Y50), or thinner mattresses in black yak-hair tents, embroidered with crane motifs (Y35).

Yang's Binguan Sheep Guesthouse (羊宾馆; Yang Binguan; dm Y25-50, r Y100) Closest to the chapels. Choose here between good beds in an ugly portacabin or foam beds in a three- or five-person tent. There's a decent restaurant.

Damshung Pema Hotel (当雄县白马宾馆; Dangxiong Xian Baima Binguan; ☎ 0891-611 2098; dm Y30-48, s/d/tr with bathroom Y268/318/318; ☺) Located in the southern half of the gateway town of Damxung (4220m). This is the best place to stay in town if it's late. The Tibetan atmosphere makes a pleasant change, with rooms with bathroom decorated with Tibetan carpets and traditional furniture. The dorm rooms share squat toilets but no showers.

Damxung is a popular lunch spot en route to Nam-tso. There are several good Muslim noodle joints as you enter the town from the south, including the **Linxia Shuangcheng Qingzhen Fanguan** (临夏双城清真饭馆; dishes Y6-10).

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport to Nam-tso. Most Lhasa travel agencies offer minibus tours for around Y150 to Y200 per person, which often includes the Y80 entry ticket. Most are day trips, which gives you just enough time to rush around the kora, get a gigantic altitude headache and then pile back in the minibus; opt for an overnight trip if you can. It's a four-hour drive to Nam-tso from Lhasa.

Land Cruiser hire for a two-day return trip costs Y1200 to Y1500 and can fit four passengers, (guides not required). Many groups stop off at the hot-spring pool at Yangpachen (see p295) or Tsurphu Monastery en route, often for no extra charge. It's possible to return to Lhasa via Reting Monastery and either Drigung Til or the Lhundrub Valley, making for an interesting and adventurous loop for around Y2800.

The nearest place served by public transport is Damxung (Dangxiong). Public buses depart from Lhasa (Y44) at around 7.30am from west of the Yak Hotel. Nagchu-bound buses also pass through Damxung. From Damxung, private minibuses (Y30) depart for Lhasa from the turn-off to Nam-tso half-hourly until noon. You might also find a seat in a taxi (Y40). From Damxung, you'll have to hitch the 62km to Tashi Do.

Some intrepid travellers have made it all the way out to Nam-tso on a mountain bike, though the shiny wheels seem to drive most nomads' dogs even more berserk than normal. The road is now paved all the way to Tashi Do.

By road it's 9km to the checkpoint where you pay the entry fee, a further 16km steep uphill journey to the 5190m Largen-la, 7km to a junction and then a circuitous 30km to Tashi Do. Around 4km before the checkpoint, a motorable dirt road offers a possible detour to Kyang-rag Monastery (see p309). Another road leads north from the ticket gate to Kangmar Monastery.

LHUNDRUB VALLEY ལྷུང་རུབ་གཞུང་

☎ 0894 / elev 3800m

Few travellers get to this lovely valley, around 70km from Lhasa, though it offers plenty of scope for adventurous DIY exploration. Also known as Phenpo, the valley is easy to get to (though less easy to get around) and is dotted with interesting monasteries. The light traffic and dirt roads make it a particularly good destination for mountain bikers.

Lhundrub ལྷུང་རུབ་ 林周

The main town in the valley is Lhundrub (Linzhou), which serves as a useful base. The northwestern section of town has the main shops and restaurants, the centre has the interesting **Ganden Chökhörling Monastery**, and the southeast has the minibus stand.

If you need to stay the night, the **Xinxin Zhaodaisuo** (鑫鑫招待所; ☎ 612 2666; d/tr without bathroom Y60/90) offers the best budget accommodation, whereas the **Government Guesthouse** (政府招待所; Zhengfu Zhaodaisuo; ☎ 612 2326; d with bathroom Y160) has the best rooms in town.

Minibuses to Lhundrub (Y15, one hour) run every 20 minutes from Lhasa's Eastern Bus Station, departing when full. The last bus back to Lhasa returns around 7pm.

Nalendra Monastery ན་ལེན་ཌ་དགོན་པ་

Ruins still dwarf the rebuilding work at Nalendra Monastery, founded in 1435 by the lama Rongtonpa (1367–1449), a contemporary of Tsongkhapa. It was largely destroyed in 1959.

To get an idea of the original layout, look closely at the mural on the immediate left as you enter the **main assembly hall**. The impressive *gönkhang* (women cannot enter) has a central Gampo Gur, a form of Nagpo Chenpo (Mahakala) and protector of the Sakyapa school, as well as statues of Pehar (on an elephant) and Namse (Vairocana, on a snow lion), both in the left corner. Look for the three huge wild yak heads in varying states of decay.

The main hall has a statue of Rongtonpa in a glass case. The inner sanctum features Rongtonpa in the front centre, flanked by two Sakyapa lamas, and an inner kora. It's worth catching one of the atmospheric prayer meetings, which are followed by a mass slurping of butter tea.

Other chapels worth popping into include the Tsar Kangtsang, still under renovation, the *shedra* (monastic college), the Jampa Kangtsang (with its interesting statue of skeletons in a *yabyum* pose), and the ruins of the *dzong* (fort) outside the monastery gate to the west.

Nalendra and Langtang monasteries are an excellent half-day trip by tractor (Y50 to Y100) or by motorbike (Y60 per bike); both are available for hire if you ask around in Lhundrub.

Alternatively, you can walk from Lhundrub to Nalendra in half a day, stopping at Langtang en route. From Lhundrub minibus stand, head south over the bridge and follow the dirt tracks as they swing west by the irrigation canal, paralleling the mountain ridge. You can see the former road to Lhasa snaking up the mountainside to the south.

Langtang Monastery ལྷང་ཏང་དགོན་པ་

On the way back from Nalendra it's worth stopping off at Langtang Monastery, visible from afar due to its huge Kadampa-style chörtens. The monastery was founded in 1093 and once had 200 monks. Today only two chapels and the ruins of the main assembly hall remain, served by 33 monks. Like Nalendra, Langtang was built as a Kadampa monastery but was subsumed into the Sakyapa school. The main hall has a central

statue of Jampa (Maitreya), the Future Buddha, with Sakya Pandita (Kunga Gyaltzen, 1182–1251) to the left. Sadly, the famous *sung-jolma* (speaking) statue of Drölma (Tara) was stolen a decade ago. The protector chapel to the left has a central image of Langtangpa, the 11th-century founder of the monastery, but it's often locked these days.

Langtang is a 1½ hour walk from Lhundrub. Nalendra is a further 90-minute hike away.

Other Monasteries

From Nalendra it's also possible to hike north across the valley for half a day to **Shar Nunery** (famed for its impressive Kadampa-style chörtens), sleep the night there and return the next day to Lhundrub via **Nakar Nunery**. You will need a sleeping bag and food. You could also do this in a half-day motorbike tour or add it on to a visit to Nalendra for a long day excursion (Y100 to 150).

Other monasteries worth exploring at the northern end of the valley include ruined **Lhundrub Dzong** and, 7km further, **Nisu Monastery**, both visible from the main road. The latter is recognisable by its row of eight yellow-topped chörtens. At the head of the valley the road switches back up to the Chak-la (4845m) and then winds down past nomads' tents for 13km towards Talung Monastery.

TALUNG MONASTERY རླུང་གཞུང་དགོན་པ་

达龙寺

elev 4150m

Dynamited by Red Guards and now in ruins in the green fields of the Pak-chu Valley, the sprawling monastic complex of Talung (or Taglung; Dalong Si in Chinese) is around 120km north of Lhasa by road. Rebuilding is currently underway, but not on the scale of other, more important, monasteries in the area.

Talung was founded in 1180 by Tangpa Tashipel as the seat of the Talung school of the Kagyupa order. At one time it may have housed some 7000 monks (it currently has 160), but was eventually eclipsed in importance and grandeur by its former branch, the Riwoche Tsuglhakhang in eastern Tibet (p261).

The site's most important structure was its **Tsuglhakhang** (grand temple), also known as the Red Palace. The building was reduced to rubble but its impressively thick stone walls remain.

To the south is the main assembly hall, the Targyeling Lhakhang. Look out for the destroyed set of three chörtens, one of which contained the remains of the monastery's founder.

To the west in the main monastery building, the Choning (Tsenyi) Lhakhang is used as a debating hall and has a statue of the bearded Tashipel to the right. The fine *cham* masks are worn during a festival on the eighth day of the eighth month (the festival clothes are in a metal box in the corner). Snarling stuffed wolves hang from the ceiling of the protector chapel next door. The Jagji Lhakhang behind the Choning Lhakhang has fine new murals around a central mandala.

Down in the centre of the village is the renovated Tashikang Tsar, the residence of the local reincarnation Tsedru Rinpoche, who died in 2007.

An hour's walk north of the turn-off to Talung brings you to **Sili Götsang**, an amazing eagle's-nest hermitage perched high above the main road.

If you need to spend the night, there is a very basic **monastery guesthouse** (dm Y15) and a small shop that sells instant noodles, beer and candles (there's no electricity).

The monastery is 2.5km west of the main road to Phongdo. For information on reaching the monastery, see p152.

RETING MONASTERY རེན་ཏེང་དགོན་པ་

热振寺

elev 4100m

Pre-1950 photographs show **Reting Monastery** (Rezhen Si; admission Y30) sprawled gracefully across the flank of a juniper-clad hill in the Rongchu Valley. Like Ganden Monastery, it was devastated by Red Guards and its remains hammer home the tragic waste caused by the ideological zeal of the Cultural Revolution. Still, the site is one of the most beautiful in the region. The Dalai Lama has stated that should he ever return to Tibet it is at Reting, not Lhasa, that he would like to reside.

The monastery dates back to 1056. It was initially associated with Atisha (Jowo-je) but in its later years it had an important connection with the Gelugpa order and the Dalai Lamas. Two regents – the de facto rulers of Tibet for the interregnum between the death of a Dalai Lama and the majority of his next reincarnation – were chosen from the Reting abbots. The fifth Reting Rinpoche was regent

from 1933 to 1947. He played a key role in the search for the current Dalai Lama and served as his senior tutor. He was later accused of collusion with the Chinese and died in a Tibetan prison.

The sixth Reting Rinpoche died in 1997. In January 2001 the Chinese announced that a boy named Sonam Phuntsog had been identified out of 700 candidates as the seventh Reting Rinpoche. Significantly, the announcement came just two days after the Karmapa set off on his flight from Tibet to India (p146). The Dalai Lama refuses to recognise the choice, and denounces it as part of a long-term strategy by the Chinese government to control religious leadership in Tibet.

The young *rinpoche* currently resides under Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gong'anju) surveillance at his official residence, 2km below the monastery by the riverside. Foreign groups staying the night at Reting must register with the PSB.

Viewing the Monastery

The current main assembly hall, or **Tsogchen**, is half its original size. Enter the hall to the right to get to the main inner shrine, the Ütse (women not allowed). The central statue of Jampai Dorje is an unusual amalgam of the gods Jampelyang (Manjushri), Chana Dorje (Vajrapani) and Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara). To the left is an ancient thangka of Drólma that, according to our monk guide, was brought here by Atisha himself. A wooden box beside the altar holds the giant molar of Sangye Wösong, the Buddha before Sakyamuni.

To the left of the Ütse entrance is a rare mural of the 14th (current) Dalai Lama (though it doesn't really resemble him); to the right of the entrance is a picture of the current Reting Rinpoche and a footprint and photo of the fifth Reting Rinpoche. In front of the entrance is a platform used for creating sand mandalas. Behind the Ütse is a storeroom stuffed with Tantric drums.

As you leave the chapel look for a second hall to your right. The hall contains a gold chörten with the remains of the sixth Reting Rinpoche, Tenzin Jigne. Lining the back wall are statues of all six previous Reting Rinpoches. The metal box in the right corner holds a giant thangka, unveiled once a year. The main courtyard is often full of yak hides, drying in the sun.

The monastery is still graced by surrounding juniper forest, said to have sprouted from the hairs of its founder Dromtomba. A 40-minute **kora** leads from the guesthouse around the monastery ruins, passing several stone carvings, a series of eight chörtens and an active sky burial site. Further up the hillside is the *drubkhang* (meditation retreat) where Tsongkhapa composed the Lamrim Chenmo (Graduated Path), a key Gelugpa text. The large escarpment draped with prayer flags to the right is the Sengye Drak (Lion's Rock), where there are several more retreats.

A pleasant hour-long walk northeast of Reting leads to the village-like **Samtenling Nunnery**, home to over 240 nuns. The main chapel houses the meditation cave of Tsongkhapa; to the right is a stone footprint of Tsongkhapa and hoofprint belonging to the horse of the protectress Pelden Lhamo. The trail branches off to the nunnery from the sky burial site to the northeast of the monastery.

The **monastery guesthouse** (dm Y35) offers basic dormitory rooms and simple meals.

Getting There & Away

Talung and Reting monasteries are most easily visited together in a rented vehicle. The cost of a two-day Land Cruiser trip should be Y1000 to Y1300. A guide and permits are not necessary. You could add a detour to Drigung Til Monastery and make a nice four-day loop for a few hundred yuan more.

A public bus departs for Reting (Y40, four hours) daily at 8am from the Lhasa Eastern Bus Station, passing near Talung and returning the following day. More frequent transport goes to Lhundrub, from where you'd have to rely on hitching (for information on the risks of hitching, see p344), though with enough time you shouldn't have any major problems.

Reting is 25km from the crossroads settlement of Phongdo (Pangduo Xian), which has a ruined *dzong* and is overlooked by a mountain of near perfect conical proportions.

ROAD TO DRIGUNG TIL MONASTERY

Increasingly popular destinations for independent travellers are the Drigung Til Monastery and Tidrum Nunnery, around 120km northeast of Lhasa. Though they can be reached by bus, rented transport or hitching, the valleys retain an untouched and timeless

(Continued on page 161)

(Continued from page 152)

quality that makes them seem much further from Lhasa than they actually are.

Gyama Valley ལྷ་མ་གླང་ 甲玛

This valley, 60km east of Lhasa, is famed as the birthplace of Tibet's greatest king, Songtsen Gampo, who lived here until he became king at the age of 15. It's an easy half-day excursion by bus from Lhasa and it's also a perfect place to explore on bike.

From the main highway it's 2km south to the **Gyelpo Gongkar**, a chapel just east of the tarmac road and dedicated to Songtsen Gampo and his two wives. The original building dates from the 7th century and resembles a small Yumbulagang. A black and white photo inside shows the original building, which was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution.

From here it's an hour-long walk south to the **Rabye Ling Monastery** and, in the village behind, the huge Kadam-style funeral **chörten** of Sangye On (1251–96), a master of the Talung School and founder of the Riwoche Tsuglhakhang (see p261). The small monastery boasts some fine murals and a stone mantra that is said to have appeared naturally at the moment of Songtsen Gampo's birth.

From here, continue 10 minutes north along the paved road to the three **Dumburi chörtens** and the nearby shrine and natural springs that mark the birthplace of King Songtsen Gampo. Archaeologists have linked the nearby ruins of Jampa Mingyur Ling to the palace that

KILOMETRE MARKERS ALONG THE KYI-CHU

Lhasa to Medro Gongkar marker	Feature
4632	Lhasa Bridge
4611	Dagtse/Dechen Dzong & Sanga Monastery
4610/09	Dagtse bridge, turn-off to Lhundrub
4592/1	Turn-off to Ganden Monastery
4587	Large chörten surrounded by three others
4584/3	Lhamo Monastery
4572	Gyama village & valley
4569	Roadside chörten
4564	Medro Gongkar

Songtsen Gampo's father built after leaving the Chongye Valley. From here it's a 5km (1¼ hour) walk back to the main road.

To get to the valley, take a frequent Medro Gongkar-bound minibus from Lhasa's Eastern Bus Station (Y15, 40 minutes) and get off at kilometre marker 4572, 8km before Medro Gongkar.

Medro Gongkar མཁའ་གྲོ་གུང་དགའ་རྩ་ 墨竹工卡

☎ 0891 / pop 2000 / elev 3600m

On the wide banks of the Kyi-chu, 75km northeast of Lhasa, Medro Gongkar (Mozhu Gongka) is just a pit stop en route to Drigung. If you have time it's worth stopping at **Katsel Monastery**, 3km from town on the road to Drigung. Legend has it that this Kagyupa order monastery was founded by the 7th-century King Songtsen Gampo who was led here by the Buddha disguised as a doe with antlers. The temple is also significant as one of the original demoness-subduing temples (p105) – it pinned the monster's right shoulder.

There are several places to stay in Medro Gongkar, as well as lots of Chinese restaurants.

Jama Trigang Tashi Guesthouse (Jiama Zhikang Zhaxi Lüguan; 甲玛志康扎西旅馆; ☎ 613 2666; dm Y10-15, tr per bed Y30-35) There are plenty of room types here but the best bet are the triples. It's near the east end of town, where the minibuses depart for Nyima Jiangre.

Wenxin Zhaodaisuo (温馨招待所; ☎ 135-1899 1821; dm/s/d Y20/40/60) Another decent place, with clean rooms, good beds, washbasins in each room and squat toilets down the hall. It's opposite the Agricultural Bank – enter via the road transport compound.

Minibuses go between Lhasa's Eastern Bus Station and Medro Gongkar (Y15, one hour) every 20 minutes or so until around 8pm. Smaller minibuses continue, when full, up to Nyima Jiangre (Y10) from the east end of town.

Nyima Jiangre (Drigung Qu) འཇིགས་ལུང་ལྗོངས་

☎ 0891 / pop 1500

As you continue along the upper Kyi-chu Valley from Katsel Monastery you pass two enormous ruined chörtens on the right. Halfway up the valley you come to Nyima Jiangre village, set at the auspicious confluence of three rivers. Shortly before the town is a large new dam and reservoir.

there are sights at every turn; check the kilometre markers to keep track of what is coming up.

GONGKAR གོང་ཁྱེར་ 贡嘎

☎ 0891 / elev 3600m

Gongkar (Gongga) county's main claim to fame is its airport but there are also a couple of interesting monasteries west of the airport, along the 'old' road to Lhasa. Note that there are three places called Gongkar: the airport, the monastery 10km to the west and the county town, about 10km to the east.

Information

Bank of China (Zhongguo Yinhang; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun) Five minutes' walk south of the airport; changes cash and travellers cheques and has a 24-hour ATM. It cannot change RMB back into foreign currency (see p322).

Gongkar Chöde Monastery

གོང་ཁྱེར་ཚོས་སྐྱེད་གོན་ 曲德寺

Surprisingly large, the Sakyapa-school **Gongkar Chöde Monastery** (Qude Si; admission Y20), founded in 1464, is famous for its 16th-century Kyenri-style murals. It lies 400m south of the highway, around 10km from the airport, back along the old road to Lhasa.

The **assembly hall** has statues of Sakya Pandita, Drölma, Guru Rinpoche and the monastery founder Dorje Denpa (1432-

96). To the left of the hall is the *gönkhang*, whose outer rooms have black murals depicting a sky burial. The inner hall has a statue of the Sakyapa protector Gonpo Gur and some amazing spirit traps (in a case to the right). The inner sanctum has fine Kyenri-style murals of the Sakyapa founders by the entrance, and an inner kora (*nang-khor*). Art specialists say the murals show a marked Chinese influence. The chapel to the right of the assembly hall has particularly fine images of the Past, Present and Future Buddhas.

The upper floor has more lovely old murals, including some showing the original monastery layout. On either side of the roof is the Kyedhor Lhakhang, which has fine protector murals in *yabyum* (Tantric sexual union) pose, and the Kangyur Lhakhang.

As you walk clockwise around the main monastery building, look for the *shedra* (monastic college) on the northern side. The monks attend thangka-painting classes in the morning here and practice debating in the afternoon.

Die-hards can hike a further 5km up the side valley to visit the 13th-century **Dechen Chokhor Monastery** on the hillside.

A further 13km along the road to Chushul are the impressive ruins of the Potala-like **Gongkar Dzong** and neighbouring Sundruling Monastery.

Gongkar Xian 贡嘎县

This country town (Gongga Xian; *xian*), 9km east of the airport, is of note for hosting Tibet's only public **Chairman Mao statue**, located next to a school west of the centre. The 12m tall icon, erected in 2006, has more to do with the town's economic connections to Mao's home province of Hunan than with a major ideological statement.

Rame Monastery (Remai Si), at the north end of town, is one of the earliest Sakyapa monasteries in Tibet, dating from the late 12th century, though its glory days are long gone. There are now 44 monks here.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a couple of decent places to stay near the airport if you want to use Gongkar as a base from which to explore the valley.

Hangkong Binguan (航空宾馆; ☎ 618 2109; 2nd fl, cnr main & airport rds; d Y30-50) Budget travellers can choose between two simple guesthouses opposite each other above the main road junction. Each of the neglected rooms here has a basic bathroom with cold water. There's an internet café on the ground floor. The Lantian Binguan across the road is much the same, but without the attached bathrooms.

Hunan Binguan (湖南宾馆; ☎ 739 3282; Zangxing Lu, Gongkar Xian; ordinary/standard d Y80/128, discounts of 30%) Rooms at this clean modern hotel at Gongkar Xian, 9km east of the airport, come with Western bathroom, though only the pricier standard rooms have a shower.

Airport Hotel (机场宾馆; Jichang Binguan; ☎ 624 6608; Gongkar airport; standard/deluxe d incl breakfast Y200/280; ☺) All rooms come with cleanish carpet, dim bathroom and hot-water boiler. The cheaper standard rooms in the south block are a little darker but better value. The hotel is right by the terminal building.

Gongkar has dozens of cheap Chinese restaurants, all overpriced but with decent food.

Getting There & Away

Airport buses run from the office of the Civil Aviation Authority of China (CAAC) in Lhasa to Gongkar seven times a day (Y25, 75 minutes). Return buses to Lhasa are timed to coincide with the arrival of flights, with the last departing around 4pm. One bus a day also runs to Shigatse (Y60, 9am). Taxis to Lhasa cost around Y120.

Plenty of buses stop at Gongkar en route to Tsetang (Y20) or Lhasa (Y20). Minibuses run when full from Gongkar Xian to Chitoshö village (Y5).

A chartered minibus from the airport to Gongkar Chöde Monastery costs around Y40 return, or Y10 one way to Gongkar Xian.

DORJE DRAK MONASTERY རོ་རྗེ་བླ་མ་གྲོག་པོ་

多吉扎寺

elev 3550m

Along with Mindroling Monastery, Dorje Drak (Duoji zha Si) is one of the two most important Nyingmapa monasteries in Ü. With a remote and romantic location, it is less accessible than Mindroling and consequently gets few Western visitors.

Dorje Drak was forcibly relocated to its present site in 1632 by the kings in Tsang and then sacked by the Dzungar Mongols in 1717. The monastery is headed by a line of hereditary lamas known as the Rigdzin, named after the first Rigdzin Godemachen, who are thought to be reincarnations of Guru Rinpoche. The 10th Rigdzin Lama currently resides in Lhasa.

The main assembly hall has statues of Guru Rinpoche and Pema Trinley, the fourth Rigdzin. The Samsun Namgyel Gönkhang to the right has five butter sculptures representing the chapel's five protectors. A cabinet holds the monastery's treasures, including a fragment of a staff belonging to Milarepa that was smashed in the Cultural Revolution. The upstairs chapel sells lovely ground juniper incense.

A demanding 1½ hour **kora** leads around the back of the *dorje* (thunderbolt symbol) shaped rock behind the monastery, up to a ruined retreat atop the rock. The path overlooks some dramatic sand dunes and the views from the retreat are simply stunning.

Tibetan-style beds are available at the **Monastery Guesthouse** (dm Y15). There are lots of duvets but it's a good idea to bring a sleeping bag and some food. A small shop sells soft drinks and instant noodles.

The monastery, on the northern bank of the Yarlung Tsangpo, can be reached via a ferry from kilometre marker 112 on the Lhasa-Tsetang road. Boats run in the morning and late afternoon (Y3, 30 minutes) or you can charter a boat for Y60. Hard-core trekkers can approach Dorje Drak from Lhasa, a trek of around four days.

KILOMETRE MARKERS ALONG THE YARLUNG TSANGPO

Chushul to Tsetang marker	Feature
72	Chuwu Ri, one of Ü's four holy mountains
73	Monastery on side of Chuwu Ri
80-81	Ruins of Gongkar Dzong & Shedruling Monastery
84	Gongkar Chöde Monastery
90	Bridge and tunnel to/from Lhasa
93-94	Gongkar airport
100	Dakpo Tratsang Monastery
102-103	Gongkar Xian town, Mao statue & Rame monastery
112	Ferry to Dorje Drak Monastery
117-18	Chitoshö village, ruined <i>dzong</i> & Dongphu Chukhor Monastery
138	Ferry to Drak Valley, for Drak Yangdzong Caves
142	Dranang Xian & turn-off to Dranang Monastery (2km)
147	Road to Mindroling Monastery (8km)
148-149	Tsongdu Tsokpa Monastery
155	Samye ferry
161	Namseling Manor turn-off
170	Sand dunes
190	Tsetang town

Guru Rinpoche and Terdak Lingpa (with a white beard and excellent hat). The bare main hall itself has another statue of Terdak Lingpa, along with Dorje Chang and a row of Kadampa-style chörten – the monastery originally belonged to the Kadampa school. The inner chapel has a large Sakyamuni statue. Only the statue's head is original; the body was ripped apart by Chinese troops for its relics.

Upstairs, the **Tresor Lhakhang** houses several treasures, including a stone hoofprint and a famed old thangka with the gold footprints and handprints of Terdak Lingpa, which was given to the fifth Dalai Lama.

The top floor holds the Lama Lhakhang, with some fine ancient murals of the Nyingma lineages, plus a central statue of Kuntu Zangpo (Samantabhadri). The Dalai Lama's quarters remain empty.

The other main building, to the right, is the **Sangok Potrang**, used for Tantric practices. To the left of the main entrance is a famous 'speaking' mural of Guru Rinpoche. Flanking the left wall is a huge thangka that is unfurled once a year on the 18th day of the fourth lunar month.

A new white chörten has recently been built with Taiwanese funds just outside the monastery, to replace an original 13-storey chörten destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. It's possible to climb past the ground-floor statue of Jampa to its upper floors.

Nice walks lead off from the kora around the Tsiglhakhang, west up the valley through the village to the ruins of what used to be a nunnery.

On the main road, 1.5km towards Tsetang, is the small **Tsongdu Tsokpa Monastery**. The original monastery across the road has been converted into a housing block.

Sleeping & Eating

It's possible to stay the night at the **Monastery Guesthouse** (dm Y15), though you'd do well to bring a sleeping bag. Beware of dogs if you leave your room at night. A new guesthouse is being built outside the southern gate. A small shop sells noodles, Pepsi and the like.

Getting There & Away

There is little direct transport to Mindroling. One possibility is to take the Lhasa–Tsetang bus and get off at kilometre marker 147 by the English sign to the monastery. The monastery is around 8km south of the road, up the

Drachi Valley, and the last section involves a climb (it's not too punishing). You won't see the monastery until you round a ridge and are below it. You should be able to hitch a lift from the highway turn-off.

One daily bus leaves the monastery around 8am for Tsetang (Y10), returning in the afternoon.

Mindroling is easily slotted into a Yarlung Valley excursion if you have a rented vehicle.

SAMYE MONASTERY བསམ་ལས་དགོན་པ་

桑耶寺

☎ 0893 / elevation 3630m

Samye Monastery (Sangye Si) is deservedly the most popular destination for travellers in the Ü region. Surrounded by barren mountains and dramatic sand dunes and approached via a beautiful river crossing, the monastery has a magic about it that causes many travellers to stay longer than they had intended.

As Tibet's first monastery and the place where Buddhism was established, the monastery is also of major historical and religious importance. No journey in Ü is complete without a visit to Samye.

For details of the popular trek between here and Ganden, see p288.

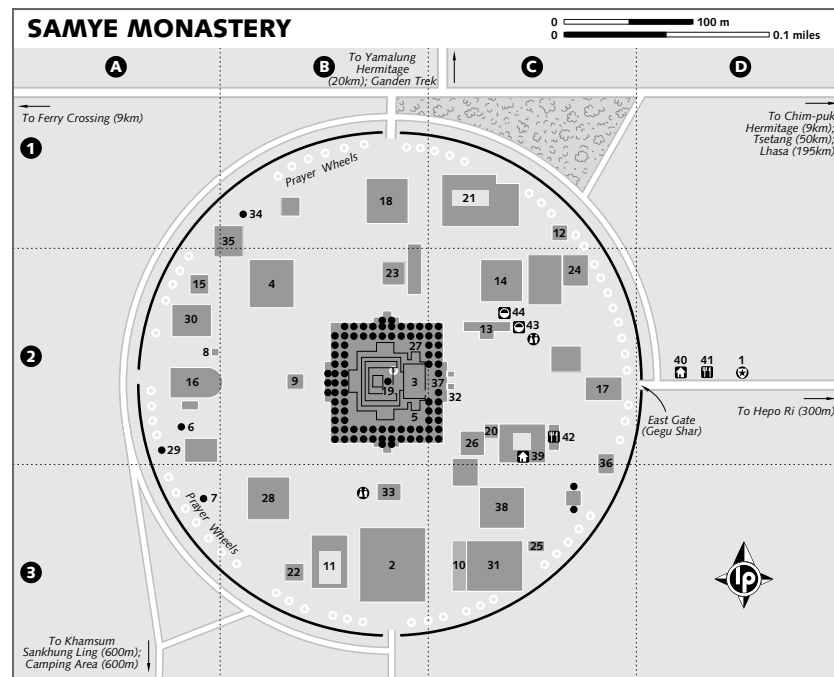
Permits

A travel permit is theoretically needed to visit Samye and you can only get one by organising a tour and guide (see p323). At the time of research there were only occasional permit checks at the ferry point on the Tsetang side and at the Monastery Guesthouse. No-one is checked for weeks and then suddenly a bunch of travellers are fined. You'll have to ask other travellers or just give it a try.

If you are stopped without a permit, you may be subject to a fine of up to Y500, but if you play the 'dumb foreigner' card well enough you should be able to negotiate this down to Y100 or less.

History

Samye was Tibet's very first monastery and has a history that spans more than 1200 years. It was founded in the reign of King Trisong Detsen, who was born close by (see p292), though the exact date is subject to some debate – probably between 765 and 780. Whatever the case, Samye represents the Tibetan state's first efforts to allow the Buddhist faith



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Assembly Hall.....3	B2	
Black Chörten.....4	B2	
Chenresig Chapel.....5	B2	
Chörten.....6	A2	
Chörten.....7	A3	
Chörten.....8	A2	
Chörten.....9	B2	
Debating Courtyard.....10	C3	
Drayur Gyagar Ling.....11	B3	
Dzogchen Lhakhang.....12	C1	
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Green Chörten.....14	C2	
Jampa Lhakhang.....15	A2	
Jampa Ling.....16	A2	
Jampel Ling.....17	C2	
Jangchub Semkye Ling.....18	B1	
Jowo Khang.....19	B2	
Kitchen.....20	C2	
Kordzo Pehar Ling.....21	C1	
Mani Lhakhang.....22	B3	
Moon Temple.....23	B2	
Namdok Trinang Ling.....24	C2	
Ngamba Ling.....25	C3	
Old Guesthouse.....26	C2	
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Friendship Snowland Restaurant.....41	D2	
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to set down roots in the country. The Bön majority at court, whose religion prevailed in Tibet prior to Buddhism, were not at all pleased with this development.

The victory of Buddhism over the Bön-dominated establishment was symbolised by Guru Rinpoche's triumph over the massed demons of Tibet at Hepo Ri, just to the east of Samye. It was this act that paved the way for the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet.

Shortly after the founding of the monastery, Tibet's first seven monks (the 'seven examined men') were ordained here by the monastery's Indian abbot, Shantarakshita (Kende Shewa), and Indian and Chinese scholars were invited to assist in the translation of Buddhist texts into Tibetan.

Before long, disputes broke out between followers of Indian and Chinese scholarship. The disputes culminated in the Great

Debate of Samye, an event that is regarded by Tibetan historians as a crucial juncture in the course of Tibetan Buddhism. The debate, which probably took place in the early 790s, was essentially an argument between the Indian approach to bodhisattvhood via textual study and scholarship, and the more immediate Chan (Zen) influenced approach of the Chinese masters, who decried scholarly study in favour of contemplation on the absolute nature of buddhahood. The debates came out on the side of the Indian scholars.

Samye has never been truly the preserve of any one of Tibetan Buddhism's different orders. However, the influence of Guru Rinpoche in establishing the monastery has meant that the Nyingmapa order has been most closely associated with Samye. When the Sakyapa order came to power in the 15th century it took control of Samye, and the Nyingmapa influence declined, though not completely.

Samye's most common icons are of the Khenlop Chösum – the trinity of Guru Rinpoche, King Trisong Detsen and Shantarakshita, the first abbot of Samye.

Samye has been damaged and restored many times throughout its long history. The most recent assault on its antiquity was by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution. Extensive renovation work has been going on since the mid-1980s and there are now 190 monks at Samye.

The Ütse

The central building of Samye, the **Ütse** (admission ¥40; ☎ 8am–5.30pm), comprises a unique synthesis of architectural styles. The ground and 1st floors were originally Tibetan in style, the 2nd floor was Chinese and the 3rd floor Indian. The corner parapets with green and gold *dorje* designs are also unique.

Just to the left of the main entrance is a **stele** dating from 779. The elegant Tibetan script carved on its surface proclaims Buddhism as the state religion of Tibet by order of King Trisong Detsen. The doorway is flanked by two ancient stone lions and two stone elephants.

From here the entrance leads into the first of the ground-floor chambers: the **assembly hall**. As you enter the hall you pass a statue of Tangtong Gyelpo to the left and a row of figures greet you straight ahead: the translator Vairocana, Shantarakshita, Guru Rinpoche,

Trisong Detsen and Songtsen Gampo (with an extra head in his turban). The photo to the right of the Guru Rinpoche statue is of the famous original statue (now destroyed), which physically resembled the guru and allegedly had the power of speech.

On the right are two groups of three statues: the first group is associated with the Kadampa order (Dromtomba and Atisha); the second group is multid denominational and includes lamas from the Nyingmapa, Sakyapa and Gelugpa orders.

To the rear of the assembly hall are steps leading into Samye's most revered chapel, the **Jowo Khang**. You enter the inner chapel via three painted doors – an unusual feature. They symbolise the Three Doors of Liberation: those of emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness. A circumambulation of the inner chapel follows at this point (take a torch).

The centrepiece of the inner chapel is a 4m statue of Sakyamuni. Ten bodhisattvas and two protective deities line the heavy side walls of the chapel, which are decorated with ancient murals. Look also for the blackened Tantric mandalas on the ceiling.

To the right of the hall is a *gönkhang*, reeking of *chang*, with statues of deities so terrible that they must be masked. Watch out for the stuffed snake over the blocked exit.

Before ascending to the 1st floor, take a look at the **Chenresig Chapel**, outside and to the left of the main assembly hall, which features a dramatic 1000-armed statue of Chenresig.

The structure of the 2nd floor echoes the inner chapel and houses an image of Guru Rinpoche in a semiwrathful aspect, flanked by Tsepame and Sakyamuni, with Shantarakshita and Trisong Detsen flanking them. Look up to see the Chinese-influenced bracketing on the beams. There is an inner kora around the hall.

Some of the murals outside this hall are very impressive (photos Y10); those on the southern wall depict Guru Rinpoche, while those to the left of the main door show the fifth Dalai Lama with the Mongol Gushri Khan and various ambassadors offering their respects. Also on this floor are the Dalai Lama's quarters (left) and another protector chapel and Tsepame (Amitayus) chapel (right).

The 3rd floor is a recent addition to the Ütse. It holds statues of four of the five Dhyani Buddhas, with a mandala of the fifth (Namse) on the ceiling.

Walk around the back to a ladder leading up to the 4th floor. This chapel holds the sacred core of the temple, as well as an image of Dukhor (Kalachakra), a Tantric deity, but it is generally locked. As you descend from the 3rd floor look for a rare mural of the 14th (current) Dalai Lama beside the stairwell.

Back on the ground floor you can follow the prayer-wheel circuit of the Ütse, and look at the interesting murals showing the founding of the monastery. You can also ascend to the outer roof for views over the complex.

Ling Chapels & Chörtens

དགོན་ཁང་དང་མཚོ་དུ་རྟེ་ནོ་

As renovation work continues at Samye, the original *ling* (royal) chapels (the lesser, outlying chapels) are slowly being restored. Wander around and see which are open. Following is a clockwise tour of those open at the time of research.

The square in front of the Monastery Guesthouse has some interesting bits and pieces. The stubby isolated building to the north constitutes the remains of a nine-storey tower used to display festival thangkhas.

From the eastern gate (*gegyu shar*) follow the prayer wheels south to the **Tsemang Ling**, once the monastery printing press, and look for the sacred stone in the centre of the chapel. If you pass the residential college of the **Shetekhang** around 9.30am or 6pm, listen out for the sounds of debating in the attached courtyard. The restored **Aryapalo Ling** was Samye's first building and has a lovely ancient feel. The statue of Arya Lokeshvara is similar to one seen in the Potala Palace (see

p109). The **Drayur Gyagar Ling** was originally the centre for the translation of texts, as depicted on the wall murals. The main statue on the upper floor is of Sakyamuni, flanked by his Indian and Chinese translators.

The **Jampa Ling** on the west side is where Samye's Great Debate was held. On the right as you go in, look out for the mural depicting the original design of Samye with zigzagging walls. There is an unusual semicircular inner kora here that is decorated with images of Jampa. Just north of here is a chörten that pilgrims circumambulate; south is a **sacred tree** to which pilgrims tie stones. The **triple Mani Lhakhang** to the north has lovely murals.

The green-roofed Chinese-style **Jangchub Semkye Ling** to the north houses a host of bodhisattvas around a statue of Marmedze, with a 3-D wooden mandala to the side. Take a torch to see the central Asian style murals.

East of here is the **Kordzo Pehar Ling**, the home of the oracle Pehar until he moved to Nechung Monastery outside Lhasa. Pilgrims stick passport photos of themselves onto the locked entrance of the ground-floor chapel, which is flanked by two ancient-looking leather bags. The upstairs portico has some old cane helmets. The inner chapel reeks of alcohol, hooks hang from the ceiling and demons' hands reach out from their cases, as if trying to grab you.

It is also possible to enter the four reconstructed concrete chörtens (white, red, green and black), though there is little of interest inside.

Hepo Ri ཅད་པོ་རི་ ལ་མ་པོ་ལྷ་ས་ཀླུ་གྲུབ་པ་ལྷ་ས་

Hepo Ri is the hill some 400m east of Samye, where Guru Rinpoche vanquished the demons of Tibet. King Trisong Detsen later established a palace here. Paths wind up the side of the hill from the road leading from Samye's east gate. A 30-minute climb up the side ridge takes you to an incense burner, festooned with prayer flags and with great views of Samye below. Head south along the ridge and descend from here. Early morning is the best time for photography.

AROUND SAMYE

Chim-puk Hermitage མཚོ་མས་ལྷ་གྲུབ་པ་ལྷ་ས་

Chim-puk hermitage is a warren of caves northeast of Samye that was once a meditation retreat for Guru Rinpoche. It is a popular

THE SAMYE MANDALA

Samye's overall design was based on that of the Odantapuri Temple of Bihar in India, and is a highly symbolic mandalic representation of the universe. The central temple represents Mt Meru (Sumeru), and the temples around it in two concentric circles represent the oceans, the continents and the subcontinents that ring the mountain in Buddhist cosmology. The complex originally had 108 buildings (an auspicious number to Tibetans). The 1008 chörtens on the circular wall that rings the monastery represent Chakravala, the ring of mountains that surrounds the universe.

day hike for travellers spending a few days at Samye. If you are lucky, you might find a pilgrim truck heading up there in the early morning, or you could hire a tractor in Samye (Y50). Ask at the reception of the Monastery Guesthouse. Otherwise the walk takes around four or five hours up and three hours down. Take plenty of water.

There is a small monastery built around Guru Rinpoche's original **meditation cave** half-way up the hill. Follow the pilgrims around the various other shrines. It's possible to stay the night here if you have a sleeping bag and food.

If you are feeling fit and acclimatised, it is possible to climb to the top of the peak above Chim-puk. You'll probably only have enough time to do this if you get a lift to Chim-puk or stay the night there. To make this climb from the Guru Rinpoche cave follow the left-hand valley behind the caves and slog it uphill for 1½ hours to the top of the ridge, where there are several clumps of prayer flags. From here you can drag yourself up along a path for another 1½ hours to the top of the conical peak, where there are a couple of meditation retreats and fine views of the Yarlung Tsangpo Valley. On clear days you can see several massive Himalayan peaks to the southeast.

Yamalung Hermitage ལམལུང་མཉམ་ལུང་ 聂玛隆 圣洞

It is possible to head up the valley directly behind Samye to the Yamalung hermitage, around 20km from Samye. See p291 for details. It's really too far to hike there and back in a day but you could probably hire a tractor to take you there for around Y50 return. The recent upgrading of the road to Yamalung might bring regular transportation along this road.

Sleeping

Monastery Guesthouse (☎ 736 2761; dm Y20-40, d/tr Y100/150) Most travellers end up at this pleasant guesthouse, just in front of the Ütse compound. Rooms are simple but spacious and there's a common hot shower (Y5) at the back. The higher the floor, the better quality the room, with pilgrims at the bottom and tour groups top of the heap.

Friendship Snowland Hotel (Xueyu Tongbao Canguan, Gangjong Pönda Sarkhang; ☎ 799 3449; dm Y25) Proper mattresses (not just foam) are on offer here, in concrete rooms above the cosy restaurant of the same name, though it's worryingly close

to the PSB office. Note that the eastern gate is closed at dusk, after which you can get to the hotel from the south or north gates.

Tashi Guesthouse (Zhaxi Zhaodaisuo; ☎ 790 6048; dm Y30) Pleasant five-bed dorms with clean foam beds, above a shop by the east gate.

There is fine camping in an orchard 10 minutes' walk south of the Ütse, near the Tibetan-style Khamsum Sankhung Ling. Take your own water.

Eating

Monastery Restaurant (dishes Y7-15) Loads of atmosphere, monks galore and decidedly average food at this place attached to the guesthouse. Menu in English.

Friendship Snowland Restaurant (☎ 799 3449; meals Y8-18) The backpacker-inspired menu at this pleasant Tibetan-style restaurant includes banana pancakes ('bread' on the menu), as well as the normal menu gibberish ('Tibet in the Pig?'). Decent Chinese and Tibetan dishes are available (spinach in ginger, ginseng chicken), as well as breakfasts, and it's actually cheaper than the Monastery Restaurant. It's outside the eastern gate of the monastery complex. Menu in English.

The shops on either side of the guesthouse are well stocked. Grab a cold beer and retire to the roof of the Monastery Guesthouse for wonderful moonlight views of the Ütse.

Getting There & Away

While it appears that Samye is easily reached by road from Lhasa, keep in mind that the main highway is south of the river, so if you come from Lhasa you need to cross over to the north bank, either by ferry (to the west) or bridge (to the east).

The only regular direct bus service from Lhasa to Samye, via the bridge at Tsetang, is a daily pilgrim bus (Y40, 3½ hours), which departs from Barkhor Sq at around 6am. Buy your ticket the day before from the tin shack just north of the square opposite Snowlands Restaurant. The return bus leaves around 2pm and stops at Tsetang (Y15), Dranang Monastery (p167) and Rame Monastery (p165) en route, making a total trip of around five hours. Buy your ticket well in advance from the shack in the monastery compound.

Many travellers still opt for the ferry across the Yarlung Tsangpo, at least one way. A bus service runs from just west of Barkhor Sq to the Samye ferry, departing around 8am (Y25,

2½ hours), or take any Tsetang-bound bus. River crossings (per person Y10, one hour) operate whenever there are enough people or a bunch of foreigners charter the boat for Y90. It is 9km from the ferry drop-off point to Samye and everyone – Tibetans included – jumps on a truck or tractor for the ride (Y5, 20 minutes).

Trucks leave Samye for the ferry terminal whenever there are enough passengers, often around 8am and 2pm. Buses to Tsetang and Lhasa wait for their passengers on the other side of the river, as does the PSB. This generally works out quicker than taking the pilgrim bus back to Lhasa.

NAMSELING MANOR རྒྱལ་སྤོང་གླིང་ 朗色林庄园

Perhaps the only building of its type still standing in Tibet, this ruined multistorey family mansion is a minor site. You might find it worth a visit if you have your own transport.

There are a few murals left, but the ruins are unstable in places so you should take care when exploring. The building is 3km south of the main highway near kilometre marker 161. Renovations are planned, along with an admission fee (Y20).

TSETANG རྩེང་བར་ 泽当

☎ 0893 / pop 52,000 / elev 3515m

An important Chinese administrative centre and army base, Tsetang (Zedang) is the fourth-largest city in Tibet and the capital of huge Shannan (Lhoka) prefecture. For travellers, Tsetang is of interest mainly as a jumping board for exploration of the Yarlung Valley. Unfortunately the local PSB has put up so many obstacles to travel in the area that for the time being we're tempted to advise permitless budget travellers to give the place a wide berth. Expect hassles buying a bus ticket, finding a budget hotel and even visiting the local sights.

Tsetang is divided into a characterless modern Chinese town and a small traditional Tibetan town, clustered to the east around Gangpo Ri, one of Ü's four sacred mountains. The former *dzong* and village of Nedong has been subsumed into Tsetang's southern suburbs.

Information

Bank of China (Zhongguo Yinhang; Naidong Lu; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-4.30pm Sat & Sun) Changes cash and travellers cheques and has an ATM.

Changxiang Wangba (Naidong Lu; per hr Y3; ☎ 24hr) Internet café.

China Post (Zhongguo Youzheng; 12 Naidong Lu; ☎ 9.30am-7pm)

Public Security Bureau (Gong'anju; PSB; Naidong Lu; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm) Best avoided.

Zhijianyuan Wangcheng (cnr Naidong Lu & Gaisang Lu; per hr Y4; ☎ 24hr) Internet café on 2nd floor above a restaurant.

Sights & Activities

MONASTERY KORA

There are a couple of small monasteries in the Tibetan quarter that are worth a brief visit. Pilgrims visit them in a clockwise circuit.

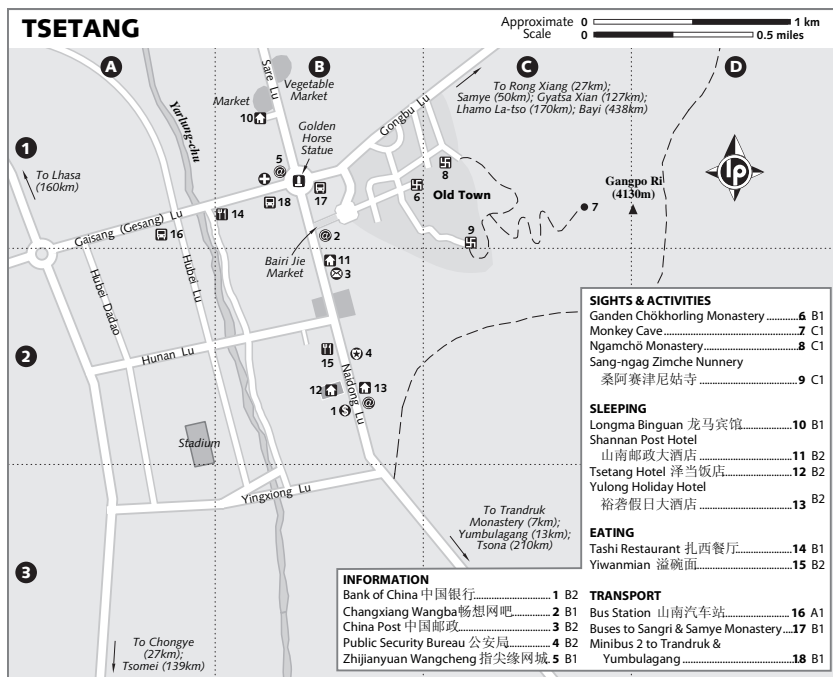
From the market on Bairi Jie head east to a small square and continue down the street to the right of the bank. After 200m you'll come to **Ganden Chökhörling Monastery**. This 14th-century monastery was originally a Kagyupa institution, but by the 18th century the Geluggas had taken it over, which is why the central statue is of Tsongkhapa.

From here head north and then east to **Ngamchö Monastery**, a somewhat livelier place. On the top floor are the bed and throne of the Dalai Lama. A side chapel is devoted to medicine, with images of the eight medicine buddhas. The protector chapel displays fine festival masks, representing snow lions, stags and demons.

A kora leads from the monastery around the base of Gangpo Ri up to a bundle of prayer flags and round to a throne-shaped incense burner. From here a side trail ascends the hill to the Monkey Cave, while the main kora descends to **Sang-ngag Zimche Nunnery** (admission Y10). The principal image here is of a 1000-armed Chenresig, dating back to the time of King Songtsen Gampo. According to some accounts, the statue was fashioned by the king himself.

GANGPO RI རྩེང་པོ་རི་ 贡不日神山

Gangpo Ri (4130m) is of special significance for Tibetans as the legendary birthplace of the Tibetan people, where Chenresig in the form of a monkey mated with the white demones Sinmo to produce the beginnings of the Tibetan race. The **Monkey Cave**, where all this took place, can be visited near the summit of the mountain. Do it in the spirit of a demanding half-day walk in the hills, rather than as a trip specifically to see the Monkey Cave, as the cave itself is rather disappointing.



The most direct trail leads up from the Sang-ngag Zimche Nunnery, climbing about 550m to the cave. If in doubt, follow the prayer flags.

Sleeping & Eating

Finding good budget accommodation is a real problem in Tsetang. The town's cheaper hotels are prevented from accepting foreigners by a strong PSB presence, and those that will accept you will notify the PSB of your presence within minutes of you checking in.

Shannan Post Hotel (Youzheng Dajiuadian; ☎ 782 1888; 10 Naidong Lu; d incl breakfast Y238-328, discounts of 50%) The rooms may be a bit knackered but this is still probably your best budget bet. The cheaper rooms come with a squat toilet but the promised hot water is unreliable.

Longma Binguan (☎ 783 5388; 28 Sare Lu; d with bath-room Y268-488, tr Y388, discounts of 40-60%) The cheaper ordinary rooms (*putong biao*) here are much the same as the pricier versions and are often discounted to Y150, making them a good deal. Get a room overlooking the inner courtyard, not the noisy market.

Yulong Holiday Hotel (Yulong Jiri Dajiuadian; ☎ 783 2888; 16 Naidong Lu; r Y580, discounts of 50-60%; 🚻) This

new three-star place was offering great discounts at the time of research for its clean modern rooms. You can even listen to your favourite Chinese pop tunes in the power shower. Or not.

Tsetang Hotel (Zedang Fandian; ☎ 782 5555; fax 782 1855; 21 Naidong Lu; d Y480-680; 🚻 📺) This is Tsetang's premier tour-group lodging, with money exchange (guests only), piped-in oxygen and comfortable four-star rooms. The souvenir shop sells slide film. Credit cards are accepted.

Yiwanmian (Naidong Lu; snacks Y5-10; 🕒 24hr) This clean and bright place across from the PSB office offers a wide range of excellent snacks. Try the *shaguo jiaozi* (炒锅饺子), ravioli in a boiling broth.

Tashi Restaurant (☎ 783 1958; Gaisang Lu; mains Y20-30) Branch of the Tashi Restaurant in Shigatse (not Tashi's in Lhasa) that offers up Nepali-style Western goodies, such as pizza, curries and good breakfasts, in a nice Tibetan-style hall. Menu in English.

Getting There & Away

Buses run hourly between Tsetang and Lhasa's main Western Bus Station (Y30, 2½ hours)

until around 6pm, passing Dranang (Y10) and Gongkar airport (Y20) en route. Private cars also do the run at dangerous speeds for Y50 per seat.

During research for this guide, the bus station at Tsetang stopped selling tickets to foreigners. In case this changes, there are daily buses to Tsomei (Y50), Gyatsa (Y60), Tsoma (Y50) and Shigatse (Y80), and services to Nangartse (Y50, Monday, Wednesday and Friday). Two buses a day run to Chushul (Y25, two hours), via Gongkar Chöde Monastery (Y20, 1½ hours).

Private buses to Samey (Y15, 45 minutes) and Sangri (Y5, one hour) depart at 8am from near the main roundabout and foreigners are allowed on these.

YARLUNG VALLEY ཡར་ལུང་གཞུང་གི་ཇུང་གི་ཁོ་ལོ་ལྷོ་ཁོ་ལོ་

Yarlung is considered the cradle of Tibetan civilisation. It was from Yarlung that the early Tibetan kings unified Tibet in the 7th century and their massive burial mounds still dominate the area around Chongye. Yumbulagang, perched on a crag like a medieval European castle, is another major attraction of the area and the site of Tibet's oldest building.

The major attractions of the Yarlung Valley can just about be seen in a day, but this is a beautiful part of Tibet for extended hiking and day walks. The main problem is the Tsetang PSB, who seem intent on limiting tourism to guided groups.

Some travellers band together in Lhasa for a three- or four-day trip out to the Yarlung Valley by way of Tsetang, taking in Samey and Mindroling en route. The total cost (including permits and guide) for a Land Cruiser for such a trip is around Y2800. It's more cost-effective to add a Yarlung extension onto a trip to the Nepali border if you are heading that way.

Permits

Travel permits (see p323) are theoretically needed to visit anywhere outside Tsetang town, though there weren't any formal permit checks in the valley during our last few research visits. The only place you are likely to be checked in is Chongye, and then only if you stay the night.

Trandruk Monastery རྩམ་བླ་གྲག་དེ་ལོ་ལོ་

Around 7km south of the Tsetang Hotel, **Trandruk** (Changzhu Si; admission Y70, photos Y75; 🕒 dawn-dusk

is one of the earliest Buddhist monasteries in Tibet, having been founded at the same time as the Jokhang and Ramoche in Lhasa. Dating back to the 7th-century reign of Songtsen Gampo, it is also one of Tibet's demoness-subduing temples (see p105; Trandruk pins down the demoness' left shoulder). In order to build the monastery here, Songtsen Gampo had first to take the form of a hawk (*tra*) in order to overcome a local dragon (*druk*), a miracle which is commemorated in the monastery's name.

Trandruk was significantly enlarged in the 14th century and again under the auspices of the fifth and seventh Dalai Lamas. The monastery was badly desecrated by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

The entrance of the monastery opens into a courtyard area ringed by cloisters. The building to the rear of the courtyard has a ground plan similar to that of the Jokhang, and shares the same Tibetan name, Tsuglhakhang.

The principal chapel, to the rear centre, holds a statue of Tara known as Drölma Sheshema (under a parasol), next to the five Dhyani buddhas. The Tuje Lhakhang to the right has statues of Chenresig, Jampelyang and Chana Dorje, who form the Tibetan trinity known as the Rigsum Gonpo. The stove to the right is said to have belonged to Princess Wencheng (Wencheng Konjo), the Chinese consort of Songtsen Gampo.

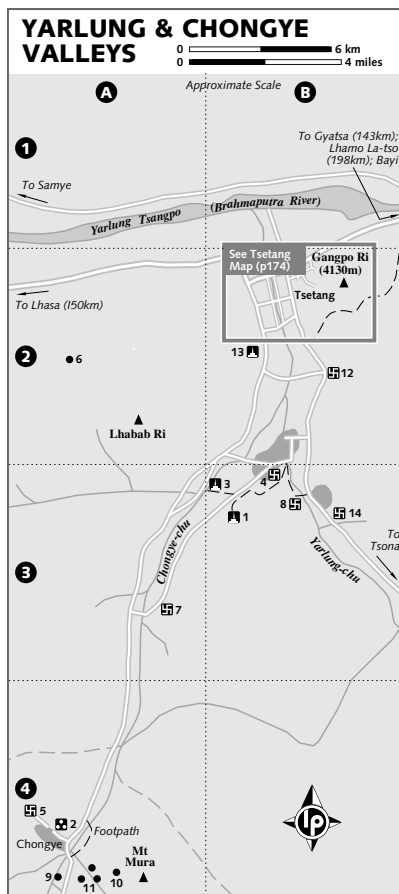
Upstairs and to the rear is a central chapel containing a famous thangka of Chenresig made up of 29,000 pearls, as well as an ancient appliqué thangka showing Sakyamuni.

Minibus 2 (Y1) runs here every 20 minutes from the main roundabout, picking up passengers along Naidong Lu.

Yumbulagang ཡུམ་བུ་ལག་གྲང་གྲང་ རྩམ་བླ་གྲང་གྲང་

A fine, tapering finger of a structure that sprouts from a craggy ridge overlooking the patchwork fields of the Yarlung Valley, **Yumbulagang** (Yongbulakang; admission Y60; 🕒 7am-7pm) is considered the oldest building in Tibet. At least that is the claim for the original structure – most of what can be seen today dates from 1982. It is still a remarkably impressive sight, with a lovely setting.

The founding of Yumbulagang stretches back into legend and myth. The standard line is that it was built for King Nyentri Tsenpo, a historic figure who has long since blurred into



SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Bhairo-puk	1 B3
Chingwa Tagtse Dzong	2 A4
Gongtang Bumpa Chörten	3 B3
Rechung-puk Monastery 日琼布寺	4 B3
Riwo Dechen Monastery	5 A4
Sheldrak Cave	6 A2
Tangboche Monastery 唐布齐寺	7 A3
Tashi Chöeden Monastery 扎西曲登寺	8 B3
Tomb of Songtsen Gampo	9 A4
Tomb of Trisong Detsen	10 A4
Tombs of the Tibetan Kings 藏王墓群	11 A4
Trandruk Monastery 昌珠寺	12 B2
Tsechu Bumpa Chörten	13 B2
Yumbulagang 雍布拉康	14 B3

the present structure. Today it serves as a chapel and is inhabited by around eight monks who double as guards – in 1999 some 30 statues were stolen from the main chapel. Its most impressive feature is its **tower**, and the prominence of Yumbulagang on the Yarlung skyline belies the fact that this tower is only 11m tall.

The ground-floor **chapel** is consecrated to the ancient kings of Tibet. A central buddha image is flanked by Nyentri Tsenpo on the left and Songtsen Gampo on the right. Other kings and ministers line the side walls. There is another chapel on the upper floor with an image of Chenresig, similar to the one found in the Potala. There are some excellent murals by the door that depict, among other things, Nyentri Tsenpo descending from heaven, Trandruk Monastery, and Guru Rinpoche arriving at the Sheldrak meditation cave (in the mountains west of Tsetang).

Perhaps the best part is a walk up along the ridge above the building, if only to get some peace from the syrupy Chinese pop music that blasts up from the car park below. There are fabulous views from a promontory topped with prayer flags. It is an easy five-minute climb and no entry fee is required.

Yumbulagang is 6km from Trandruk Monastery. Minibus 2 (Y2), originating from the Tsetang roundabout and passing Trandruk Monastery, terminates here.

Rechung-puk Monastery རེའུ་རྒྱུ་པུ་གྲོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་

日琼布寺
A popular pilgrimage site associated with the illustrious Milarepa (1040–1123), the remains of Rechung-puk Monastery are set high on a dramatic escarpment that divides the two branches of the Yarlung Valley.

Milarepa, founder of the Kagyupa order, is revered by many as Tibet's greatest songwriter and poet. It was his foremost disciple, Rec-

hungpa (1083–1161), who founded Rechung-puk as a cave (*puk*) retreat. Later a monastery was established at the site, eventually housing up to 1000 monks. This now lies in ruins. For pilgrims, the draw of the monastery is the atmospheric **cave of Black Heruka**, where they are thumped on the back with the stone footprint of Rechungpa.

See below for how to visit the ruins as part of a day-long hike around the valley.

Tangboche Monastery བང་པོ་ཆེ་ལྷོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་

A minor site thought to date back to 1017, Tangboche Monastery is about 15km southwest of Tsetang on the way to Chongye. Atisha, the renowned Bengali scholar, stayed here in a meditation retreat. The monastery's **murals**, which for most visitors with an interest in things Tibetan are the main attraction, were commissioned by the 13th Dalai Lama in 1913. They can be seen in the monastery's main hall – one of the few monastic structures in this region that was not destroyed by Red Guards.

Tangboche is easily visited if you are travelling by rented transport between Tsetang and Chongye. You should be able to see the building on the left once you're about 15km out of Tsetang.

CHONGYE VALLEY རྒྱུ་ལྷོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་

Most visitors to the Chongye Valley go as a day trip from Tsetang and combine it with

attractions in the Yarlung Valley. It is possible to stay in the town of Chongye but you leave yourself open to potential permit hassles.

Chongye is a beautiful valley enclosed by rugged peaks. The views from some of the burial mounds are superb. It is also well worth climbing up to Riwo Dechen Monastery and the ruins of the old *dzong* behind it for more views of the mounds.

Chongye Town རྒྱུ་ལྷོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་

琼结镇
0893 / pop 3000
Chongye is not a town in which you'll want to linger, but it makes a decent base for treks in the area.

There are buses almost hourly between Tsetang and Chongye town (Y5), from where most of the important sights are easily accessible on foot. Hitching here is not that easy, though by no means impossible.

Chongye Burial Mounds རྒྱུ་ལྷོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་ལྷོ་པོ་

The Tombs of the Kings at Chongye represent one of the few historical sites in the country that gives any evidence of a pre-Buddhist culture in Tibet. Most of the kings interred here are now firmly associated with the rise of Buddhism on the high plateau, but the methods of their interment point to the Bön faith. It is thought that the burials were probably officiated at by Bön priests and were accompanied

DIY: TREKKING THE YARLUNG VALLEY

Perhaps the best way to see the lesser sights of the Yarlung Valley is on foot, visiting a handful of pilgrimage sites, none of which are more than 40 minutes' walk apart. Bring water and a packed lunch for a fine day trip.

After visiting **Trandruk Monastery** and **Yumbulagang**, take Minibus 2 for 2km north from Yumbulagang and get off at kilometre marker 373. Follow the side road westwards for 15 minutes, then curve to the left to visit the small **Tashi Chöeden Monastery**, home to 20 monks.

From here, head north along the base of the hillside for 25 minutes and take a left where the canal branches left. A faint path climbs the ridge for 15 minutes up to **Rechung-puk** (see opposite). Alternatively, carry on north to Khurmey village, from where it is an equally steep 20-minute walk up to the monastery, passing a white chörten.

After visiting the main **Heruka cave**, head over the back (west) side of the ridge, pick your way down through the ruins, past a looted chörten, to the minor road at the base of the ridge. Follow this southwest for 10 minutes to a small village. A path leads from here up to a cleft in the rock, decorated with prayer flags – this is the **Bhairo-puk**. The tiny cave is home to a couple of hermits and houses a stone handprint and statue of the translator Vairocana.

From here descend back to the village and head west along a dirt track towards the large **Gongtang Bumpa chörten** and then join the main road from Tsetang to Chongye and hitch (p344) back to Tsetang.

mythology. Legend has him descending from the heavens and being received as a king by the people of the Yarlung Valley. More than 400 Buddhist holy texts (known collectively as the 'Awesome Secret') are said to have fallen from the heavens at Yumbulagang in the 5th century. Murals at Yumbulagang depict the magical arrival of the texts.

There has been no conclusive dating of the original Yumbulagang, although some accounts indicate that the foundations may have been laid more than 2000 years ago. It is more likely that it dates from the 7th century, when Tibet first came under the rule of Songtsen Gampo.

The plan of Yumbulagang indicates that it was originally a fortress and much larger than

by sacrificial offerings. Archaeological evidence suggests that earth burial, not sky burial, might have been widespread in the time of the Yarlung kings, and may not have been limited to royalty.

Accounts of the location and number of the mounds differ. Erosion of the mounds has also made some of them difficult to accurately identify. It is agreed, however, that there is a group of 10 burial mounds just south of the Chongye-chu.

The most revered of the mounds, and the closest to the main road, is the **Tomb of Songtsen Gampo**. It is the largest of the burial mounds and has a small **Nyingmapa temple** (admission Y30) atop its 13m-high summit. The furthest of the group of mounds, high on the slopes of Mt Mura, is the **Tomb of Trisong Detsen**. It is about a one-hour climb, but there are superb views of the Chongye Valley.

Chingwa Tagtse Dzong འཕྲིབ་བུག་རྩེ་རྫོང་

The *dzong* can be seen clearly from Chongye town and from the burial mounds, its crumbling ramparts straddling a ridge of Mt Chingwa. Once one of the most powerful forts in central Tibet, it dates back to the time of the early Yarlung kings. The *dzong* is also celebrated as the birthplace of the great fifth Dalai Lama. There is nothing to see in the fort itself, but again you are rewarded with some great views if you take the 40-minute or so walk up from Chongye. Paths lead up from the centre of town, from the nearby ruins of the red chapel and from the gully behind Riwo Dechen Monastery.

Riwo Dechen Monastery འཕྲིབ་རྒྱལ་འཛིན་ལོ་བཟང་ཆོས་ལུགས་ལྷོ་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་གྱི་རྩེ་རྫོང་

The large, active, Gelugpa-sect Riwo Dechen Monastery sprawls across the lower slopes of Mt Chingwa below the fort. There are some nice walks up to the ridge north of the monastery and then down to the fort.

Riwo Dechen Monastery can be reached by a half-hour walk from Chongye's atmospheric old Tibetan quarter. Turn west at the town's T-junction and ask for the 'gompa'. Halfway up is a grand, new chörten. It is sometimes possible to stay the night at the monastery – a magical experience.

LHAMO LA-TSO ལྷ་མོ་ལ་ལུ་ལོ་ ལྷ་མོ་ལ་ལུ་ ལྷ་མོ་ལ་ལུ་ One of Ü's most important pilgrimage destinations, Lhamo La-tso (Lamu Lacuo) is

around 115km northeast of Tsetang. *La* is a Tibetan word that means 'soul' or 'life spirit'. *La* resides in both animate and inanimate forms, including lakes, mountains and trees. In the case of Lhamo La-tso, *la* is identified with the spirit of Tibet itself.

The Dalai Lamas have traditionally made pilgrimages to Lhamo La-tso to seek visions that appear on the surface of the oracle lake. The Tibetan regent journeyed to the lake in 1933 after the death of the 13th Dalai Lama and had a vision of a monastery in Amdo that led to the discovery of the present Dalai Lama. The lake is considered the home of the protectress Palden Lhamo.

The gateway to Lhamo La-tso is the dramatic, but mostly ruined, **Chökorgye Monastery** (却柯杰寺; Quekejie Si; 4500m), wedged between three mountains, Zhidag (north), Palden Lhamo (south) and Begtse (east) in the Tsi-chu Valley. Founded in 1509 by the second Dalai Lama, Gendun Gyatso (1476–1542), the monastery served later Dalai Lamas and regents as a staging post for visits to the lake. Some 500 monks were in residence until the place was flattened by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution; a handful have returned and the main hall has been rebuilt.

On the nearby slope is a mani wall that consecrates a footprint stone of the second Dalai Lama.

Just short of the mountain pass that overlooks Lhamo La-tso is a ritual *shökde* (throne) built for the Dalai Lamas. It is now buried under a mound of *kathak* (silk scarves). It's a 15-minute walk from the *shökde* to the pass and another 1½ hours to get down to the lake, which is encircled by a kora.

Permits

A visit to Lhamo La-tso requires four permits (three days to process), which are only available with the help of a tourist company in Lhasa. Even then, obtaining permissions can be tricky. The only place you are likely to be checked is at Chökorgye Monastery or a hotel in Gyatsa Xian. We weren't checked during our visit, but because we were without a permit we didn't hang around too long.

Sleeping & Eating

Chökorgye Monastery (dm Y50) The nearest accommodation to Lhamo La-tso. It has basic dorm rooms at outrageous prices. There are

good camping spots behind the temple walls if you have a tent.

Gyatsa Holy Lake Hotel (d Y160) Of the several hotels in Gyatsa Xian (for those who have a permit), this one, on the eastern edge of town, is the best.

Getting There & Away

The approach to Lhamo La-tso begins from Tsetang, usually by hired vehicle. From Tsetang it is 27km to the village of Rong Xiang, where a bridge crosses the Yarlung Tsangpo to Sangri. Continuing east from Rong Xiang, the road passes **Chakar Chöde Monastery** (恰嘎曲德寺; Qiaga Qude Si), situated above the road next to a large purple water tank. Most of the monastery stands in ruins, but the main hall has been rebuilt and features a statue of Sakyamuni. Check out Songtsen Gampo's sword on the pillar to the left. If the main hall is locked, you can get a key from the caretaker who lives next door.

It's slow going for 32km to Chusom (Qusong; 3880m), where the **Mansion of Lhagyari** (拉加里王府; Lajiali Wangfu) – a three-storey, mud-brick pile – looms above the road. You can scamper up to the 13th-century ruins in about five minutes. The interior bears some painted crossbeams, but is pretty unstable.

From Chusom the road climbs 36km to Batang-la (4950m) and then descends 26km to Lasuo village, where you can stay in a basic **guesthouse** (dm Y20) if it is late. Another 26km brings you to Gyatsa (加查; Jiazha) Xian, where a bypass leads 3km to a bridge that spans the Yarlung Tsangpo. Traffic is sparse but you might be able to hitch a ride from here up to Chökorgye Monastery; otherwise it's a 55km walk of two days, via Tseju village. Keep a low profile in Gyatsa Xian if you have no permit.

Altogether, it takes about six hours to drive from Tsetang to Chökorgye Monastery.

From the monastery, 4WD vehicles can drive (one hour) up a twisting mountain road to the *shökde*. Without transport, you can walk to the pass from the monastery in four hours – you have to be fit, acclimatised and well equipped to attempt it.

The most interesting way to reach the lake is to trek from Rutok (six days, via Dzingchi and Magong-la) or from Sangri, both routes via Gyelung-la. Coming from Sangri it's 42km along a driveable road to Olkhar, where you can break the journey at a hot-spring pool. For detailed information on this trek see Gary McCue's *Trekking in Tibet – A Traveler's Guide*. A four- or five-day trip from Lhasa to Lhamo La-tso in a hired vehicle, including permits and guide, will cost around Y4000.

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