

# Western Tibet (Ngari)

མངའ་རིས་



Vast, scarcely populated and with an average altitude of over 4500m, Ngari is a frontier in one of the remotest corners of Asia. The main attractions of what is likely to be a three-week trip are a mountain and a lake – but what a mountain and what a lake! Sacred Mt Kailash and Lake Manasarovar are two of the most far-flung and legendary travel destinations in the world. Many of the pilgrims on the road have been planning a visit all their lives.

The landscape of Ngari is dominated by the Himalaya range to the south and the huge salt lakes of the Changtang plateau to the north. In between are immense stretches of yellow steppe, dusty badlands, sandy deserts, and the mineral-rich trans-Himalayan ranges stained purple, rust and green. For those not overly fussed by the spiritual significance of Mt Kailash, going to one of the most isolated and beautiful corners of the globe is likely to be an attraction in itself.

Days are long in transit, and until recently, Western travellers were quite rare. Even now few travel the more out-of-the-way northern route or visit the otherworldly ruins of the ancient Guge kingdom at Tsaparang, a day's journey from Mt Kailash. The truly intrepid who visit secluded monasteries, hidden valleys and isolated archaeological sites can be counted on one hand.

Travel in Ngari is still not easy or comfortable, but improved roads and telephone lines (and mobile-phone reception) have made it more accessible. There's a bus service from Lhasa to Ali, a small but growing network of public transport, and an airport planned for 2010. Change is coming, which makes now the time to visit Ngari.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Join the pilgrims looking to erase the sins of a lifetime on the three-day trek around holy **Mt Kailash** (p226)
- Hike the sandy shores of sacred **Lake Manasarovar** (p229), or just marvel at the turquoise waters and snowcapped-mountain backdrop
- Camp anywhere in this otherworldly landscape, but especially by the lakes **Tagyel-tso** (p222), **Dawa-tso** (p223) and **Peiku-tso** (p220)
- Explore the ruins of an ancient kingdom at **Tsaparang** (p235), one of Asia's unknown wonders
- Spot wild asses, gazelle and blue sheep on the **northern route** (p221) to Ali



## History

Most histories of Tibet begin with the kings of the Yarlung Valley region and their unification of central Tibet in the 7th century. But it is thought that the Shangshung (or Zhangzhung) kingdom of western Tibet probably ruled the Tibetan plateau for several centuries before this. According to some scholars, the Bön religion made its way into the rest of Tibet from here. The Shangshung kingdom may also have served as a conduit for Tibet's earliest contacts with Buddhism. There is little material evidence of the Shangshung kingdom in modern Tibet, though the Khyunglung Valley, on the Sutlej River near Tirthapuri hot springs, marks the site of the old kingdom.

The next regional power to emerge in Ngari was the Guge kingdom in the 9th century. After the assassination of the anti-Buddhist Lhasa king Langdharma, one of the king's sons, Namde Wosung, established this kingdom at Tsaparang, west of Lake Manasarovar and Mt Kailash. The Guge kingdom, through its contacts with nearby India, led a Buddhist revival on the Tibetan plateau and at its peak was home to over 100 monasteries, most of them now in ruins.

In the late 16th century, Jesuit missionaries based in the enclave of Goa took an interest in the remote kingdom of Guge, mistaking it for the long-lost Christian civilisation of Prester John (a legendary Christian priest and king who was believed to have ruled over a kingdom in the Far East). The Jesuits finally reached Tsaparang in 1624 after two failed attempts, but if their leader, Father Antonio de Andrade, had expected to find Christians waiting for him, he was disappointed. Nevertheless, he did meet with surprising tolerance and respect for the Christian faith. The Guge king agreed to allow de Andrade to return and set up a Jesuit mission the following year. The foundation stone of the first Christian church in Tibet was laid by the king himself.

Ironically, the evangelical zeal of the Jesuits led not only to their own demise but also to the demise of the kingdom they sought to convert. Lamas, outraged by their king's increasing enthusiasm for an alien creed, enlisted the support of Ladakhis in laying siege to Tsaparang. Within a month the city fell, the king was overthrown and the Jesuits imprisoned. The Guge kingdom collapsed.

At this point, Ngari became so marginalised as to almost disappear from the history

books – with one notable exception. In the late Victorian era, a handful of Western explorers began to take an interest in the legend of a holy mountain and a lake from which four of Asia's mightiest rivers flowed. The legend, which had percolated as far afield as Japan and Indonesia, was largely ridiculed by Western cartographers. However, in 1908 the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin returned from a journey that proved there was indeed such a mountain and such a lake, and that the remote part of Tibet they occupied was in fact the source of the Karnali (a major tributary of the Ganges), Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo), Indus (Sengge Tsangpo) and Sutlej (Langchan Tsangpo) Rivers. The mountain was Kailash and the lake, Manasarovar.

## Permits

Foreigners are supposed to have a fistful of permits: an Alien Travel Permit, military permit, Tibet Tourism Bureau (TTB) permit, foreign affairs permit... If you arrange a Land Cruiser trip in Lhasa, the travel agency will organise all these for you but it can take a week.

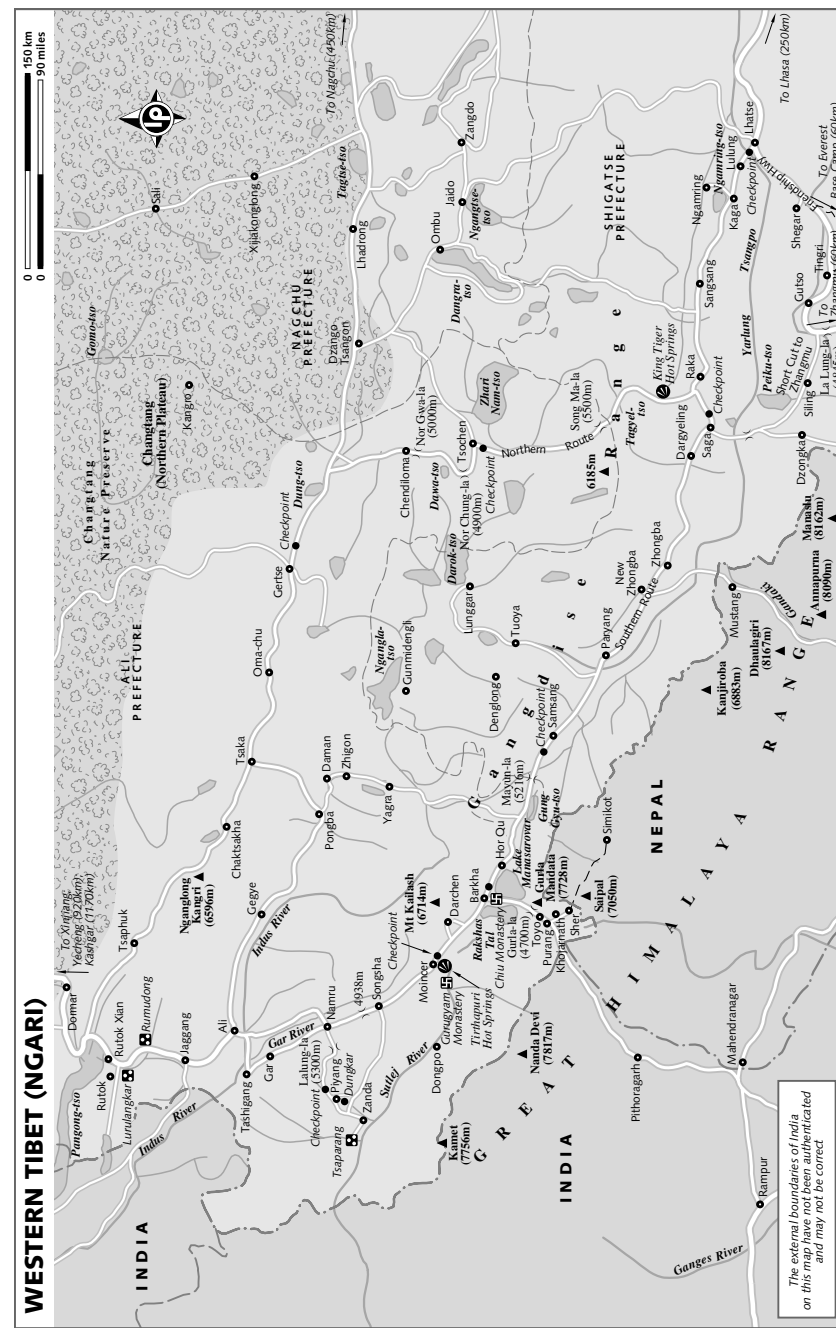
Technically you can get around most of the region with just an Alien Travel Permit (p324). In the past, you could obtain one by getting to Ali (by hitching or bus) and surrendering yourself immediately to the Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gong'anju) office. In return for a fine (Y300 to 350) you would receive a travel permit for most places in the prefecture (eg Mt Kailash, Manasarovar, Purang, the Guge kingdom, Rutok, Gertse and Tsochen). At the time of research some travellers were being turned back, so check for the latest word before you head off.

Western Tibet is a politically sensitive area and is periodically closed to foreigners, due either to political unrest on the Mt Kailash kora or military tension along the contested borders of China, India and Pakistan.

## When to Go

May, June and from mid-September to early October are probably the best times to head out to Ngari. Rates for Land Cruiser hire are cheapest in November. Drölma-la on the Mt Kailash kora is normally blocked with snow from late October or early November until early April.

The festival of Saga Dawa (p229) during May or June is a particularly popular time



to visit Mt Kailash and hundreds of pilgrims and tourists descend on the mountain, which means for some it's a very bad time to go.

### What to Bring

Warm clothes are essential, even in summer. Days can be hot though, so do bring something light to wear. A sleeping bag is recommended, as is a tent. Many of the villages and towns in western Tibet are dusty, dirty, depressing places to stay. After spending all day riding through some of the most glorious scenery on the planet why sleep anywhere else? If you are heading out to trek Mt Kailash, a tent is essential. If you're hitching, a face-mask will help keep out some of the dust. See p345 for other ideas.

Supplies are fairly easy to get now in the expanding towns but consider bringing some things to make travelling more flexible. A package or two of muesli (with powdered milk) and fresh fruit means you don't have to suffer Chinese breakfast every day. A couple of loaves of bread and peanut butter and jam (or canned luncheon meat) means you can stop and have lunch wherever you like: beside a turquoise lake, or flowing river, or out in yellow fields beside a flock of sheep. All the above supplies can easily be purchased in Lhasa (see p126).

It's also worth bringing along a few treats, such as peanuts, sachets of hot chocolate, chocolate bars and dehydrated food, from home.

The only places to change money in Ngari are banks in Ali and, less reliably, Purang – it's much easier to change US dollars as cash rather than travellers cheques. It's best just to bring what you expect to spend.

### Getting There & Away

Most travellers approach Ngari from Lhasa because it's the easiest place to organise permits and find travelling companions for a Land Cruiser tour (still the most common way to get around). Ngari can also be approached from Nepal. Check for the latest word about coming in from Xinjiang as it's a long way to go to be turned back.

There's a nonstop bus service along the northern route between Lhasa and Ali and a local-transport network based in Ali. However, at the time of writing foreigners were not allowed to take any buses into or around western Tibet.

The rare traveller still tries to hitch out to Ngari, but check the latest situation with permits as there are several checkpoints along the way where you need to show your passport and travel permit. Note drivers are often very reluctant to pick up foreigners as special permits are needed. If you do decide to hitch, be honest when asked by drivers if you have a travel permit so they can assess their risk properly. For information on the risks associated with hitching, see p344.

### FROM LHASA

From Lhasa there are two approaches to Ngari: a southern route and a northern. Both follow the same road west to Lhatse and beyond to Raka. About 6km past Raka the routes split, with the southern route continuing west and the northern route heading north.

The southern route is the more popular one, largely because it is the fastest way to the highlights of the territory. Although there are no stellar attractions on the longer northern route, the scenery is superb and this is the road taken by the Lhasa–Ali bus (p226).

See p21 for an overview of the routes to Mt Kailash.

### FROM XINJIANG

Although it's a very difficult road, the route along the Xinjiang–Tibet Hwy sees its share of hitchhikers, cyclists and other independent travellers. But you're always taking a risk that you might get turned back in Ali, so check the latest word on permits and PSB permissiveness before you head out. There's a bus between Yecheng and Ali when road conditions allow. The route passes through the remote Aksai Chin region; with the unpredictability of breakdowns, it can take several days or more (especially if you are trying to hitch) to travel the 1100km from Yecheng to Ali. For a rundown of the route, see p338.

### FROM NEPAL

If you're coming from Kathmandu on the Friendship Hwy (or heading to Kathmandu because of the permit situation), a shortcut to/from Saga (via the beautiful Peiku-tso) takes a full day's travel off your trip. It is also possible to enter Ngari on a four-day trek from Simikot in the Humla region of western Nepal to Purang on the Chinese border near Mt Kailash. This route is open only to tour

groups that trek in from Humla, which is a restricted region.

### SOUTHERN ROUTE

There are now bridges over all the major rivers along the shorter southern route, which has boosted traffic (though sand can still be a problem in places). At the time of writing the road from Sangsang to Raka was being upgraded but should be ready by the time you read this.

### Lhatse to Saga (306km)

This is a full day's journey of about eight hours driving. Just past the Lhatse checkpoint (6km after Lhatse itself), the road leaves the paved Friendship Hwy and bears northwest onto a dirt road. The kilometre marker at the start of this route is 2141.

Just a couple of kilometres after leaving the Friendship Hwy the road crosses the Yarlung Tsangpo and then runs for an hour or so through alternating scenery: barren canyons (that swell in the summer rains) and green meadowland with scattered Tibetan villages on the edges. The photogenic **Lang-tso** (Ox Lake), which you pass in the first hour, has been stocked by the Chinese for sport fishing, a sore point with local Tibetans. (Tibetans don't catch or eat fish because of the Buddhist prohibition on taking life.)

Past the lake the road climbs up to the Ngamring-la (4500m). At kilometre marker 2085, 60km from Lhatse, the road passes through the very small town of **Kaga** (Kajia), next to the **Ngamring-tso**, which often appears brown because of the nearby mountains reflecting off its surface. A turn-off runs round the east side of the lake to the larger settlement and army base of **Ngamring** (Angren), visible on the northeast side of the lake and about 6km off the main route. Ngamring has food and accommodation if you need it.

Within 10km of passing Kaga, 70km west of Lhatse, you'll leave behind the last trees for many days, and soon after you'll also leave behind the last agricultural fields. The scenery now begins to look like a dreamy Cézanne landscape, with broken hills of tan and rust and purple folding in on each other as if slashed onto a canvas with a heavy impasto.

About 500m beyond kilometre marker 2060, prayer flags mark the start of a path to the **Drapsang Monastery**, which overlooks the road from a steep fairy-tale-like crag. The

road then makes a zigzag ascent past photogenic nomads' camps and their flocks to the Sang-la (4700m), then down to a valley time forgot, and up again to the 4800m Karla before dropping down over one hour to Sangsang.

**Sangsang**, 122km west of Lhatse, is a small grubby town of a few hundred souls. The **Hotel Sangsang** (d/q per bed ¥35/25), at the T-junction, is bearable for an overnight stay and has a good Chinese restaurant. There are a couple of other very basic restaurants, truck-stop guesthouses and one grocery store on the left just north of the T-junction. If you have time, you could visit the small Nyingma-school **Wösaling nunnery**, which overlooks the town from the northern end.

By the time you read this, the road from Sangsang to Raka should be paved. The route passes through a succession of wide alleys: stop in one and take a couple of hours to hike to the top of a treeless foothill for outstanding views. Back on the road you follow a gorge into the spectacular wide ravine of the Raka Tsangpo with its dark, craggy peaks. Emerging from this ravine the road skirts a lake and then crosses a flood plain, which is prone to flood damage during the monsoon. The route then climbs a couple of passes, before dropping down again and passing through the tiny settlement of **Raka** (4900m, kilometre marker 1912), about 6km before the junction of the northern and southern routes, and 120km from Sangsang.

The rooms in the misspelt **Lhato Hotel Teahouse** (d¥30) are rustic but clean and have their own yak-dung stoves for heat. The hotel is on the right as you drive through the village (the whole community is about two blocks long), and has a pretty decent Chinese restaurant and Tibetan teahouse. There are a couple of other restaurants and guesthouses in town, most with English signage. If you're taking the northern route, this is pretty much the last hotel for 240km, though you are able to camp at Tagyel-tso. Confusingly, many maps show Raka (or Raga) right at the crossroads; in fact the turn-off is 6km away.

If you are heading to Saga, it's another 60km.

### Zhangmu to Saga (280km)

The scenic short cut from Zhangmu on the Nepali border to Saga (Sajia) on the southern route to Ngari saves 250km (at least a day of

travel) and is used by Land Cruiser groups visiting Ngari directly from Nepal.

See p211 and p212 for more details on the first part of this route. Past Nyalam the road climbs to the 4950m Tong-la and then the 4845m La Lung-la. Not long after, the short cut branches west off the Friendship Hwy (kilometre marker 5265-66; 113km from Zhangmu), rounding some hills at the entrance of a vast stony plain. From here to Saga is about 170km or four hours of driving.

**Siling** (Seylong) village is reached in the first hour and here travellers must pay Y65 per person and Y40 per car for entry to the western section of the Qomolongma Nature Reserve. The nearby village has a fine monastery and ruined *dzong* (fort).

To the south come views of **Shishapangma** (8012m), known to the Nepalese as Gosaithan, the only 8000m-plus mountain planted completely inside Tibet. The road provides access to the mountain's north base camp before skirting the beautiful turquoise lake **Peiku-tso** (4591m), about an hour's drive from Siling. This is one of Tibet's magical spots, and there's fine camping by the lakeshore, with stunning views of snow-capped Shishapangma and Nepal's Langtang range. If you do plan to camp, bring your own drinking water and be well acclimatised. Also try to find a sheltered camp site as winds whip up in the afternoon. To the west of the lake is an eroded canyon to explore.

The bumpy route then follows a narrow gorge before passing the turn-off to the scenic but off-limits Kyirong Valley. After passing the small Drolung-tso you climb to a pass and then drop steeply down to the bridge across the Yarlung Tsangpo. From here it's 3km to Saga, where you join the southern route.

## Saga བཅའ་ལྷོ་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་

☎ 0892 / elev 4600m

The dirty, sprawling town of Saga is the last of any size on the southern route and your last chance to eat a lavish meal. The town is expanding in all directions, but for this book's purposes we concentrate on the northeast part at the T-junction where the Saga Hotel is sited. The road going north at the junction heads toward Zhongba and Mt Kailash, while the road south leads to Lhatse. The road west heads into the new centre of town, where you connect with the road to Zhangmu (see p219).

There's an **internet bar** (网吧; wangba; per hr Y5; ☎ 11am-11pm) in the lobby of the Saga

Hotel, and hot showers at the **bathroom** (linyu; Y10; ☎ 10am-11pm) just west of the Saga Hotel about 50m down the road.

**Saga Hotel** (萨嘎宾馆; Saga Binguang; ☎ /fax 820 2888; d with bathroom Y320, d/t without bathroom Y280/180, discounts of 20-30%) is a decent place with clean, Western-style rooms sporting comfortable beds and modern bathrooms. The detractions are shouting staff and scruffy hallways. Next door is the **Moon Star Restaurant** (☎ 820 3008; dishes Y10-40) serving good Chinese food, though dishes are mostly sized to suit groups.

**Xingyue Guesthouse** (Xingyue Judian; ☎ 820 3008; dm Y40) is a basic guesthouse at the eastern tip of the T-junction, just up from the Saga Hotel. It's popular with Land Cruiser drivers and guides.

There are a number of cheap Tibetan guesthouses on the road heading north from the T-junction. Try **Yajiang Yajie Hotel** (Yajiang Binguang; ☎ 890 0855; d/tr per bed Y30/25) about 500m north of the Saga Hotel, or the nearby Shancheng Comfortable Hotel.

Note that all hotels except Xingyue Guesthouse have English signage out the front.

Saga has numerous small Chinese restaurants along the northern road with dishes better sized to fit a single traveller's needs than Moon Star. Though there are no English menus, owners are friendly and usually willing to help out. 'Fried rice? Fried noodles?'

West of the Saga Hotel is a fruit shop and several small grocery stores for drinks and snacks.

There are daily (sometimes twice daily) buses running between Saga and Shigatse (Y150, 16 hours).

## Saga to Zhongba (145km)

There are several ruined monasteries along this stretch, including one just 1km out of Saga. **Dargyeling Monastery**, 42km from Saga (kilometre marker 1820), is the best preserved and worth a stop.

From here, you cross a river and then pass the ruins of a large monastery, 12km from Dargyeling Monastery. The road then climbs to a pass marked by hundreds of miniature chörtens, before dropping 23km to Zhongba.

## Zhongba འགྲོ་མོ་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་

'Old' Zhongba is a tiny, dusty town on the main road with a couple of basic guesthouses, restaurants and a small monastery. ('New'

Zhongba, 25km northwest, is a small Chinese town with a couple of shops, hotels and restaurants and has little to recommend it.) Given the choice between here and Paryang, take 'Old' Zhongba.

The rustic **Yak Hotel** (☎ 0892-858 1011; dm Y40), on the eastern side of the pass, is the best there is.

## Zhongba to Paryang (110km)

From Zhongba, the road deteriorates and the kilometre markers disappear. This section is particularly prone to invasion from the sand dunes on either side of the road and many trucks get stuck briefly here. You shouldn't have any real problems in a Land Cruiser.

A photogenic section of dunes, lake and mountains kicks in 60km from Zhongba. About 23km before Paryang you crest a pass and drop past more dunes to Paryang. Photos taken along this route can often get steppe, streams, desert dunes and snowcapped mountains in the same shot.

## Paryang བཅའ་ལྷོ་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་

elev 4750m

Guides have said that while many groups spend a night in Paryang on the way to Mt Kailash, none want to spend the night here on the return. The reason is obvious: it looks more like a refugee camp than a village, with stray dogs roaming everywhere, and garbage piles burning day and night.

If you must pass a night here, there are a few guesthouses. The **Shishabama Hotel** (dm/d Y40/100), run by a friendly Tibetan family, has freshly painted rooms, though bedsheets have a few stains. From the Chongqing Restaurant (below) head up the road, turn right at the T-junction and walk a few blocks until you see a large white compound on the left.

In the centre of the village, **Chongqing Restaurant** (重庆饭店; Chongqing Fandian; dishes Y10-30) serves pretty good food considering where you are. Menu in English.

## Paryang to Hor Qu (223km)

The route is a pleasant four-hour drive, passing through yellow steppe, with craggy, snowcapped Himalayan peaks off to the south when the weather is clear. Pick any foothill that strikes your fancy and go for a stroll.

There is a tricky section of sandy road 12km west of Paryang but all the major river crossings now have bridges. There's a check-

point along the way, where you must show your passport and permits.

After the Mayun-la (5216m), the road improves as you cross from Shigatse to Ngari prefectures and descends to the long Gung Gyu-tso, which nomads consider poisoned and will not let their herds drink from. Magical Mt Kailash comes into view approximately 90km after the Mayun-la, just before the town of Hor Qu.

## Hor Qu རྫོང་ཁྱེར་

elev 4560m

Hor Qu is another expanding village with little to recommend it but the views. The 7728m Gurla Mandata is to the southwest, as is Lake Manasarovar, though the lake is a long hike away. Some trekkers walking the Lake Manasarovar kora (p311) spend the night here but most tour groups should give it a miss and continue to Darchen or, better, Chiu Monastery at Lake Manasarovar.

**Yang-tso Guesthouse** (白雪湖日光旅馆; Baixuehu Riguang Lüguan; ☎ 136-3897 5385; q per bed Y30) is a clean and decent family-run place at the east end of town. The cosy teahouse is a good place to relax and observe family life. The sign at the entrance to the compound reads 'White-Snow Lake ZL Sunlight Guesthouse'. The pit toilets have no roof but this grants you the most magnificent views of Gurla Mandata to the southwest.

**Pu Lan Guesthouse** (普兰旅馆; Pulan Lüguan; ☎ 136-3897 6303; q per bed Y40) offers slightly better rooms with cheap wood floors, but it's not as friendly a place as the Yang-tso.

To the right of Yang-tso Guesthouse, the rustic **Big Wineshop of Jin Mantang** (dishes Y10-30) serves decent rice and noodle dishes. Electricity is on from 9pm to midnight in Hor Qu, so hang around to watch a DVD. Menu in English.

From Hor Qu, it's 22km to the crossroads settlement of Barkha (Barga), where you turn south to Chiu Monastery (one hour driving from Hor Qu) on the shores of Lake Manasarovar, or continue west to Darchen.

## NORTHERN ROUTE

The northern route is the longer of the two routes from Lhasa to Ngari but there's more traffic and public transport along it. Although it's no freeway, the dirt road is at least maintained by teams of road crews working hard for their Y900 a month. The first part, like

the southern route, follows the road from Lhatse to the turn-off near Raka (see p219). From Raka, there is basically no accommodation before Tsochen, 240km away. If you're travelling by Land Cruiser, seriously consider camping most of the time as the towns are uniformly dismal. On the other hand there's no shortage of grassy riverside spots with beautiful mountain views. You'll see a lot of seminomadic herders along this route, as well as marmots, blue sheep, wild asses and antelope.

### King Tiger Hot Springs & Tagyel-tso

ལྷག་ལྷུ་ཚུ་ཚོན་

Only 21km north of the Raka junction are the Tagyel Chutse, or **King Tiger Hot Springs**, a wild collection of gushing geysers, bubbling hot springs, puffing steam outlets and miscellaneous smoking holes in the ground. It's a fun place to explore and maybe even wash up at. If you head directly down to the riverbed from the top of the pass, you'll find a small bathing area built into the rocks.

From the hot springs, the road runs around the western side of a beautiful lake, then through a wide valley, one of the stretches of flat terrain in Ngari where you can see the road ahead of you for kilometres. From a low pass, the route descends to a much larger lake, the **Tagyel-tso**, the waters of which are a miraculous shade of the deepest blue imaginable and ringed with snowy peaks. This is a great place to camp if you're prepared for the cold and altitude (around 5170m). There are lots of flat spots by the lake, and you'll have plenty of marmots and grazing wild asses for company.

### North to Tsochen

It's about 240km from Raka to Tsochen or five to six hours of driving. For 25km the road runs along the eastern side of Tagyel-tso before starting to climb to the 5500m Song Ma-la. At kilometre marker 322 look straight ahead at the copper-stained mountain range for the uncanny likeness of Jabba the Hut's face in the rocks.

A further 45km from the pass and the road crests a smaller pass and leads down to two joined lakes, past a small salt mine. Eventually you pop out into the wide sandy valley of the Yutra Tsangpo, where the road splits *Mad Max*-style into a dozen parallel tracks. At kilometre mark 179 there is a major check-

point where your passport and permit will be checked. The town of Tsochen is just ahead across the plains.

### Tsochen འཚོ་ཚོན་ རྩོམ་

☎ 0897 / pop 1000

Tsochen (Cuoqin), 235km from the northern turn-off, 173km south of the northern road proper, is another bleak, dusty town lining the main road. At the east end (about 2km from the start) is a **Tibetan quarter**. Walk through this to reach a mass of mani stones, prayer poles and yak skulls that local pilgrims flock to daily at dusk.

From here, you are able to see the desert plateau to the north and a second mass of prayer flags about 1km away; just below here is the **Mentong Monastery**, a small but friendly place with 30 monks. Visitors can enter the main prayer hall and the Kuding Lhakhang, which has an inner chapel. The monastery belongs to the Kagyud school, so there are pictures of Milarepa, Marpa and the Karmapa.

One potential excursion from Tsochen is to **Zhari (Tsari) Nam-tso**, a huge salt lake 50km east of town towards the town of Tseri (Tsitri). You will need to have this visit pre-arranged with your driver before leaving Lhasa or arrange extra payment for the half-day trip.

The PSB (公安局; Gong'anju) maintains a strong presence in town and at the time of writing all foreign travellers had to go to the station to register. The station is about halfway up the road on the left from the start of town (coming from Lhasa). The process can be a long one.

There's an unmarked **guesthouse** (s/d per bed Y120/60) 150m past the petrol station on the right. Look for the white-tiled building and turn into its courtyard. Rooms, on the 2nd floor, are large and fairly well provided with TVs, washstands, sofas and clean bedding. The pit toilets across the compound are nasty.

**Friendship FERIA Hotel** (☎ 290 1878; d Y180) is at the beginning of town on the left, before the petrol station. It looks fine on the outside but is, as WH Auden once wrote of motels, 'designed to disintegrate'.

The main street is lined with Chinese restaurants (dishes Y10 to 30), but don't expect to find an English menu. There are several grocery stores at the far end of town near the Tibetan quarter.

### Tsochen to Gertse (257km)

From Tsochen to the junction of the northern road is a journey of about 180km; Gertse is another 77km, making a total drive of around seven hours. If you plan to stay in Gertse, take your time as the route is far more interesting and scenic than the town.

The ride out of Tsochen offers many opportunities for a quintessential Tibetan photo of flocks of sheep grazing on rolling yellow steppe backed by high rugged mountains. About 43km north of Tsochen, the road passes the 4900m **Nor Chung-la** (Small Wild Yak Pass) before descending to the dramatic turquoise waters of **Dawa-tso**, another superb camping spot. For the next 60km the route crosses from one attractive valley to another, sometimes connected by the river and gorge, at other times by minor passes.

The road crosses the scenic **Nor Gwa-la** (Wild Yak Head Pass), another pass of nearly 5000m, 94km (about 2½ hours of driving) north of Tsochen. From the pass the route descends to a bridge, 109km from Tsochen, at **Chendiloma**, where there is a small guesthouse and teahouse.

From about 10km before Chendiloma and for the next 50km, the road runs right beside a beautiful, snowcapped mountain range running north-south, crossing several of its glacial outwashes. The valley narrows towards its northern end before the road suddenly pops out onto a wide plain to meet the northern road proper (the one that links Amdo with Ali). It's a long 15km drive almost in a straight line towards the **Dung-tso**, with its purple mountain backdrop and salt marsh foreground that looks like whitecaps on the water from a distance.

From the junction it's two hours west to Gertse through a wide valley dotted with sheep, blue sheep and prayer flags. There's a minor checkpoint for drivers 24km before Gertse.

### Gertse གེ་ར་ཚེ་ 改则

☎ 0897

Gertse (Gaize) is the biggest town along the northern route before Ali and looks like a strip of warehouses and junkyards when you first drive in. The main street of town begins from the roundabout and runs east-west about 1.5km. Even if you don't spend the night here, budget an hour to visit the long wall of chörtens, mani stones, prayer flags

and yak horns that stretches off to the south of town.

There's mobile-phone reception in Gertse and numerous private telecom booths around town for cheap calls.

The **Government Guesthouse** (政府招待所; Zhengfu Zhaodaisuo; q/d per bed Y35/45, deluxe s/d Y180) is opposite the hospital west of the roundabout. There are three blocks here. The cheapest quads are a bit smelly and cramped and are favoured by truck drivers. The doubles have clean beds, TVs, and electricity till 2am. The deluxe doubles are a big step up, but the private bathrooms remain out of reach, locked up due to a lack of running water.

There are numerous Chinese and Tibetan restaurants (dishes Y10 to 35) along the main road. Most are open for lunch and dinner, and several for a breakfast of *baazi* (steamed meat-filled buns) and *xifan* (rice porridge).

A sleepy indoor market in the middle of town on the north side of the road offers such unexpected treats as bananas and pears.

### Gertse to Gegye (368km)

It's a seven- to eight-hour drive from Gertse to Gegye, the next town of any size. Soon after leaving Gertse, you'll pass several small lakes set in a wide plain that switches between steppe and desert. Keep your eyes open for round, tomblike buildings that are actually tsampa (roasted barley) storage bins, and for the astonishingly varied colours of the mountains: rust, mustard, turmeric, green barley... Also look for the Chinese-built wells that look like the entranceways to pedestrian underpasses. **Oma-chu** (kilometre marker 982), a small village huddled beneath a rocky outcrop, is 50km west of Gertse.

After about 30km the road passes large Tarab-tso (or Dara-tso). It's another 75km to ramshackle **Tsaka** (about three hours from Gertse), a small salt-mining community. The centre of town has a guesthouse.

From Tsaka one route continues west to meet the Ali-Kashgar road just north of Pangong-tso. The road to Pongba heads south and climbs to the 4878m Gya-la, then passes nomads' tents and curves around salty Bar-tso, before crawling to another pass (4800m) that has a large cave on one side. The road then descends to **Pongba** (Shungba or Xiongba) via a wide plain marked with wavy lines made by vehicle tyres: it's like a giant Edvard Munch canvas. Pongba is a

dismal wool-trading centre for the nomads of the region, 96km from the turn-off. Here you'll find a very basic truckers' guesthouse and a few restaurants.

In the last stretch, the road heads north-west from Pongba. Check out the fields of grasses of varying colours: honey, camel and mustard. The most amazing pictures are created by this natural palette, including one we saw that looked exactly like a cartoon desert island with a coconut tree growing in the centre. At kilometre marker 1202, the road enters a gorge and follows the Indus River to Gege, 105km (two hours) from Pongba.

## Gege རྒྱལ་གྱི་རྒྱུ་ 革吉

The formerly quiet little town of Gege (Geji), nestled against a ridge, is expanding rapidly and an entirely new main street was almost completed at the time of writing. It was actually looking very nice as the buildings – though offices for companies such as China Telecom and the Agricultural Bank of China – were built in an attractive Tibetan style. The new and old main streets join at a T-junction just down from China Telecom. At the far end of the old main street, heading off to the hills, is the Tibetan quarter.

The government guesthouse **Gege Binguan** (革吉宾馆; Geji Binguan; ☎ 0897-263 245; d Y90) is the best in town. Rooms have high ceilings, decent beds and TV. The bathrooms are locked though, so you must use the dirty squat ones outside. The hotel is on the old main street 150m up on the left. It's a large, official-looking building inside a compound with a white tiled arch.

**Qile Guesthouse** (奇乐招待所; Qile Zhaodaisuo; dm Y30) is a basic Tibetan-run guesthouse across the road from the Gege Binguan, on the 2nd floor. There's a cosy teahouse at the end of the hallway.

The old main road contains a couple of small grocery stores, plenty of Chinese and Muslim restaurants (dishes Y10 to 30), and a couple of Tibetan teahouses. Don't expect an English menu anywhere.

## Gege to Ali

Ali is just 112km (three hours) from Gege. At first the road follows the infant Indus River. Then at kilometre marker 1260 it crosses the river and soon enters a marshland with an abundance of birdlife, including golden ducks and large black-necked cranes.

The road then passes through a landscape of alternating dry canyons and marshland. At kilometre marker 1330 a misplaced factory suddenly appears out of nowhere. Ali soon emerges like a bizarre mirage. From afar it looks very large and modern and the shock is reinforced when you actually reach the town. There are clusters of modern-looking buildings, shops, neon signs, paved roads and hordes of taxis. Here you'll drive on your first bitumen road since Lhatse and it's an amazing experience to glide smoothly into town after five or six days bouncing around the northern plateau.

## ALI ཨ་ལི་ 阿里

☎ 0897 / elev 4280m

Ali, also known as Shiquanhe in Chinese and Senge Khabab (Town of the Lion) in Tibetan, is the capital of the Ali prefecture. There's nothing much to see, but it is a good place to clean up, have some decent food, top up supplies and check your email before heading off to the real attractions of Ngari.

Ali is thoroughly Chinese. There are plenty of Tibetans wandering the streets but, like you, they are probably visitors from further afield. The town is expanding rapidly, especially to the south of the river, and there's a big army presence. After the barren emptiness of the surrounding country, Ali, with its video-game parlours, department stores and karaoke bars, comes as a real shock to the system.

For views of the town, climb up to the prayer-flag-strewn hills to the north of town. Don't take pictures of the army compound to the west (recognisable by the huge army symbol painted on the hillside above it).

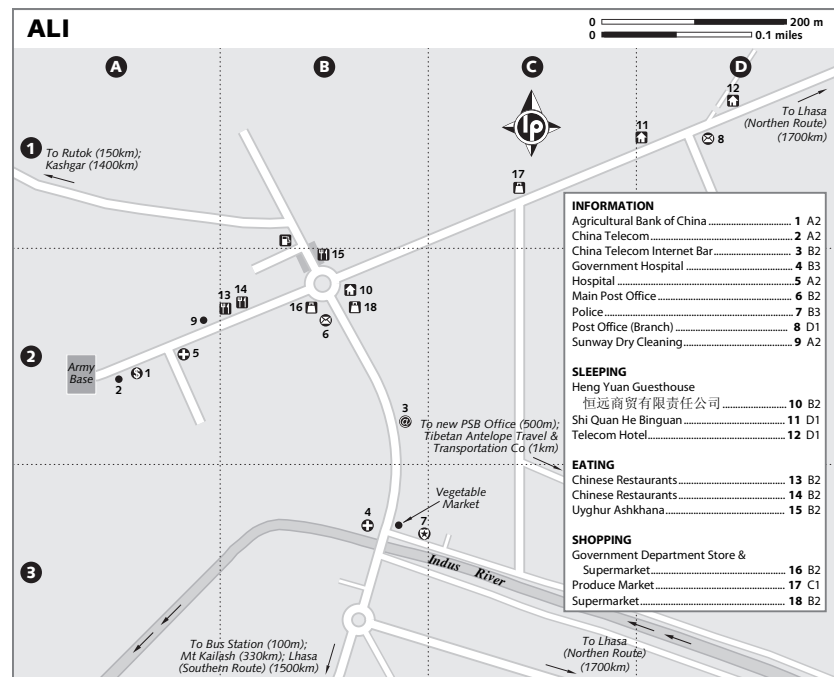
## Information

For cheap international calls visit one of the many private telecom booths around town.

**Agricultural Bank of China** (Zhongguo Nongye Yinhang; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri) Near the army post, west of the roundabout. Will change cash US dollars, euros and UK pounds only (no travellers cheques). There's an ATM outside on the Visa, MasterCard and Cirrus networks.

**China Telecom Internet Bar** (Zhongguo Dianxin Wangba; per hr Y4; ☎ 24hr) Go through the gate and take the stairs to the left to the 2nd floor. Private booths are available with windows if you can't stand the smoke in the main room.

**PSB** (Gong'anju; ☎ 282 1542, 136-1897 7294; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4.30-7pm Mon-Fri) Groups will need to register here. Individuals without permits may be fined Y350 and then



given a travel permit for the region for Y50, or they may be sent back to wherever they came from. Check with other travellers on the latest situation. The new office is way out in the southeastern suburbs; take a taxi and ask for the *xin gong'anju* – 新公安局. The office is on the ground floor, at the end of the corridor to the left. Note that at the time of writing the PSB were stopping travellers on the street asking to see passports and permits. There were also obvious undercover officers pretending to be fellow travellers.

**Sunway Dry Cleaning** (Saiwai Ganxidian; per piece Y4-5) Will do laundry; ask for normal wash (*shuixi*; 水洗) not dry-cleaning (*ganxi*; 干洗).

## Sleeping & Eating

Your sleeping options are limited in Ali as many hotels are off-limits to foreigners.

**Telecom Hotel** (Ali Dianxin Binguan; ☎ 282 2998; d/tr Y150/130) This place has really dropped in quality (and fortunately in price) and while the rooms are still fine for a night's stay (they're clean but the furnishings are taking a beating), there's no running water, and you should expect discreet knocks on your door throughout the night from the local gals.

**Heng Yuan Guesthouse** (Heng Yuan Binguan; ☎ 282 8288; s/d/tr without bathroom Y180/185/188, d with bathroom

Y300, discounts of 30%) A popular place with Land Cruiser tours, with large clean rooms lacking any style. The bathrooms in the more expensive doubles are very large but the water drips from the showerheads. The hotel has a decent inexpensive restaurant (dishes Y5 to 30) on the ground floor with an extensive Chinese menu. The *niurou mian* (beef noodles; Y5) is very cheap, as is the plate of *shuijiao* (dumplings; Y12). There's also a more expensive but quite pleasant (in a generic kind of way) teahouse-sports bar (drinks Y15 to Y30) on the 2nd floor with a widescreen TV.

**Shi Quan He Guesthouse** (Shiquanhe Binguan; ☎ 282 4977; d with bathroom Y300, s/d without bathroom Y80/160, tr per bed Y30; discounts of 15%) This charmless two-star hotel offers bright, Western-style rooms with small bathrooms (24-hour hot water), and very spartan rooms without. Rooms here are often booked out, especially the triples.

Ali has numerous Chinese restaurants south and west of the main junction and, given the town's remote location, they are surprisingly good value for money. There are also a few Tibetan places around. Don't expect English menus.

**Uyghur Ashkhana** (noodles Y10) For something completely different head to this popular place that greets you at the entrance with the hanging carcass of a cow. A loaf of thick naan and 10 beef skewers is a cheap Y11. To find the place head north 100m from the main roundabout. Look for a man barbecuing outside a glass building. (The cow inside is another dead giveaway.)

### Shopping

Ali is a good place to stock up on supplies. The best selection is in the supermarkets by the main roundabout. For fruit head to the **market** (☎ 7am-10pm), a couple of hundred metres east.

### Getting There & Away

From Ali to Darchen, the only town in the vicinity of the Mt Kailash kora, it's a day's journey of around 330km.

A civilian airport is scheduled to open here in 2010.

### BUS

**Tibetan Antelope Travel and Transportation Co** (藏羚羊旅运有限公司; Zanglingyang Lüyun Youxian Gongsi; ☎ 282 3828; ttt010406@sina.com) runs a bus service between Lhasa and Ali. The office is in the far southeast of town, not far from the new PSB building.

The sleeper bus runs every two or three days nonstop along the northern route and takes 60 hours. The tickets are priced from Y651 to Y751. Booking tickets two or three days in advance is essential. For details of the Lhasa services, see p127.

The company also runs buses to the following: Yecheng (Y500, 50 hours) every two days, road conditions permitting; Rutok Xian (Y50) once a day; Zanda (Y200) every two or three days; Darchen/Purang (Y230/280) every two days.

From the government bus station at the south end of town buses also run to Lhasa, Darchen, Purang, Zanda, Rutok and Yecheng.

### Getting Around

Fleets of taxis are part of the mirage-in-the-desert shock of arriving in Ali. Within the city limits there's a standard taxi fare of Y5, but the centre of town is actually compact enough that you can walk anywhere.

## MT KAILASH གངས་རི་ནོལ་ཚེ

### 冈仁波齐峰

Going to western Tibet and not completing a kora around Mt Kailash would be like visiting a great capital and stopping short outside its most famous treasure. Mt Kailash dominates the region with the sheer awesomeness of its four-sided summit, and its centrality in the mythology of a billion people. And like the greatest works of art, a Taj Mahal or a *Hamlet*, it captures the imagination generation after generation.

The mountain has been a lodestone to pilgrims and adventurous travellers for centuries but until recently very few had set their eyes on it. With the means of transportation getting easier and easier, and road conditions improving, this is fast changing. Camp sites and guesthouses can now be crowded, and sadly littered with plastic bottles and instant-noodle packaging. There's no denying that this distracts from the sense of holiness of the place, at least for foreign visitors.

Any reasonably fit person should be able to complete the three-day walk, but come prepared with warm and waterproof clothing and equipment. For more information about the kora, including a map of the route, see p302.

### History

Throughout Asia, stories exist of a great mountain, the navel of the world, from which flow four great rivers that give life to the areas they pass through. The myth originates in the Hindu epics, which speak of Mt Meru – home of the gods – as a vast column 84,000 leagues high, its summit kissing the heavens and its flanks composed of gold, crystal, ruby and lapis lazuli. These Hindu accounts placed Mt Meru somewhere in the towering Himalaya but, with time, Meru increasingly came to be associated specifically with Mt Kailash. The confluence of the myth and the mountain is no coincidence. No-one has been to the summit to confirm whether the gods reside there (although some have come close), but Mt Kailash does indeed lie at the centre of an area that is the key to the drainage system of the Tibetan plateau. Four of the great rivers of the Indian subcontinent originate here: the Karnali, which feeds into the Ganges (south); Indus (north); Sutlej (west); and Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo, east).

### TO THE LAND OF SHIVERING SHIVA

'Are you cold?' I asked Mr Ranjan as we met in the hallway of the Saga Hotel. He was wearing a thick blue North Face jacket, ski gloves, ski pants, balaclava and a woven scarf wrapped up to his stubby chin. I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, sandals and jeans.

'I haven't been outside yet,' he answered. 'But the altitude is very high here I think. I can't take any chances falling ill. I am on my way to Kailash.'

He didn't need to tell me. On my walk around the holy mountain I'd seen hundreds of Indian pilgrims, and they had all been dressed literally exactly like him.

Hindus are a common sight around the Kailash area from June to September. For them, Mt Kailash is the abode of Shiva and Lake Manasarovar a mental creation of Brahma. An agreement between China and India allows a limited number of pilgrims to make the journey each year. The trip is so important that the quota is oversubscribed and places have to be determined by a lottery. I could see why Mr Ranjan was taking no chances with a stray breeze. If he missed this opportunity to do a *parikrama* (the Hindu equivalent of a kora) around Mt Kailash, there would not be another.

I had finished my own circuit around Mt Kailash not three days before and when he heard this Mr Ranjan suddenly became all flashing eyes and questions: Had I walked all the way around the sacred peak? What was it like? What did I see? I answered that yes I had circumambulated the peak, the route was an easy one to follow and I had seen the four sides of Mt Kailash: the northern peak, with its black granite face, was most beautiful.

These were not the answers he wanted, of course, but I didn't feel like admitting I had spent three days wanting to vomit from the effects of acute mountain sickness (AMS). *What was it like?* It was like being out of mind but not body. *What did I see?* I dreamt one night of Milarepa, riding a St Bernard, flying me down off the mountain on a beam of light.

'Are you going to take a horse around the mountain?' I asked to change the direction of the conversation. Most Indian pilgrims to Mt Kailash drive as far as they can up the Lha-chu Valley on the first day, and then switch to Tibetan horses, with herds of yaks and their handlers in tow with supplies.

But Mr Ranjan was clear that this was not the way to do things.

'I walk the holy ground with my own legs,' he said, not boasting, just matter-of-factly. 'Otherwise, why do I go?'

I agreed and at that our conversation ended. Mr Ranjan uttered a final 'God bless you', then walked to the end of the hallway, turned into the lobby, exited the front door and stepped into 25°C weather dressed like a snowman.

Mt Kailash, at 6714m, is not the mightiest of the mountains in the region, but with its hulking shape – like the handle of a millstone, according to Tibetans – and its year-round snowcapped peak, it stands apart from the pack. Its four sheer walls match the cardinal points of the compass, and its southern face is famously marked by a long vertical cleft punctuated halfway down by a horizontal line of rock strata. This scarring resembles a swastika – a Buddhist symbol of spiritual strength – and is a feature that has contributed to Mt Kailash's mythical status. The mountain is known in Tibetan as Kang Rinpoche, or 'Precious Jewel of Snow'.

Mt Kailash has long been an object of worship for four major religions. For Hindus, it is

the domain of Shiva, the Destroyer and Transformer. To the Buddhist faithful, Mt Kailash is the abode of Demchok (Sanskrit: Samvara), a wrathful manifestation of Sakyamuni or Sakya Thukpa, thought to be the equivalent of Hinduism's Shiva. The Jains of India also revere the mountain as the site at which the first of their saints was emancipated. And in the ancient Bön religion of Tibet, Mt Kailash was the sacred Yungdrung Gutseg (Nine-Stacked-Swastika Mountain) upon which the Bönpo founder Shenrab alighted from heaven.

In May 2001 Spanish climbers gained permission to climb the peak, only to abandon their attempt in the face of international protests. Reinhold Messner also gained permission to scale the peak in the 1980s, but

### PLANNING A LAND CRUISER TRIP TO MT KAILASH

Any pilgrimage worth its salt involves its fair share of trials and tribulations, but with careful planning it's possible to avoid many of the common pitfalls of arranging a trip to Mt Kailash.

Your first step should be to write up a detailed proposed itinerary for the trip, to give to both your agency and other prospective travellers. Mention all sights you wish to see so the agency will know which permits to apply for. Once you're on the road, it's usually too late.

If you've acclimatised in Lhasa, the slow rate of gain along the way shouldn't pose any serious problems. From Lhasa, most groups spend five to six days to get to Mt Kailash, often stopping en route at Shigatse and Sakya. After three or four days on the kora, a day is spent at Lake Manasarovar to rest up and enjoy the scenery. From the lake it's four days back to Lhasa, though you can do it in three.

If you plan to visit Thöling Monastery and Tsaparang, add at least three days to your proposal. An itinerary that takes in both the northern and southern routes will eat up around 21 days, though it will be hard to find other travellers to join you.

Costs usually come to about ¥1000 per day but can be more, or less, depending on the month. This is for your driver and guide, the Land Cruiser, most permits and fuel. It does not pay for your expenses, including meals, accommodation and entrance fees. Additional days cost ¥500 to ¥800, meaning it's often cheaper to book fewer days than you really plan to travel (there are of course limits to this).

abandoned his expedition in deference to the peak's sanctity when he got to the mountain.

### Darchen 塔钦

Mt Kailash is accessed via the small town of Darchen (Taquin; elevation 4560m), the starting point of the kora. It is a dirty, forgettable little village, littered with various compounds. Most travellers linger long enough to organise their kora and then get out. The smart ones arrange to sleep at Lake Manasarovar just over an hour's drive away. If you need medical attention, however, there's a Swiss-funded Tibetan clinic in Darchen to the northwest.

The PSB (公安局; Gong'anju) is in the middle of town in an unmarked building 100m north of Tibet Manasarovar Travels Guesthouse. Groups will need to get their travel permit stamped here on arrival. 'Tickets' for the Mt Kailash kora (¥50) are available here. Travellers also need to register with the military, and the office for this is on the northeast side of town inside the police compound.

### SUPPLIES

From June to September, nomad traders set up a row of tents in the south end of Darchen. Mostly they sell drinks, snacks and instant noodles at inflated prices.

For something better try to locate the *rou-dian* (butchery) in the centre of town and buy some fresh lamb. Then take it to a restaurant and ask the staff to boil it. In the cooler air of

Mt Kailash it will last two days. There's also a woman who bakes traditional flat bread inside the compound of the Tibet Manasarovar Travels Guesthouse (opposite).

### PORTERS & YAKS

Big groups often hire yaks to carry their supplies. These cost ¥50 a day plus another ¥80 for a guide. However, yaks will only travel except in pairs or herds, so you have to hire at least two. Most hikers get by with the services of local porters for ¥80 a day.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

There are many stray dogs in Darchen and sometimes on the kora path. Most are friendly, but a Tibetan woman was killed by a pack a couple years ago and now many Tibetans won't hike alone.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

If you've got extra time at Darchen, or you want to spend a day or two acclimatising before setting out on the Mt Kailash kora, you can find some interesting short walks in the area. The ridge to the north of the village obscures Mt Kailash, but an hour's walk to the top offers fine views of the mountain. To the south you will be able to see the twin lakes of Manasarovar and Rakshas Tal.

A dirt road just to the east of Darchen leads up to the **Gyangdrak Monastery**, largest of the Mt Kailash monasteries. Like other

monasteries, it was rebuilt (in 1986) after the depredations of the Cultural Revolution. It is possible to drive here, but it's a fine 2½-hour walk. At the crossroads near a stream, head west if you want to visit **Selung Monastery**, a two-hour walk.

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The festival of **Saga Dawa** marks the enlightenment of Sakyamuni, and occurs on the full-moon day of the fourth Tibetan month (in May or June). Saga Dawa is a particularly popular time to visit Mt Kailash, though you will have to share the Tarboche camping area with several hundred other foreigners, most of them on group tours. You can also expect that all the hotels in Darchen will be booked solid throughout this time. The rudeness of some tourists and their intrusive camera lenses can spoil the occasion. Other times offer a less colourful but more personally spiritual time to make your kora.

The highlight of the festival is the raising of the Tarboche prayer pole on the morning of Saga Dawa. Monks circumambulate the pole in elaborate costumes, with horns blowing. There are plenty of stalls, a fair-like atmosphere and a nonstop tidal flow of pilgrims around the pole. After the pole is raised at about 1pm everyone sets off on their kora.

How the flagpole stands when it is erected is of enormous importance. If the pole stands absolutely vertical all is well, but if it leans towards Mt Kailash things are not good; if it leans away towards Lhasa, things are even worse.

Particularly large numbers of pilgrims assemble at Mt Kailash every 12 years, in the Tibetan Year of the Horse. The next gathering is in 2014.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Pectopath** (☎ 139-8907 0383; dm ¥30) The 10-bed dorm is clean and cosy, if slightly cramped. The attached teahouse is a great place to plan your kora and chat with other travellers. The owner, Diki, speaks some English. The guesthouse is west of the red compound of the Tibet Manasarovar Travels Guesthouse, or north of the nomads' tents across an empty lot.

**The House of Support** (☎ 139-8997 5186; dm ¥40) Another friendly dorm with a cosy restaurant. It's beside Pectopath.

**Tibet Manasarovar Travels Guesthouse** (tr per bed ¥60) Rooms are basic and clean and there's

usually electricity after 9.30pm. The guesthouse is inside a large red compound in the southeast of town.

The **restaurant** (☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; dishes ¥10-30) attached to the Tibet Manasarovar Travels Guesthouse serves decent Chinese food and you can get a cheap breakfast of *baozi* (meat-filled buns) and *xifan* (rice porridge) before heading off for the Mt Kailash trek.

**Chinese restaurant** (dishes ¥15-25) This restaurant is just south of the Tibet Manasarovar Travels Guesthouse below the East-West Hotel.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Darchen is 6km north of the main Ali-Payang road, about 12km from Barkha, 107km north of Purang, 330km southeast of Ali and a lonely 1200km from Lhasa.

Land Cruiser trips are the most popular way to get to Darchen. During the peak season (July, August and September) you'll probably find three or four trips advertised on Lhasa's noticeboards at any one time. For tips on planning Land Cruiser trips, see opposite and p345.

There are buses every two days between Ali and Darchen (Y230), but none between Darchen and Saga. You may be able to get a ride back in a Land Cruiser. Ask around.

### LAKE MANASAROVAR མཚོ་མི་མག་ elev 4560m

Lake Manasarovar, or Mapham Yum-tso (Victorious Lake) in Tibetan, is the most venerated of Tibet's many lakes and one of its most beautiful. With its sapphire-blue waters, sandy shoreline and snowcapped-mountain backdrop, Manasarovar is immediately appealing, and a welcome change of venue from the often-forbidding terrain of Mt Kailash.

According to ancient Hindu and Buddhist cosmology the four great rivers of the Indian subcontinent, the Indus, Ganges, Sutlej and Brahmaputra, arise from Manasarovar, though in reality only the Sutlej originates at the lake.

Manasarovar has been circumambulated by Indian pilgrims since at least 1700 years ago when it was extolled in the sacred Sanskrit literature the *Puranas*. A Hindu interpretation has it that *manas* refers to the mind of the supreme god Brahma, the lake being its outward manifestation. Accordingly, Indian pilgrims bathe in the waters of the lake and circumambulate its shoreline. Tibetans, who are not so keen on



## KAILASH & MANASAROVAR BOOKS

There are numerous books about Mt Kailash, Lake Manasarovar and the surrounding area to whet your appetite for adventure. *The Sacred Mountain* by John Snelling reports on early Western explorers, including those who turned up in the early 1980s when the door to China and Tibet first creaked narrowly open. The Kailash chapters in German-born Lama Anagarika Govinda's *The Way of the White Clouds* (1966) includes a classic account of the pilgrimage during a trip to Tibet in 1948. There's also Sven Hedin's three-volume *Transhimalaya: Discoveries & Adventures in Tibet* (1909-13).

Books such as *Kailas: On Pilgrimage to the Sacred Mountain of Tibet* by Kerry Moran (with photos by Russell Johnson) and *Walking to the Mountain* by Wendy Teasdill may make you jealous that you didn't get to the mountain just a decade or two earlier. Both highlight the much greater difficulties (and, in their eyes, rewards) that one would experience on a pilgrimage as recently as the late 1980s.

The more scientifically inclined can turn to Swami Pranavananda's *Kailas Manasarovar*, an account of the author's findings over numerous stays in the region between 1928 and 1947. The book was reprinted in India in 1983 and you should be able to find a copy in a Kathmandu bookstore or online.

Charles Allen's *A Mountain in Tibet* investigates the hunt for the sources of the region's four great rivers and is perhaps the best introduction to the region.

the bathing bit, generally just walk around it. Legend has it that the mother of the Buddha, Queen Maya, was bathed at Manasarovar by the gods before giving birth to her son.

The Hindi poet Kalidasa once wrote that the waters of Lake Manasarovar are 'like pearls' and that to drink them erases the 'sins of a hundred lifetimes'. Be warned, however, that the sins of a hundred lifetimes tend to make their hasty exit by way of the nearest toilet. Make sure that you thoroughly purify Manasarovar's sacred waters before you drink them, however sacrilegious that may sound.

Manasarovar is linked to the smaller Rakshas Tal (known to Tibetans as Lhanag-tso) by the channel called Ganga-chu. The two bodies of water are associated with the conjoined sun and moon, a powerful symbol of Tantric Buddhism. On rare occasions, water flows through this channel from Lake Manasarovar to Rakshas Tal; this is said to augur well for the Tibetan people and most are pleased that water has indeed been flowing between the two lakes in recent years.

Most groups and individuals base themselves at the picturesque Chiu village, site of the Chiu Monastery, on the northwestern shore of the lake. For an overview of the Lake Manasarovar kora, see p311.

## Sights & Activities

### CHIU MONASTERY

Thirty-three kilometres south of Darchen, **Chiu Monastery** (admission free) enjoys a fabulous

location atop a craggy hill overlooking Lake Manasarovar. The chapel here contains images of Sakyamuni and Guru Rinpoche, but most people love the lake views, the winding stone staircases and old wooden doorframes of this fairy-tale-like structure. On a clear day you can see Mt Kailash and 7728m Gurla Mandata, the huge peak on the southern horizon.

### HOT SPRINGS

There are *wenquan* (hot springs) behind the monastery piped into a glass-roofed **bath-house** (admission ¥20) close to the village. The water is channelled from the hot springs into individual cubicles via open ducts. The odourless water is silky to the touch, much like the waters the Japanese describe as a 'beauty bath'.

Someday, a proper spa will be built here (and the view it will have of the lake!) but until then you must be satisfied with a good wash with great water in rather dodgy-looking tubs (bring a towel to sit on and wear sandals).

### TREKKING

For a trek, walk along the ridge to the southeast of the monastery or make a half-day trek along part of the lake kora to the ruined chörten and prayer wall at Cherkip, returning via the shoreline cave retreats (see p311). There are fine views and lots of nesting birds along this route, but bring repellent against the annoying shoreline flies.

## Sleeping & Eating

You need to register with the PSB in Darchen before spending the night. It's not necessary to go in person if you are on a Land Cruiser tour; the guide and driver can handle this.

There are a couple of simple, friendly guesthouses such as **White Horse Hostel** (d¥40) in Chiu village, on the bluff near the bathhouse. Our favourite, though, is an unmarked **guesthouse** (dm¥40) down on the sandy shore of the lake to the left of the Indian pilgrim Manasarovar Guesthouse compound. The guesthouse is run by a very sweet nomad family, and is striking for its uncluttered space and rustic but cheery atmosphere. Sure it has pit toilets (pretty clean and with a fabulous view of the monastery) and mud-brick walls with old blue and white paint, but it's exactly the kind of unpretentious place we'd want for a simple lakeside retreat. There's a cosy teahouse inside where you can get simple noodle and rice dishes, and drinks.

Most other guesthouses can also provide simple meals.

## Getting There & Around

You will have made it this far either by hitching or by hiring a Land Cruiser. There is no public transport and very little truck activity between Darchen and the monastery.

## TIRTHAPURI HOT SPRINGS & KORA

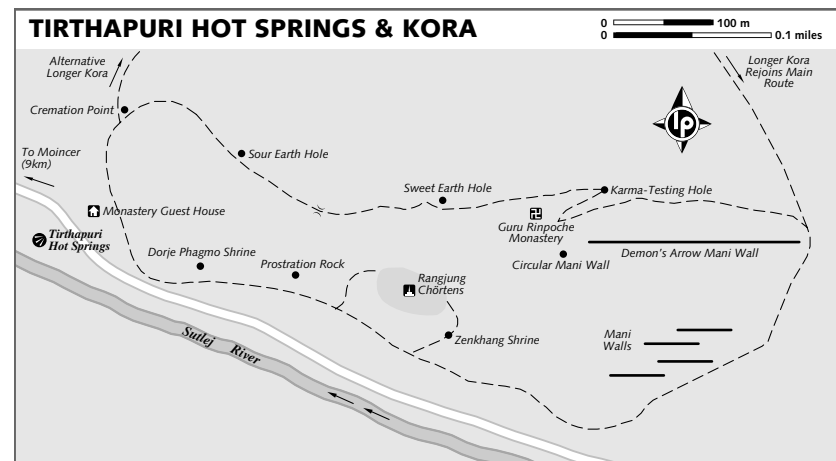
འཇུག་ལྷོ་ཆོག་

On the banks of the Sutlej, only a few hours' drive northwest of Darchen, the Tirthapuri

hot springs enjoy close associations with Guru Rinpoche. Pilgrims traditionally bathe here after completing their circuit of Mt Kailash, but the springs are growing weaker year by year and are now oddly diverted into a barren field. Tirthapuri has a one-hour kora route. It's somewhat interesting to follow, though most people can safely give this place a miss if time is tight.

Starting from the hot springs the trail climbs to a cremation point, an oval of rocks covered in old clothes and rags. From this point, an alternative longer kora climbs to the very top of the ridge, rejoining the trail near the long mani wall. The regular kora trail continues past a hole where pilgrims dig 'sour' earth for medicinal purposes. Further along, there's a 'sweet' earth hole. The trail reaches a miniature version of Mt Kailash's Drölma-la, marked with mani stones and a large collection of yak horns and skulls. Below, prayer flags hang right across the gorge and a series of rocky pinnacles are revered as *rangjung*, or self-manifesting or self-arising chörtens.

The trail passes the **Guru Rinpoche (Tirthapuri) Monastery**. Where the trail doubles back to enter the monastery there is a rock with a hole in it right below the solitary prayer wheel, which is a handy karma-testing station. Reach into the hole and pull out two stones. If both are white your karma is excellent; one white and one black means that it's OK; and if both are black you have serious karma problems. Perhaps another Mt Kailash kora would help?



The monastery *dukhang* (assembly hall) has stone footprints of Guru Rinpoche and his consort Yeshe Tsogyel to the right of the altar. Outside the monastery a large circle of mani stones marks the spot where the gods danced in joy when Guru Rinpoche was enshrined at Tirthapuri. Beside it is a mani wall (a wall made of mani stones) over 200m long, the end result of a demon firing an arrow at the guru. (The guru stopped the arrow's flight and transformed it into this wall.) Finally, the kora drops back down to the river, passing a large collection of mani walls of various sizes on the way.

There are limited facilities at the hot springs, so you should be self-sufficient. The **monastery guesthouse** (d Y30) has a couple of rooms and you can camp further downstream (purify all river water here).

There is no public transport to Tirthapuri, which is 9km south of Moincer (Mensi), which in turn is 65km west of Darchen along the main road to Ali. There's a checkpoint at Moincer, which sometimes charges a fee to proceed to Tirthapuri. Moincer is the dormitory town for the coal mines 20km to the northeast and has a decent selection of shops, restaurants and the basic Meiman Zhaodaisuo guesthouse.

A further 14km west from Tirthapuri is the Bönpö-sect **Gurugyam Monastery**. The nearby upper Suttlej region, a further 10km away, is peppered with abandoned cave settlements and forms the **Kyunglung (Garuda) Valley**, the location of the early kingdom of Shangshung (see p216). If you have a particular interest in this archaeological site and other remote monasteries in the area, bring a copy of Victor Chan's *Tibet Handbook* and be prepared for some serious exploration.

## GUGE KINGDOM གུ་ཁོ་རྒྱལ་རབ་

The barren, eroded landscape around modern Zanda is unlike any you will have encountered so far, and seems an improbable location for a major civilisation to have developed. Yet the ancient Guge kingdom thrived here as an important stop on the trade route between India and Tibet. Today, the remains of Thöling Monastery, once a major centre of Tibetan Buddhism, and neighbouring Tsaparang, a 9th-century fortress etched into the very stone of a towering ridge, are two of western Tibet's highlights, though few Western tourists bother to make it this far.

Tsaparang is 20km west of Zanda, while Thöling Monastery is now merely an adjunct to the town. To visit both you need to budget at least three days (two merely for getting there and back from Darchen).

## History

By the 10th century the Guge kingdom was a wealthy centre supporting several thousand people, and the great Guge king Yeshe Ö began to nurture an exchange of ideas between India and Tibet. The young monk Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055) was sent to study in India and returned 17 years later to become one of Tibet's greatest translators of Sanskrit texts and a key figure in the revival of Buddhism across the Tibetan plateau. Rinchen Zangpo built 108 monasteries throughout western Tibet, Ladakh and Spiti, including the great monasteries of Tabo (Spiti) and Alchi (Ladakh). Two of the most important were those at Tsaparang and Thöling. He also invited Kashmiri artists to paint the unique murals still visible today. It was partly at Rinchen Zangpo's behest that Atisha, a renowned Bengali scholar and another pivotal character in the revival of Tibetan Buddhism, was invited to Tibet. Atisha spent three years in Thöling before travelling on to central Tibet.

The kingdom fell into ruin just 50 years after the first Europeans arrived in Tibet in 1624, after a siege by the Ladakhi army (see p216).

## Permits

You need a travel permit for the region and it will be checked on the road into Zanda. If you hire a Land Cruiser, the permit will be arranged in Lhasa. Otherwise, try to get one from the PSB in Ali.

## Getting There & Away

From Ali there are buses (Y200) every two or three days to Zanda. There are two main roads to Zanda from the Darchen–Ali road. Both are rough and go over some very high passes. In a Land Cruiser it's possible to make it to Zanda from either Ali or Mt Kailash in a single day, providing you get an early start. There is no public transportation for the 21km to Tsaparang.

## TO/FROM DARCHEN

It's about an eight-drive from Darchen to Zanda, though the distance is only about

243km. It's 65km from Darchen to Moincer, which is the turn-off to Tirthapuri, and then another 56km from there to the army base at Ba'er/Songsha, where there's a basic Tibetan restaurant. By the end of 2007 the road from Songsha to Moincer should be paved, though this won't cut off much time as the 122km from Songsha to Zanda is the hard part and takes six to seven hours of zigzagging down and up fantastically eroded gorges and gullies. The road then enters the wider Suttlej Valley and, after crossing a bridge, finally reaches Zanda.

## TO/FROM ALI

Coming from Ali, the road is equally tough going, but highly scenic, and will also take around eight hours of driving though it's only around 200km. The first hour is on paved road that runs above and then through the super-flat Gar Valley. About 64km from Ali the route crosses a bridge to the western side of the valley. A further 10km and the road branches right off the main road. Now more like a trail, or wagon path, the road climbs huge switchbacks up to the 5300m Lalung-la (Laling Gutsa), then the Laochi-la before descending and climbing again to a third pass. About 65km from the turn-off there's a permit checkpoint (this used to be just outside Zanda).

From a plateau there are stunning 180-degree views of the Indian Himalaya, stretching from Nanda Devi in the south to the Ladakh range in the north. The route then drops down into deep, eroded wadi-like gullies before finally reaching the Suttlej Valley. Around 80km from the turn-off look for a village surrounded by eroded cliffs with hundreds of tombs carved into the soft rock.

The Suttlej Valley is a wonderland of eroded cliffaces that have taken on the most astonishing shapes. You'll swear over and over again that you're seeing the ancient ruins of a monastery, or a castle, or the high pillars that once held the roof of a mighty palace.

After crossing the valley and then a long bridge you wind up in the foothills to Zanda, 130km from the turn-off.

## Zanda རྩམ་པོ་ 札达

☎ 08927 / elev 3650m

Zanda (Zhada), or Tsamda, is the bland, one-street town that has been built up the slopes from the Thöling Monastery. Be careful wan-

dering around and taking pictures as the army maintains a strong and visible presence, with bases at both ends of town.

The **Cultural Affairs Bureau** (☎ 062 2110), just south of the entrance to the Hubei Hotel courtyard (Shuili Biquan), may issue permits for the caves at Dungkar (p237) – or get one at the PSB in Ali to be safe – and help you find a local who knows the way.

There are good hot showers (*yushi*) on the 2nd floor at **The Masses Bath** (Dazhong Yushi; Y20; ☎ 9am-1am) in the south end of town near the Chongqing Hotel. On the 1st floor you can get your **laundry** (per piece Y4-5) done. There's an **internet bar** (wanga; per hr Y8) in the shop just beside the laundry.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Telecom Hotel** (q with/without TV Y60/50) This place has big rooms with fairly comfy beds and a desk. The pit toilets at the back of the compound are reasonably clean.

**The Letter Reaches the Guesthouse** (☎ 139-8997 1972; s/d Y60/80) Friendly place with small rooms but decent beds. There's even a real sink and mirror in the common area for washing up. And yes, the crazy English name is what you will read on the sign over the door.

**Chongqing Hotel** (Chongqing Biquan; ☎ 136-2897 6950; d Y100) Rooms are in small cabins with TV and cheery flowery bedsheets. The cabins are set in a large quiet compound, which is right beside laundry, internet and hot showers.

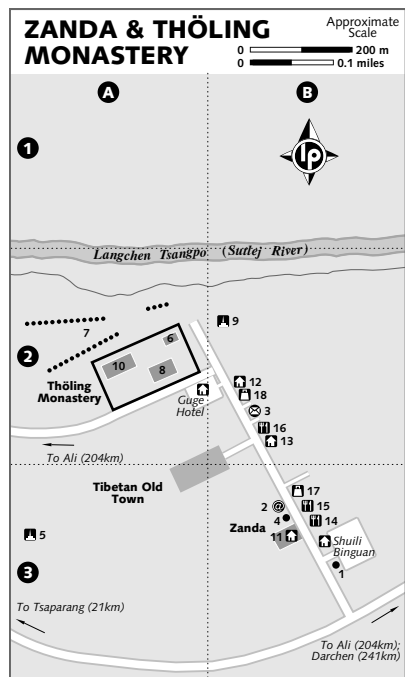
The main street has at least half-a-dozen places to eat, mostly generic Chinese restaurants, though also a couple of Tibetan options, and one Muslim eatery. **Hong Man Tian Restaurant** (dishes 10-25) was newly painted and spruced up at the time of writing, though more importantly it was serving good Chinese food. There's an English sign out the front. Menu in English.

## SHOPPING

There's a small grocery store up from China Telecom and an underground market just past that sells fresh fruit.

## Thöling Monastery མཚོ་ལྷོང་

Founded by Rinchen Zangpo in the 10th century, **Thöling Monastery** (admission Y50) was once Ngari's most important monastic complex. It was still functioning in 1966 when the Red Guards shut down operations. Three main buildings survive within the monastery walls.



Even if you have little interest in Buddhist statues and murals, it is still fascinating to walk around the complex, with its cramped hallways and low doorframes, and open views across the Sutlej Valley from the courtyard.

#### MAIN ASSEMBLY HALL (DUKHANG)

The dimly lit chamber of the *dukhang* has especially fine wall murals, showing strong Kashmiri and Nepali influences; bring a powerful torch (flashlight) to enjoy the rich detail. The Kashmiri influences are noticeable in the shading on the hands and feet, the detail of the jewellery and dress, the tight stomach lines and non-Tibetan images of palm trees and *dhotis* (Indian-style loincloths). Scholarly opinion varies on whether the murals date from the 13th and 14th, or 15th and 16th centuries.

The main statues here are of the past, present and future buddhas (all of recent origin), and there's also a footprint of Rinchen Zangpo. The lower walls of the inner area have murals depicting the life of the Buddha and the founders of the monastery. Murals of

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the protectors Dorje Jigje (Yamantaka) and Namse (Vairocana) decorate the main entry.

#### WHITE CHAPEL (LHAKHANG KARPO)

The entry to this side chapel is marked by a finely carved deodar (cedar) doorframe that originated in India. Inside are detailed 15th- and 16th-century murals. The left wall in particular has been hit by water damage and a Swiss team is currently working on a restoration plan. The central statue is an old Sakyamuni Buddha; only his hands are of recent origin. Lining the sides are the eight medicine buddhas in various states of destruction. Male deities line the left wall; female bodhisattvas on the right. The far-right-corner murals depict sky burials.

#### YESHE Ö'S MANDALA CHAPEL (NAMNANG LHAKHANG)

Once the main building in the Thöling complex, Yeshe Ö's Mandala Chapel was also known as the Golden Chapel. Before its destruction in the Cultural Revolution, the square main hall had four secondary chapels at the centre of each wall. Figures of the deities were arrayed around the wall facing towards a central image atop a lotus pedestal, in the form of a huge three-dimensional Tibetan mandala (a circular representation of the three-dimensional world of a meditational deity). All the images have been destroyed but the four chörtens remain.

You enter the Mandala Chapel through the Gyatsa Lhakhang and finish off a visit by walking around an interior kora of empty chapels.

#### OUTSIDE THE MONASTERY WALLS

A few steps east of the monastery compound is the recently restored **Serkhang chörtens**. A similar **chörtens** stands in total isolation just to the west of the town. To the north, between the monastic compound and the cliff-face that falls away to the Sutlej River below are two long lines of miniature **chörtens**. The area is superbly photogenic at dusk.

#### Tsaparang ལྷ་མོ་ལྷོ་མོ་

The citadel of **Tsaparang** (admission Y106, plus Y10 for Chinese-speaking guide) has been gracefully falling into ruin ever since its slide from prominence in the 17th century. The ruins, which seem to grow organically out of the hills in successive levels, are crowned by a red Summer Palace atop a yellow cockscomb-like outcrop. It's a photogenically surreal landscape.

The site's early Tantric-inspired murals are of particular interest to experts on early Buddhist art. (See p232 for a history of the site.) For everyone else there are the views over the valley and the twisting paths and secret tunnels that worm their way through the fortress.

The ruins climb up the ridge through three distinct areas. At the bottom of the hill is the monastic area with the four best-preserved buildings and their murals. From there the trail to the top climbs through former residential quarters, where monks' cells were tunnelled into the clay hillside. Finally, the route burrows straight into the hillside through a tunnel before emerging in the ruins of the palace citadel at the very top of the hill. The vast, rough-hewn landscape of the Sutlej Valley that spreads out before you is both terrifying and sublime: you can't take your eyes off its beauty, but you know you wouldn't last a day alone in it.

Tsaparang is 21km west of Zanda, but unless you get lucky hitching a ride, the only way to get there is with a rented vehicle. Walking is risky as the dirt roads change every year because of the monsoons.

Early evening (particularly around 8pm) offers the best light. No photography is allowed inside the chapels. Bring a strong torch, lunch and water, and expect to spend at least half a day exploring the ruins; longer if possible.

#### SIGHTS

##### Chapel of the Prefect

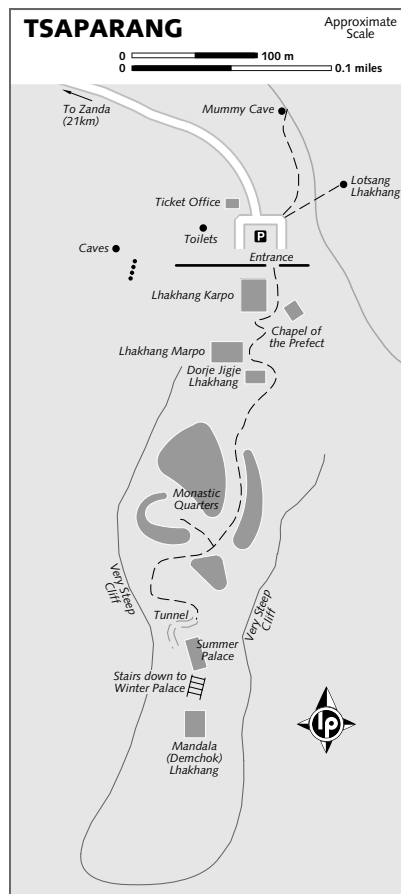
Just inside the entrance to the complex is a small building that was a private **shrine** for Tsaparang's prefect or regent. The caretaker has named it the 'Dröлма Lhakhang' after his own sculpture of Dröлма (Tara) displayed here. The wall murals date from the 16th century, by which time the style evinced in other Tsaparang murals was in decline. The exuberant murals include fantastic multicoloured images of elephants, Garuda-like bird-people, hermits and snow lions, among others. The main mural on the back wall shows Sakyamuni flanked by Tsongkhapa and Atisha (Jowe-je). Small figures of the Buddha's disciples stand beside his throne.

##### Lhakhang Karpo

Slightly above the entrance, the large **Lhakhang Karpo**, or White Chapel, holds the oldest paintings at Tsaparang and is probably the most important chapel in Ngari. The murals of the chapel date back to the 15th or 16th century but their influences extend back to 10th-century Kashmiri Buddhist art, and for this reason are of particular interest to scholars of Buddhist art. Apart from Tsaparang, very little material evidence of early Kashmiri art remains (noticeably at Alchi Monastery in Ladakh). Lay people can spot the Kashmiri influence in the Hindu-inspired deities, with their slender torsos and thin waists, the detailed brocade of the figures' robes and the general richness of the colours.

The ceiling is beautifully painted, as are the many thin columns that support it. The carvings and paintings of Sakyamuni that top each column are particularly noteworthy. At one time, 22 life-size statues lined the walls; today only 10 remain and these are severely damaged. Even so, this chapel has fared better than most temples attacked during the Cultural Revolution. Originally each statue would have been framed by a *torana* (halo-like garland). Only partial sections of these remain (look in the far left corner and back recess), but you can still see the holes where these structures were once anchored to the walls.

The doors are flanked by two 5m-high guardian figures, red Tamdrin (Hayagriva) and blue Chana Dorje (Vajrapani). Again, both are damaged but even armless they hint at the lost marvels of the chapel.



The huge figure of Sakyamuni that once stood in the recess, the Jowo Khang, at the back of the hall has been replaced by one of the caretaker's statues. On the side walls at the back were once row after row of smaller deities, each perched on its own small shelf.

### Lhakhang Marpo

Above the Lhakhang Karmo is the equally large **Lhakhang Marpo**, or Red Chapel, which was built around 1470, perhaps 30 years earlier than the Lhakhang Karmo. The murals in this chapel were repainted around 1630, shortly before the fall of the Guge kingdom, so they are actually younger than those in the Lhakhang Karmo.

The beautiful original chapel door, with its concentric frames and carvings of bodhisattvas, mantras and elephants, has survived and is worth close inspection. Inside, many thin columns support the chapel roof, similar to those of the neighbouring Lhakhang Karmo. By the main door are images of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), Green Tara and an eight-armed White Tara, with Drölma and Jam-pelyang (Manjushri) to the right.

The statues that once stood in the chapel were placed towards the centre of the hall, not around the edges, and although only the bases and damaged fragments remain, the crowded feel to the space, the intense colours and the eerie silence combine to create a powerful atmosphere. You almost expect Indiana Jones to come striding out from behind the wreckage.

Although the wall murals have been damaged by vandalism and water leakage, they remain so remarkably brilliant it's easy to forget that they are actually over 350 years old. On the left wall are the famous murals chronicling the construction of the temple: animals haul the building's huge timber beams into place as musicians with long trumpets celebrate the completion of the temple. Officials stand in attendance (a Kashmiri delegation wears turbans), followed by members of the royal family, the king and queen (under a parasol), Öpagme (Amitabha) and, finally, a line of chanting monks. The royal gifts frame the bottom of the scene.

Murals on the far right (northern) wall depict the life of the Buddha, showing him tempted by demons and protected by a naga serpent, among others. On the eastern wall are eight stylised chörten, representing the eight events in Buddha's life.

The main deities in the chapel have very ornate *toranas*, decorated with birds and crocodiles, and topped with flying *apsaras* (angels). At the back of the hall, statues of the 35 confessional buddhas once sat on individual shelves; a handful of them still have bodies but all the heads have gone.

### Dorje Jigje (Jikji) Lhakhang

The murals in the smaller chapel a few steps above the Lhakhang Marpo are also painted red and gold, and are almost solely devoted to wrathful deities such as Demchok (Chakrasamvara), Hevajra and the buffalo-headed

Dorje Jigje (Yamantaka), to whom the chapel is dedicated. On the left as you look back at the door is Namtöse (Vaishravana), the God of Wealth, who is depicted riding a snow lion and surrounded by square bands of Tibetan warriors.

Like the Chapel of the Prefect, the paintings here are of later origin, central Tibetan in style (rather than Kashmiri-influenced) and of lower quality; the golden years had passed by this point. All the statues that once stood here were destroyed.

### Summer Palace

From the four chapels at the base of the hill, the path to the top climbs up through the monastic quarters and then ascends to the palace complex atop the hill via a tunnel. The **Summer Palace**, at the northern end of the hilltop, is empty, with a balcony offering wonderful views. The Sutlej Valley is just to the north. Across the smaller valley to the northeast is the ruined Lotsang Lhakhang.

The most interesting of the palace buildings is the small but well-preserved Mandala (Demchok) Lhakhang, the red-painted building in the centre of the hill-top ridge. The centrepiece of this small chapel was a wonderful three-dimensional mandala with Tantric murals, only the base of which survived the desecrations of the Cultural Revolution. It is currently being restored and is closed to visitors.

### Winter Palace

Accessed by a steep and treacherous eroded staircase (now with a rough railing in place), the **Winter Palace** is an amazing ants' nest of rooms tunnelled into the clay below the Summer Palace. The rooms were built 12m underground in order to conserve warmth, and the eastern rooms have windows that open out onto the cliff-face. There are seven dusty chambers, all empty, linked by a cramped corridor. Branching off from the stairs you will see a dim passage that provided vital access to water during sieges and served as an emergency escape route for the royal family.

The easily missed stairs to the Winter Palace lead down from between the Summer Palace and the Mandala (Demchok) Lhakhang. Don't go down if you're prone to vertigo or claustrophobia.

### Other Sights

North of the main entrance to Tsaparang a trail follows a green river valley down about 700m to a **cave** on the left that holds the mummified remains of several bodies. On the way back, visit the chörten and ruined chapel of the **Lotsang Lhakhang**. Only the feet of the main statue remain. Also worth a quick visit are the **caves** and **chörten** to the west of the main site, near the public toilet behind the caretaker's compound.

### DUNGKAR & PIYANG ཏུངཀར་ཕིལམ་གྲོང་ཁའུ་

Caves with extensive wall paintings were discovered at remote Dungkar approximately 40km northeast of Zanda, during the early 1990s. At around 1100 years old, the cave paintings are possibly the oldest in Ngari and have much in common stylistically with the Silk Road cave murals of Dunhuang in China (particularly in their almost cartoon style, and the flying *apsaras*, painted on a blue background). There are three main caves, of which the best preserved is the mandala cave. You need to have an interest in early Tibetan and Silk Road art for the trip to be worthwhile. Lovely Dungkar village also has a ruined **monastery** above the town.

The PSB in Ali (p224) will usually give you a permit (Y50) to the caves, but if it doesn't, try the Cultural Affairs Bureau in Zanda (p233). It may give you a letter of introduction to the caretaker. Remember, though, that if he's not at home when you arrive, you won't get in as no-one else has the key.

Also note that you may not get there at all as most Land Cruiser drivers do not know the area and the dirt roads are unsigned and change every year after the monsoons. Your best bet is to bring a local with you, but this probably means bringing a local back with you to Zanda. Realistically plan on at least a full day to visit the caves.

A couple of kilometres north, further up the valley, the village of Piyang is worth the small detour. It lies at the foot of a large ridge honeycombed with thousands of caves and topped with ruined monastery buildings and walls.

### RUTOK XIAN རུཏོག་ཁའུ་རྫོང་

The new Chinese town of Rutok Xian (Ritu Xian), 132km from Ali, is a modern army post, but there are a couple of great sights nearby that warrant the trip. The road between Rutok

and Ali was being upgraded at the time of writing, so the journey there in the future should be fairly quick.

About 8km north of Rutok Xian, the road hits the east end of lovely turquoise **Pangong-tso** (4241m). The long lake extends 110km into Ladakh in India.

The old Tibetan village of Rutok lies about 10km off the main road from a turn-off about 5km south of Rutok Xian. The drive passes the pretty **chörtens** of Bankor village en route. Lovely white-painted traditional Rutok huddles at the base of a splinter of rock, atop which is **Rutok Monastery**, flanked at both ends of the hill by the crumbling, but still impressive, ruins of **Rutok Dzong**. From here, you can see the reservoir below and Pangong-tso in the distance. The surrounding villages are largely deserted in summer, as herders have moved to higher pastures.

The intensely atmospheric main chapel of the monastery has a large statue of Jampa (Maitreya) and a bronze Garuda to the left. Clearly, at one time the whole eastern face of the hill was covered in monastic buildings. The monastery was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and rebuilt in 1983-84; it now has just six monks.

## Sights

### ANCIENT PETROGLYPHS

In 1985 prehistoric rock carvings, or petroglyphs, were found at several sites in Rutok County. This was the first time such finds had been made in Tibet, although similar finds have since been made at numerous other sites.

The extensive collection of rock carvings at **Rumudong** is right beside the road, about 36km south of the old Rutok turn-off, or about 96km north of Ali. There are kilometre markers every 5km along this road. Travelling north from Ali, start looking on the east side of the road at kilometre marker 970 (though the kilometre markers may change with the upgraded road); the petroglyphs would be at around 967. There are two distinct groups on the rockface right beside the road, just before it crosses a bridge to travel along a causeway over the marshy valley floor of the Maga Zangbu-chu.

The first, and more extensive, group also features a number of more recent Buddhist carvings, some of them carved right over their ancient predecessors. The most impressive of the rock carvings features four extravagantly

antlered deer racing across the rock and looking back at three leopards in hot pursuit. Also depicted are eagles, yaks, camels, goats, tigers, wild boars and human figures.

Less visited are the **Lurulankar** paintings, about 12km southwest of Rutok. The relatively primitive carvings are right beside the road, up to a height of 4m above the ground, and show a variety of pre-Buddhist symbols and animals, including dogs, yaks, eagles, deer and goats. Human figures are shown standing in isolation or riding on horses. There are a number of hunting scenes showing dogs chasing deer and hunters shooting at them with bows and arrows.

Most people visit Rutok Xian as a day trip from Ali, though there are a couple hotels in town and many restaurants. There's no accommodation or any other facilities at old Rutok.

## Getting There & Away

From Ali there are daily buses (Y50) to Rutok Xian, but there's no public transport to old Rutok and very little traffic on the road.

## WESTERN NEPAL TO MT KAILASH

See Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* for details of the trek from Humla, a restricted region in the far west of Nepal, to Mt Kailash. This route is open only to tour groups that trek in from Humla and you will need a specially endorsed Chinese visa.

From the Nepali border at Sher, the road makes a long descent to a stream and then follows the Humla Karnali to the village of Khojarnath, 10km north.

## Khojarnath ཁོཤ་རྒྱལ་གྱི་རྒྱུ་རྩེ་

For those travelling north from Nepal, Khojarnath, 21km south of Purang, is the first large village over the border in Tibet. It boasts the wonderful **Korjak Monastery** (admission Y30), an important monastery of the Sakya order. The blood-red compound, which dates back to 996, is sited in a narrow valley hemmed in by hulking dark-green mountains dotted with traditional villages. Korjak escaped the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the damage sustained has been repaired with financial assistance from German and Italian sponsors.

The atmospheric main hall is entered via an ancient wooden door with particularly fine

carvings. The hall itself is presided over by a figure of Jampa (Maitreya). To the far left is a small chamber with paintings from the earliest days of the monastery. Hanging from the ceiling to the right of the entrance are the stuffed carcasses of a yak, an Indian tiger, a snow leopard and a wolf.

The eight-pillared Rinchen Zangpo Lhakhang adjoining the main hall is dominated by the trinity of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), Jampelyang (Manjushri) and Chana Dorje (Vajrapani). To the right of these statues is a *rangjung* (self-manifesting or self-arising) speaking Tara. The revered 2ft-high statue once warned the monastery's abbot how to prevent flooding of the local area. During the Cultural Revolution the statue was buried for safekeeping.

When you finish inside do a final kora around the compound. Little appears to have changed here or in the surrounding valley for a millennium.

Khojarnath is 130km from Darchen or about 107km from Chiu Village on Lake Manasarovar. Travellers to these areas should try to pay a visit to Khojarnath. The drive south

from Darchen or Lake Manasarovar is one of the most scenic in western Tibet. From the lake, the monastery is easy to work in as a day trip.

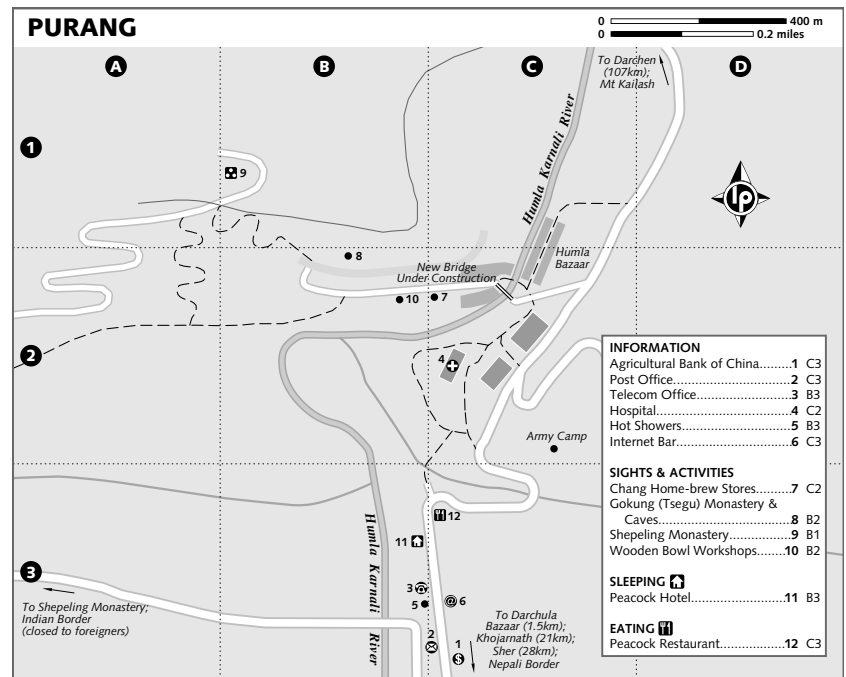
## Purang རུ་རྒྱལ་

☎ 08060 / elev 3800m

Purang (Taklakot to the Nepalis) is a large trading centre comprising a number of distinct settlements separated by the Humla Karnali River, known in Tibetan as Mabja Tsangpo (Peacock River). Nepali traders come up from the Humla district and also the Darchula region in the extreme west of Nepal to trade a variety of goods, including rice, carried up from Nepal in huge trains of goods-carrying goats. Indian consumer goods and Nepali rice are traded for Tibetan salt and wool in the Darchula bazaar, a 15-minute walk south of Purang.

Purang is also the arrival point for the annual influx of Hindu pilgrims from India, intent on making a *parikrama* (the Hindu equivalent of a kora) of Mt Kailash, which devout Hindus consider the abode of Shiva.

The hill northwest of town is the site of a huge army base said to extend far into the mountain



in a series of caves. It's even rumoured there are missiles here, aimed at New Delhi.

### INFORMATION

There's an **internet bar** (wangba; per hr Y10; ☎ 24hr) in a dark room on the 2nd floor in the middle of town, and **hot showers** (yushi; Y20; ☎ 10am-11pm) directly across the hall.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Be careful not to photograph the Chinese military base to the east or any of the small compounds in town. One guide we know was beaten by a group of soldiers after his tour group inadvertently photographed a restricted area.

### SIGHTS

In the hills above the Humla Bazaar are many retreat **caves** formed around the cliffside **Gokung (Tsegu) Monastery**. Here, a ladder leads up to a couple of upper-floor cave chapels decorated with prayer flags. The dirt road from Humla Bazaar passes several **chang home-brew stores** and **bowl workshops**.

The ruined **Shepeling Monastery** towers over the town from its dramatic hilltop position. In 1949 the Swami Pranavananda described this Kagyud monastery, which housed 170 monks, as the biggest in the region. The Chinese army shelled it during the Cultural Revolution and today only the assembly hall is being restored. The monastery is currently administered by Chuku Monastery on the Mt Kailash kora.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Peacock Hotel** (孔雀宾馆; Kongque Binguan; ☎ 290 0139; d/tr per bed Y100/40, ste Y280) All rooms have

decent beds and TV, but no bathrooms. If you want privacy, the best deal is to pay for all the beds in a triple.

There are a few other hotels and guest-houses in town, but the PSB may not let you stay at any of them.

Despite the proximity to Nepal, there's little flavour of the subcontinent in Purang's restaurants. **Peacock Restaurant** (☎ 290 0139; dishes Y10-25) This has a decent range of Chinese dishes and is a very neat and presentable establishment.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Western trekkers arriving from Nepal usually arrange to be met at the border town of Sher for the 28km drive via Khojarnath to Purang.

Buses (Y230) run every two days from Ali to Purang via Darchen. From Purang it's 74km north to the Chiu Monastery on the shores of Lake Manasarovar and another 33km from there to Darchen, starting point for the Mt Kailash kora.

The road north from Purang passes the quaint village of Toyo before passing a number of small Tibetan settlements and fording several rivers en route to the Gurla-la (4700m). Though still part of Western Tibet, you'll be struck by the lush terraced fields and the different designs of the houses and chörtens in this area.

Just beyond the pass, Rakshas Tal and (on a clear day) Mt Kailash come into view. A few kilometres before reaching the village at Chiu Monastery you'll pass by a gold mine.

The way south is actually far more scenic than the way north as the first sight you face is the Himalaya.

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