



Western Tibet (Ngari)

མངའ་རྫིས་

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Best Views

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Best Places off the Beaten Track

- » Gossul Monastery (p179)
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Why Go?

Vast, thinly populated and with an average altitude of over 4500m, Ngari is Tibet's wild west, a rough and ready frontier occupying one of the remotest corners of Asia. For most travellers the main attractions of what is likely to be a three-week overland trip are the almost legendary destinations of Mt Kailash and Lake Manasarovar. Indeed, many of the pilgrims on this road have been planning a visit all their lives. For those less fussed by the spiritual significance of Mt Kailash, getting to one of the most isolated and beautiful corners of high Asia is likely to be an attraction in itself.

Until recently only the hardest of travellers made it to western Tibet, but freshly paved roads and a new airport means that the region is on the verge of embracing mass Chinese tourism.

When to Go

May to June and mid-September to early October are the best times to head to Ngari, though June and July see huge convoys of Indian pilgrims booking out entire hotels on their way to Mt Kailash. April to October is best for the Drölma-la pass on the Kailash kora, as it's normally blocked with snow during other months.

The festival of Saga Dawa in May/June is a particularly popular time to visit Mt Kailash, and hundreds of pilgrims and tourists descend on the mountain. Some find the pilgrim atmosphere a highlight; others find the large numbers of trekking groups off-putting.



Western Tibet Highlights

- 1** Join fellow pilgrims looking to erase the sins of a lifetime on the three-day trek around sacred **Mt Kailash** (p175)
- 2** Hike the sandy shores of holy **Lake Manasarovar** (p178), or just marvel at the intensely turquoise waters and snowcapped-mountain backdrop
- 3** Camp on the shores of the spectacular otherworldly lakes of **Tagyel-tso** (p170), **Dawa-tso** (p171) and **Peiku-tso** (p168), as long as you are acclimatised



4 Scramble through tunnels, caves and secret passageways as you explore the ancient ruins and Kashmiri-influenced art of **Tsaparang** (p183), one of Asia's unknown wonders

5 Spot herds of wild asses, antelope and gazelle in the untrammelled wilderness of the Changtang, Tibet's Serengeti, along the **northern route** (p170) 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, fled to the west and established this kingdom at Tsaparang, west of Lake Manasarovar and Mt Kailash. The Guge kingdom, through its contacts with nearby Ladakh and Kashmir, spearheaded a Buddhist revival on the Tibetan plateau that at its peak fostered 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 over the Himalaya from India in 1624 after two failed attempts, but if their leader, Father Antonio de Andrede, 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 Andrede 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.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

At the time of research, foreigners were not allowed to travel on public transport in Tibet. Basic information is included here in case the situation changes.

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 never recovered.

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 (the northernmost tributary of the Ganges), Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo), Indus (Sengge Tsangpo) and Sutlej (Langchen Tsangpo) Rivers. The mountain was Kailash and the lake, Manasarovar.

Permits

Foreigners require a fistful of permits: an Alien Travel Permit, military permit, Tibet Tourism Bureau (TTB) permit, foreign affairs permit... Your travel agency will organise all of these for you but it will take a week minimum. You may need to stop in Shigatse to process your Alien Travel Permit and may further need to get this endorsed in Darchen or Ali, depending on the direction of travel. This is particularly true if you wish to visit off-the-beaten-track places like Gurugyam Monastery. As you travel through the region your guide will need to register you with the Public Security Bureau (PSB) in some towns (such as Tsochen).

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.

Itineraries

See p26 for an overview of itineraries from Lhasa to western Tibet. Most trips will

WHAT TO BRING

Warm clothes are essential, even in summer. The sun is strong and days can be hot, especially in a 4WD, so do bring something light to wear. A sleeping bag is recommended to avoid grubby truck-stop bedding. Many of the villages, towns and hotels in western Tibet are dusty, dirty, depressing places so a tent gives you the flexibility to camp out in some of the most glorious scenery on the planet. A tent is also useful (though not essential) if you are doing the Kailash kora. A face-mask can be useful to keep out the copious dust.

Supplies are now easy to get in all the settlements of the west but consider bringing luxuries like instant porridge, muesli (with powdered milk), chocolate, cheese and dehydrated foods from home. A snack supply gives you the flexibility to stop for a picnic lunch somewhere beautiful (or when the car breaks down).

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

take between two and three weeks. Add in a spare day for delays or breakdowns and figure in some time to rest and wash up or you'll gradually get too tired to fully enjoy the trip.

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 Mt Kailash. Although there are no stellar attractions on the longer northern route, the scenery is grander, traffic lighter and wildlife richer than the southern route.

The Xinjiang-Tibet Hwy is one of the highest, remotest and most spectacular roads in Asia. The route passes through the remote and disputed Aksai Chin region; with the unpredictability of breakdowns, it can take several days or more to travel the 1100km from Yecheng to Ali. The very few hardy adventurers who make this road do so mostly in a rented 4WD, and it's not cheap as you'll likely have to pay for the vehicle to travel all the way from Lhasa to Yecheng and back. Buses run every few days between Ali and Yecheng but foreigners are not officially allowed on them. For a rundown of the route, see p354.

If you're coming to/from Kathmandu via the Friendship Hwy, a shortcut to/from Saga (via beautiful Peiku-tso) will shave 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 Ne-

pal 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

The entire 500km section of road from Saga to Hor Qu was under reconstruction in 2010, qualifying the route as one of the world's largest construction sites. Once road upgrading has been completed, driving times will be slashed and you'll be able to drive from Lhatse to Kailash in two days. Until then, expect bone-crunching chaos as drivers divert off-road every few kilometres in a confused attempt to find the next road/detour/bridge. It's a serious grind. The good news is that bridges are now in place over all the major rivers, so getting stuck in a river is just a fond memory from the past.

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. 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 meadow land 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

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

If you've acclimatised for a few days in Lhasa, the gradual rate of gain along the southern route to Kailash shouldn't pose any serious problems, though the jump from Lhatse (3950m) to Raka (4925m) or Saga (4610m) involves a potentially dangerous jump in elevation. An overnight at Sakya (4280m) or Rongphu Monastery (4900m) en route will help your body adjust. If you're coming from Nepal you should be particularly careful as you won't be well acclimatised; an overnight in Nyalam (3750m) and either old Tingri (4250m), Baber (4250m) or Lhatse is an excellent idea.

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 **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.

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 Bang-la (4720m), then down to a valley that time forgot, and up again to the 4800m Gor-la, before dropping down over one hour to Sangsang.

Sangsang (4590m), 113km and three hours west of Lhatse, is a small grubby town of a few hundred souls. The impressively named but overpriced **Symphonium Hotel** (桑福宾馆; Sāngfú Bīnguǎn; r ¥80-150), and the

simply unimpressive **Sāngsāng Bīnguǎn** (桑桑宾馆; per bed ¥30-40) offer rooms, buckets of cold water and a few hours of electricity in the evenings. If you have time, you could visit the small Nyingma-school **Oserling nunnery**, which overlooks the town from the northern end and is home to 36 nuns.

The route passes through a succession of wide alleys before following a gorge into the ravine of the Raka Tsangpo with its dark, craggy peaks. Emerging from this ravine the road skirts a lake and then crosses a plain, which is prone to flood damage during July and August. The route then climbs to the 4925m Jye-la, before dropping down again and passing through the tiny settlement of **Raka** (4925m, kilometre marker 1912), about 6km before the junction of the northern and southern routes, and 115km from Sangsang.

The rooms in the misspelt **Lhato Hotel Teahoese** (拉妥旅馆; Lātuǒ Lǔguǎn; dm ¥30) are rustic but clean and have their own yak-dung stoves for heat. The hotel is the first on the right as you drive through the one-horse village and is one of half a dozen identical guesthouses all in a line. For surprisingly good Sichuanese food, try the **Hóngchéng Fànguǎn** (洪城饭馆; mains ¥20-25) across the road. Electricity is by generator only. If you're taking the northern route, this is pretty much the last accommodation for 240km, though you could 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.

ZHĀNGMÙ TO SAGA (280KM)

The scenic short cut from Zhāngmù on the Nepali border to Saga on the southern route to Ngari saves 250km (at least a day of travel) and is used mostly by 4WD groups visiting Ngari directly from Nepal.

See p157 and p160 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 Zhāngmù), rounding some hills at the entrance of a vast stony plain. Keep your eyes peeled for ruins to the north. From here to Saga it's about 170km or four hours of driving.

The first village you see just north of the road, 24km from the junction, is Petse, huddled below a gumpa and ruined hilltop *dzong* (fortress). Shortly afterwards at **Siling** (Seylong) village, travellers must pay Y65 per person and Y40 per car for entry to the western section of the Qomolangma Nature Reserve.

To the south come views of sand dunes and then massive **Shishapangma** (8012m), known to the Nepalese as Gosainthan, the world's 14th-tallest peak and 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 **Peiku-tso** (4590m), 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 snowcapped Shishapangma and the Langtang range bordering Nepal to the south. 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.

The bumpy route then enters a side gorge before passing the turn-off to the scenic but off-limits Kyirong Valley and the border crossing with Nepal at Rasuwa (closed to foreigners). Some 14km after the junction look back for fine views over the plain. After passing small, salty Drolung-tso you climb to two passes at 4825m and 4760m 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 ས་གཡོ་ ས་མེ

☎0892 / ELEV 4610M

The sprawling truck-stop town of Saga is the last of any size on the southern route and your last chance to eat a lavish meal and enjoy 24-hour electricity. Most facilities are found on the central street, Gesang Lu, at the intersection of the roads to Zhāngmù, Lhatse and Mt Kailash.

There's a fast and friendly **internet bar** (心语网吧; Xīnyǔ Wǎngbā; per hr Y10; ☺24hr) at the square by the south end of Gesang Lu, and hot showers at a couple of **bathhouses** (淋浴; línǚ; Y15-20; ☺10am-midnight) on the main street. Cash-strapped optimists could try the ATM at the Agricultural Bank by the southern square. There are well-stocked supermarkets beside the Saga and Jiling hotels.

Saga Hotel (萨噶宾馆; Sàgá Bīnguǎn; ☎820 2888; Gesang Lu; d/tr Y420/360, discounts of 10%;

☎☎) is the only decent hotel for hundreds of kilometres, with English-speaking reception staff and clean, carpeted rooms sporting modern bathrooms, though it's well overpriced. If it's full try the affiliated and similar Jiling Hotel at the other end of the street. The **Moon Star Restaurant** (dishes Y20-40; ☎) attached to the Saga Hotel serves decent Chinese food, but the English menu is 60% pricier than the Chinese version.

Ālī Zhāodàisuǒ (阿里招待所; tr per bed Y40) is a modern concrete guesthouse at the eastern tip of Gesang Lu, opposite the Saga Hotel. The beds are comfortable and the location is central but the manager is cranky at best.

There are several Tibetan compound-style guesthouses on the road heading north from the T-junction, best of which is the cosy **Bo Tie The Clan Hotel** (Bodo Dronkhang; 博扎家族旅馆; Bózhā Jiāzú Lǚguǎn; dm Y30), with clean rooms, decent beds and clean squat toilets. It's a 10-minute walk from the centre.

Several buses a day run between Saga and Shigatse.

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) on the hillside and 1.5km off the main road, is the best preserved and worth a visit for its fine views and unusual chörtens.

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 འབྲོང་པ 仲巴

'Old Zhongba' (4570m) is a tiny, dusty town on the main road with a couple of basic guesthouses, restaurants and a small monastery. ('New Zhongba', 22km northwest, is a modern Chinese military town with good restaurants but little else to recommend it.) Given the choice between overnighing here and Paryang, take Old Zhongba.

The Sakayapa-school Dradun Gumpa is worth the short stroll, especially for the remarkable Cultural Revolution-era newspapers still defacing religious murals in a side chapel of chörtens. The severed heads of goats and yaks dangle from a nearby roadside chörtens.

The rustic but friendly **Yak Hotel** (☎0892-8909863; dm Y35) has cosy yak-dung fireplaces and can provide basins of warm water for washing.

ZHONGBA TO PARYANG (101KM)

At New Zhongba you can enjoy a tantalising few kilometres of tarmac (and a petrol station) before the road deteriorates. A photogenic section of sand dunes, lake and mountains kicks in 60km from Zhongba. About 23km before Paryang you crest a 4780m pass and drop past more spectacular dunes to Paryang. Photos taken along this route can often get steppe, streams, desert dunes and snowcapped mountains in the same shot.

PARYANG བེར་ཡང་མོར་ 帕羊

ELEV 4750M

Guides have said that while many groups spend a night in Paryang (Pâyáng) 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 foot-deep dust choking a central junction that consists largely of oil-soaked truck-repair shops.

If you must pass a night here, the **Shishapangma Hotel** (dm/d Y40/100) in the far west of town has modern rooms around a large courtyard and is popular with Indian pilgrims, though bed sheets can be grubby. The central **Tashi Hotel** (扎西旅馆; Zhaxi Lúguǎn; dm Y30) is a smaller, simpler Tibetan-style place near a charming *mani lhakhang* (chapel with a large prayer wheel). There are several other hotels in town but no running water.

In the centre of the village, the yellow-signed **Meiyum Perse** (神湖藏餐; Shénhú Zàngcān; dishes Y10-20) is a cosy Tibetan-style teahouse and restaurant, and there are also several Sichuanese restaurants.

PARYANG TO HOR QU (223KM)

The route is a pleasant four-hour drive along the spine of the Himalaya, passing through yellow steppe, with craggy, snow-capped peaks looming to the south when the weather is clear.

There is a tricky section of sandy road 12km west of Paryang but all the major river crossings now have bridges. There's a checkpoint 103km from Paryang, where you must show your passport and permits.

At the Mayum-la (5220m), the road crosses from the drainage basin of the Yarlung

Tsangpo to that of the Sutlej, as you cross from Shigatse to Ngari prefectures. A descent leads to the long Gung Gyu-tso, which nomads consider poisoned, even though it drains into Lake Manasarovar. Your first magical views of Mt Kailash come into view approximately 90km after the Mayum-la, just before the town of Hor Qu (4620m). A ticket office here collects a Y200 regional 'entry fee', when staffed.

Hor Qu (ཧོར་ཆུ་མོ་; 霍尔; Huò'ěr) is another expanding village with little to recommend it but the views. Hulking 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 (p259) spend the night here but most groups should give it a miss and continue to Darchen or Chiu Monastery at Lake Manasarovar, both less than an hour's drive away.

From Hor Qu, it's 22km to the crossroads settlement and checkpoint of Barkha (巴嘎; Bāgā), from where it's 15km south to Chiu Monastery, or 22km west to Darchen.

Northern Route

The northern route is the longer of the two routes from Lhasa to Ngari but it's arguably the more spectacular route, passing huge salt lakes and valleys of seminomadic herders, as well as marmots, blue sheep, wild asses and antelope. Although it's no freeway, the dirt road is well maintained and driving conditions are good.

The first part, like the southern route, follows the road from Lhatse to the turn-off near Raka (see p167). From Raka, there is almost no accommodation before Tsochen, 240km away. If you're travelling this route by 4WD, seriously consider camping at least once or twice, as the towns are uniformly dismal. You need to be well acclimatised if you intend to tackle this route before the rest of western Tibet as the road from Raka never really drops below 4500m and is often above 5000m.

KING TIGER HOT SPRINGS & TAGYEL-TSO ལྷག་རྒྱལ་རྩུ་ཚོ་ཚོ་

ELEV 5070M

Only 21km north of the Raka junction are the Tagyel Chutse, or **King Tiger Hot Springs**, a collection of gushing geysers, bubbling hot springs, puffing steam outlets and smoking holes that seem to lead

straight down into the bowels of the earth. A grazing brontosaurus would not seem out of place in this smouldering, primeval landscape.

From the hot springs, the road skirts the western side of a beautiful lake, then through a wide valley, one of many stretches of open plateau in Ngari where you can see for tens of kilometres ahead of you. From a 5235m pass, the route descends to a much larger lake, **Tagyel-tso**, the waters of which are a miraculous shade of the deepest blue imaginable and ringed with snowy peaks. With luck you can spot gazelles, wild asses and even the occasional wolf, hungrily eyeing the valley's many fat marmots. This is a great place to camp but only if you're prepared for the cold and especially the altitude (around 5150m). If you've come from a night or two at Everest Base Camp you should be OK; from Lhatse this is too big a jump in altitude to be considered safe.

NORTH TO TSOCHEN

It's about 240km from Raka to Tsochen or six hours of driving on good but unpaved roads. For 25km the road runs along the eastern side of Tagyel-tso before climbing past herding camps to the 5570m Sangmola. The end-of-the-world Drolma Teahouse before the pass (5195m) offers instant noodles and a simple place to crash.

A further 45km after the pass the road crests a smaller pass and leads down to two conjoined 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. About 230km from the turn-off, a small monastery and large collection of prayer flags and mani stones sit on a ledge above the road. Three kilometres later is a major checkpoint where your passport and permit will be checked. The town of Tsochen is just ahead, 5km across the plains.

TSOCHEN མཚོ་ཚོང་གླ་ 措勤

☎0897 / ELEV 4680M

Tsochen (Cuòqín), 235km from the northern turn-off and 173km south of the northern road proper, is probably the most interesting town on the northern route, full of wild-haired nomads in town on a shopping trip. At the east end of the 2km-long town, walk through the **Tibetan quarter** to reach a mass of mani stones, prayer poles and yak skulls that local pilgrims gravitate to daily at dusk.

From here you'll see a second larger collection of prayer flags and mani stones about 1km away on the plateau to the north; just below here is the **Mendong Monastery**, a small but friendly place with 36 monks. The atmospheric inner chapel of the main prayer hall holds the funeral chörten of local lama Sherab Rinpoche, plus his stone hand and footprints. The monastery belongs to the Kagyud school, so there are pictures of Milarepa, Marpa and the Karmapa here (as well as Chairman Mao!). The monastery is headed by an 88-year-old lama who fled to India in 1959 and returned in 1984 to rebuild the ruined monastery.

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; Gōng'ānjú) 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). They'll be waiting for you.

The town has electricity between 7pm and 1am.

Friendship FERIA Hotel (友谊宾馆; Yǒuyǐ Bīnguǎn; ☎261 2308; d/tr/q without bathroom ¥120/150/200) is at the beginning of town on the left, before the petrol station. Rooms are clean and there's plenty of hot and cold water in drums, with outside pit toilets.

Lhatse Dronkhang (家庭旅馆; Jiātíng Lúguǎn; ☎261 2561; s/d per bed ¥80/50) Just 150m past the FERIA, on the right, this friendly Tibetan-run place has decent, clean rooms on the 2nd floor. The walls are wooden and so potentially noisy but there's an inside toilet and showers are under construction.

The main street is lined with Chinese restaurants but don't expect to find an English menu. Opposite the Lhatse Dronkhang, the **Lhatse Tashi Restaurant** (mains ¥10-30) is owned by the same people and offers cosy Tibetan seating and a good range of Chinese and Tibetan dishes. There are several supermarkets in town.

TSOCHEN TO GERTSE (257KM)

From Tsochen to the junction of the northern road (S301) is a journey of about 180km; Gertse is another 77km, making a total

drive of around five hours. If you plan to stay in Gertse, take your time as the route is far more interesting and scenic than the town.

About 43km north of Tsochen, the road passes the 5090m **Nor Chung-la** (Small Wild Yak Pass) before descending to the dramatic turquoise waters of **Dawa-tso** (4680m), another superb camping spot. For the next 60km the route passes 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 5250m, 94km (about two-and-a-half hours of driving) north of Tsochen. From the pass the route descends to a bridge, 109km from Tsochen, and for the next 50km the road runs alongside a dramatic range of 6000m-plus glaciated mountains. The valley narrows towards its northern end before the road suddenly pops out onto a wide plain to meet the northern road proper (linking Amdo with Ali).

It's a long 15km drive in an arrow-straight line towards **Dung-tso**, with its purple mountain backdrop and salt marsh foreground that looks like whitecaps on the water from a distance. Don't approach too close or you'll get stuck in the boggy shoreline.

From the junction it's 90km (two hours) west to Gertse through a wide valley dotted with sheep and prayer flags. There's a checkpoint 24km before Gertse.

GERTSE གེར་ཙེ 改则

☎0897 / ELEV 4445M

Gertse (Gäizé) is the biggest town along the northern route before Ali. The main street (Luren Lu) begins from the yak statue roundabout and runs from east to west about 1.5km. Dazhong Lu is the most interesting street, lined with Tibetan teahouses and pool tables. Several shops sell colourful *chubas* (Tibetan cloaks) with fake sheepskin lining. Budget some time to visit the long wall of chörtens, mani stones, prayer flags and yak horns to the south of town.

The central **Hóngyùn Wǎngbā** (鸿运网吧; Luren Lu; per hr Y5; ☉9am-2am) offers internet access. The **Yángguāng Línǜ** (阳光淋浴; showers Y10; ☉10am-10.30pm), opposite the Grain Hotel, is one of a couple of places offering hot showers. Check the characters carefully on the doorway, as next door is a brothel.... None of the hotels in town have running water.

Xīnqìxiàng Zhāodàisuǒ (新气象招待所; r Y120) has spacious rooms for one to four people, all at the same price, with shared squatties down the hall. It's on the yak statue roundabout and gets quite a lot of 4WD traffic.

The **Gaize Hotel** (改则宾馆; Gäizé Bīnguǎn; ☎265 2699; d Y120, d/tr per bed without bathroom Y50) is opposite the hospital west of the roundabout. The cheapest rooms are poorly maintained and favoured by truck drivers. The deluxe doubles have clean beds and bathrooms, though water comes in buckets only. The hotel is also known as the Zhèngfǔ Zhāodàisuǒ (Government Hotel) and Lǚrén Bīnguǎn.

Grain Hotel (粮食局招待所; Liángshíjú Zhāodàisuǒ; Wenhua Lu; s/d/tr Y80/100/120) is a decent place with clean rooms, a sunny greenhouse-style corridor and helpful floor ladies.

There are numerous Chinese and Tibetan restaurants (dishes Y10 to Y35) along the main road.

GERTSE TO GEGYE (368KM)

It's a seven- to eight-hour drive from Gertse to Gegye, the next town of any size. The initial landscape is a dreamy blur of lake and sky, cut by salt rings and brooding mountains of rust, mustard, turmeric and green barley. The isolated bunkers that look like tiny greenhouses are water wells. **Oma-chu** (kilometre marker 982), a small village huddled beneath a rocky splinter, is 50km west of Gertse. Keep your eyes open for the round, tomblike buildings that are actually tsampa (roasted barley) storage bins.

The road passes some impressive peaks to the south and then the village of Sherma, squeezed between the two lakes of Rali-tso and Loma Gyari-tso. After more peaks the road drops down to large and photogenic Peri-tso and the nearby village of Wenbu Dangsang, two hours from Gertse. It's another 50km past a stony plain and a huge salt lake that looks like it's full of icebergs to ramshackle **Tsaka** (擦卡; Cākā), a small salt- and sheepskin-processing community. The centre of town has Mínhé Fànguǎn, a good Muslim noodle place, and the decent **Fúpín Zhāodàisuǒ** (扶贫招待所; ☎263 5018; dm/r Y45/120), a two-storey Tibetan-style guesthouse, around the corner.

From Tsaka one route continues west to meet the Ali-Kashgar road just north of Pangong-tso. The road to Ali branches south and climbs a side valley to the 4895m

Gya-la, then descends past yak-hair nomads' tents to curve around salty Sher-tso (Bar-tso), before crawling to another pass (4855m) that has a large cave on one side. The road then descends to the pastures of **Zhungba** (Shungba; 雄巴; Xióngbā) via a Gobi-like stony desert. Zhungba is a dismal wool-trading centre for the nomads of the region, 96km from the turn-off and with a few simple teahouses.

At kilometre marker 1202, near Drungba, the road enters a gorge and follows the fledgling Indus River to Gegye, 105km (two hours) from Zhungba. The Indus has its source in the northern flanks of Kailash and is known here as the Sengge (or Sengye) Tsangpo, or Lion River. It's astonishing to think that this little stream continues through Ladakh and Pakistan, crossing the world's highest mountain ranges to become one of the great rivers of Asia.

GEGYE རྒྱལ་གྱི་རྒྱལ་གྱི་ 革吉

📍0897 / ELEV 4520M

The mildly interesting little town of Gegye (Géjǐ), nestled below a ridge, is a logical overnight point, though there's little to actually do except drink beer and play pool with the local nomads. The two main streets (Hebei Lu and Yanhu Lu) join at a T-junction by the Shuǐlǐ Bīngǔǎn. Hebei Lu has several good supermarkets and internet access at the **Guāngxiān Wǎngsù** (光纤网速; 33 Hebei Lu; ☎9am-midnight; per hr ¥5). The Yǎngguāng Zhāodàisuǒ guesthouse across the road offers hot showers (¥15).

This 2nd-floor **Shuǐlǐ Bīngǔǎn** (水利宾馆; 📍263 2146; cnr Yanhu Lu & Hebei Lu; r ¥100) is easily the best choice in town. Rooms are clean and comfortable with TVs and DVD players, the shared indoor squat toilets are simple but clean and there's even some running water.

The government guesthouse **Géjǐ Bīngǔǎn** (革吉宾馆; s/d ¥100/120) is in a terminal state of decline. The carpeted rooms are OK but the bathrooms are locked, so you have to use the absolutely shocking outdoor latrines. The hotel is unsigned inside a compound with a white tiled arch.

Yanhu Lu boasts the excellent **Kange Nyima Tsangkhang** (mains ¥14-30), a very pleasant Tibetan restaurant with a good range of Tibetan dishes and a recommended *shemdre* (meat and curried potatoes with rice). Next door is a glass-fronted Uighur restaurant that offers Xīnjiāng-style noodles and kebabs.

GEGYE TO ALI (112KM)

Ali is just three hours from Gegye. At first the road follows the infant Indus River, then at kilometre marker 1260 it crosses the river, swings southwest and enters a marshland rich in bird life, including golden ducks and large black-necked cranes. Many maps incorrectly show the main S301 road continuing northwest.

The road then passes through a canyon landscape painted in swirling desert hues of butterscotch, caramel and popcorn, then passes Zouzou village and a dramatic escarpment. At kilometre marker 1330 a lone concrete factory suddenly appears out of nowhere. Ali then gradually emerges like a desert mirage, gradually revealing paved grids of department stores, karaoke bars and taxis that come as quite a shock in such a remote location. It's a surreal experience to glide smoothly into town after five or six days bouncing around the northern plateau.

Ali ཨ་ལི་ 阿里/狮泉河

📍0897 / ELEV 4280M

Ali (Ālǐ), also known as Shīquánhé (Lion Spring River) in Chinese and Sengge Khabab (Town of the Lion) in Tibetan, is the capital of the Ngari (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 western Tibet.

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. The opening of the Kūnshā airport 50km from town in 2010 will only boost the city's growth.

For views of the town, climb up to the pagoda-topped hill to the north of town. Don't take pictures of the army compound to the west (recognisable by the huge '八一' army symbol painted on the hillside above).

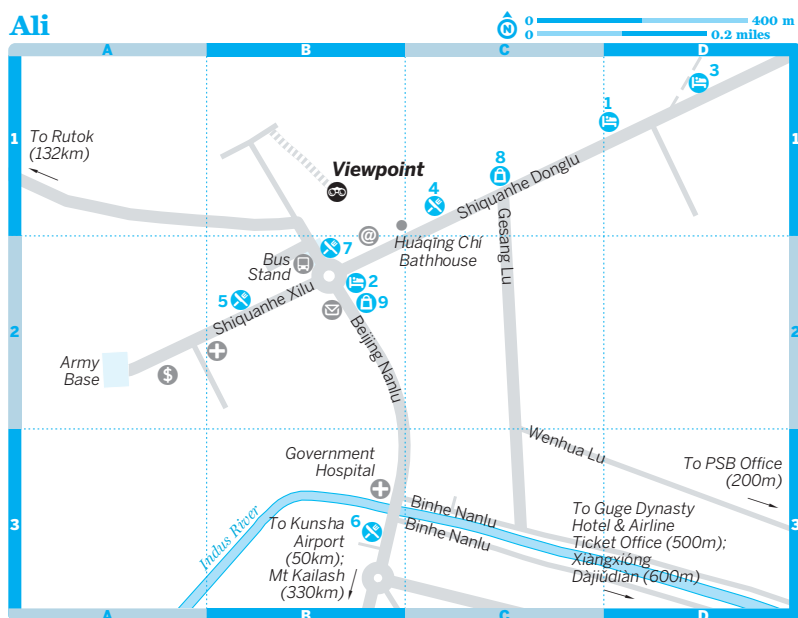
🛏 Sleeping

Your sleeping options are limited in Ali as many hotels are off-limits to foreigners. The better hotels fill up quickly.

Shénhú Bīngǔǎn

HOTEL \$

(神湖宾馆; 📍136 3897 7982; Shiquanhe Donglu; s/d ¥140/150, s/d without bathroom ¥50/80)



Ali

📍 Top Sights

Viewpoint..... B1

🏠 Sleeping

- 1 Ali Hotel..... D1
 2 Heng Yuan Guesthouse..... B2
 3 Shénhú Bīnguǎn..... D1

🍴 Eating

- 4 Baiyi Supermarket..... C1
 5 Chinese Restaurants..... B2
 6 Effendi Ashkhana..... B3
 7 Uighur Ashkhana..... B2

🛒 Shopping

- 8 Fruit & Vegetable Market..... C1
 9 Supermarket..... B2

Owned by the Yak Hotel in Lhasa, this place is a good first choice. The cheaper rooms have communal squat toilets but no showers. Rooms are arranged around an inner atrium.

Heng Yuan Guesthouse

HOTEL \$\$

(恒远宾馆; Héngyuǎn Bīnguǎn; ☎282 8288; cnr Beijing Nanlu & Shiquanhe Donglu; s/d Y120/140, tr without bathroom Y150) A popular place with 4WD tours, it has decent rooms in the

main building (avoid the back courtyard rooms) but chaotic management when we visited. You access the rooms through a ground-floor department store.

Ali Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(狮泉河饭店; Shīquánhé Fàndiàn; ☎280 0004; 17 Shiquanhe Donglu; d Y260, d/tr without bathroom Y120/130) This charmless two-star government hotel offers exhausted Western-style rooms with broken fixtures and small bathrooms, and very spartan rooms without. There's hot water in the evenings and mornings only.

Xiangxióng Dàjiūdiàn

HOTEL \$\$\$

(象雄大酒店; ☎283 0888; www.xiangxionghotel.com, in Chinese; Binhe Nanlu; d Y488; 🚗) Currently the best hotel in town, in the southeast suburbs, shortly to be eclipsed by the next-door Guge Dynasty Hotel.



Eating

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). For supplies try the Baiyi Supermarket on Shiquanhe Donglu or the supermarket next to Hengyuan Guest-

house. For fresh produce try the fruit and vegetable market on Shiquanhe Donglu.

Uighur Ashkhana

UIGHUR \$

(Beijing Beilu; noodles Y12) For a taste of Central Asia head to this popular Uighur restaurant (*ashkhana* in Turkic), 100m from the main roundabout. Fresh nan bread, a bowl of *suoman* (fried noodle squares) and a couple of kebabs makes for a great meal. The barbecue grill and smell of mutton is a sign that you're close.

Effendi Ashkhana

UIGHUR \$\$

(Beijing Nanlu; dishes Y15-100) For something a bit fancier, this great 1001 Nights-style restaurant feels lifted from Istanbul. The *pilov* (pilau rice) and kebabs are great but the best dish is the *dàpánjī* (大盘鸡), a chicken, potato and noodles extravaganza big enough for three people.

i Information

Electricity is on and off in Ali, shifting every 12 hours between different districts like a nomad.

Agricultural Bank of China (中国农业银行; Zhōngguó Nóngyè Yínháng; Shiquanhe Xilu; ☺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.

Gésāng Wǎngchéng (格桑网城; Shiquanhe Donglu; per hr Y10; ☺24hr) Reliable internet access.

Huáqíng Chí Bathhouse (华清池; Shiquanhe Donglu; showers Y10; ☺10am-11pm) Hot-water showers.

PSB (行政公署公安处; Xíngzhèng Gōngshǔ Gōng'ānchù; ☎282 1545; 17 Wenhua Lu; ☺10am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri) Groups may need to get their travel permit endorsed here if they haven't done so in Darchen. The office is in the southeast of town.

i Getting There & Away

From Ali to Darchen, at the base of the Mt Kailash kora, it's a day's journey of around 330km.

AIR Tibet's fourth airport, at Kūnshā (昆莎; Gusa in Tibetan; 4274m) opened in 2010, 50km south of Ali. There are currently twice-weekly flights to Lhasa (Y2500) and on to Chéngdū, with services planned to Kashgar. Buy tickets and enquire about airport buses at the airline ticket office in the new **Guge Dynasty Hotel** (古格王朝大酒店; Gùgé Wángcháó Dàjiǔdiàn; Binhe Nanlu).

BUS Sleeper buses run every couple of days to Lhasa (50 hours) and Yèchéng (30 hours)

in Xīnjiāng and there are also daily services to Rutok Xian, Zanda, Darchen/Purang and Gertse. Passenger 4WDs also run to Lhasa for Y300/500/800 for a back/middle/front row seat.

i Getting Around

Fleets of taxis are part of the mirage-in-the-desert shock of arriving in Ali (*We wonder how they got there...?*). 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་རིན་པོ་ཅེ་ 冈仁波齐峰

Going to western Tibet and not completing a kora around Mt Kailash (Kang Rinpoche, or Precious Jewel of Snow, in Tibetan) 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, just as it dominates the mythology of a billion people.

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 road conditions improving every year, this is fast changing. Large numbers of Indian pilgrims visit the mountain between June and August and you can expect visitor numbers to increase dramatically now that flights are operating to Ali, just a few hours' drive away.

Any reasonably fit and acclimatised 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 p250.

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

WARM-UP HIKES AROUND MT KAILASH

If you've got extra time at Darchen, or you want to spend a day 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 switchbacking dirt road just to the east of Darchen branches right after 1km to the **Gyangdrak Monastery**, largest of the Mt Kailash monasteries and 6km from Darchen. Like other monasteries, it was rebuilt (in 1986) after the depredations of the Cultural Revolution. The left branch of the road follows a stream west to **Selung Monastery**, where a short walk leads to a viewpoint popular with Indian pilgrims for its views of Kailash and Nandi peaks. The secret 'inner kora' of Kailash starts from here but is only open to pilgrims who have completed 13 main koras of the mountain.

For an excellent warm-up and acclimatisation hike, get dropped off at Gyangdrak and then follow the obvious path over the ridge and down to Selung (45 minutes). At the pass on the ridge a side path leads up the hillside straight towards Kailash for epic views of the south face and back towards Manasarovar, Rakshas Tal and tent-shaped Gurla Mandata. From Selung you can drive back or continue over the ridges to the south to eventually drop down steeply to Darchen. Views of the Barkha plain from the ridge above Darchen are awesome but it gets very windy in the afternoons. For a map of the region see Map p252.

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).

Mt Kailash, at 6714m, is not the mightiest of the mountains in the region, but with its distinctive 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. Kailash is actually not part of the Himalaya but rather the Kangri Tise (Gangdise) range.

Mt Kailash has long been an object of worship. For Hindus, it is the domain of Shiva, the Destroyer and Transformer, and his consort Parvati. To the Buddhist faithful, Mt Kailash is the abode of Demchok (Sanskrit: Samvara) and Dorje Phagmo. The Jains of India also revere the mountain as the site where the first of their *tirthankara* (saints)

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

DARCHEN དར་ཆེན། 塔钦

☑0897 / ELEV 4670M

Nestled in the foothills of Mt Kailash, the small town of Darchen (Tāqīn) is the starting point of the kora. It is a rapidly expanding settlement of hotel compounds, tourist restaurants and newly built blocks, much improved on the miserable hovel that greeted travellers to Kailash a few years ago. Most travellers make use of the town's hot showers, restaurants and supermarkets, either before or after their kora, though it's perfectly feasible to sleep instead at Lake Manasarovar just over an hour's drive away. If you need medical attention, there's a Swiss-funded traditional Tibetan clinic in the northwest of Darchen.

If you haven't already bought your 'ticket' for the Kailash–Manasarovar–Purang area (Y200) you will have to get one on the approach road to Darchen.

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 presence of so many tourists and their ever-present 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

There's not a great deal to choose between Darchen's hotels. Almost all offer foam beds in clean rooms with an outdoor pit toilet in the corner of a large courtyard. Just pick one that doesn't have a large convoy of 4WDs parked outside.

Pilgrim Hotel GUESTHOUSE \$
(朝圣宾馆; Cháoshèng Bīnguǎn; ☎298 0833; dm Y60; 📍) Turn right at the T-junction for this good place that has a cosy dining room, patchy internet access and donates part of its profits to local monasteries.

Lhasa Holyland Guesthouse GUESTHOUSE \$
(拉萨圣地康桑旅馆; Lāsà Shèngdì Kāngsāng Lúguǎn; ☎139 8907 0818; dm Y60-70) This

friendly new place has modern rooms, a cosy Tibetan-style teahouse and, for better or worse, the local PSB office. It is currently adding 150 beds.

Sun & Moon Guesthouse GUESTHOUSE \$
(Ninda Dronkhang; 日月宾馆; Rìyuè Bīnguǎn; ☎260 7102; q per bed Y60) This easily overlooked place in the far top (northwest) end of town offers the nicest accommodation, with cosy rooms and clean communal toilets, though it's a bit out of the way. It's part of the Tibet Medical and Astrological Institute (Menkhang).

Other good and almost identical places include the Fresh Peacock Hotel and the Darchen Local Aid the Poor Programme Hotel (Poverty Alleviation Hotel), both on the main street and with four-bed rooms for Y60 per bed. Bigger places like the Gandisi Hotel are often fully booked with huge groups of Indian pilgrims.

Darchen Local Aid the Poor Programme Hotel Restaurant TIBETAN \$
(塔尔青利民扶贫宾馆; Tǎ'ěrqing Límín Fúpín Bīnguǎn; mains Y10-25) Good breakfasts, the best-value *shemdre* and other dishes in town and a cosy Tibet-style decor make this our favourite restaurant in town, and the hotel is pretty good also.

Information

A couple of places are trying to start internet service without much success, though it's surely only a question of time.

God Water Bathing (圣水淋浴; Shèngshuǐ Línǚ; showers Y20; ☎9.30am-midnight)

Lobsang Blind Massage House (☎136 3899 9712; Chinese/Japanese/Tibetan massage Y100/120/150) The perfect end to a kora is a relaxing massage from blind English-speaking Lobsang, a graduate of Braille Without Borders (see p345) who has set up shop in the Poverty Alleviation Hotel.

PSB (公安局; Gōng'ānjú) Travellers need to register and have their travel permit endorsed at the PSB office in the Lhasa Holyland Guesthouse.

Getting There & Away

Darchen is 3km north of the main Ali–Saga road, about 12km from Barkha, 107km north of Purang, 330km southeast of Ali and a lonely 1200km from Lhasa.

Buses pass through town daily to Ali (Y150) and Purang (Y100) but currently not to Saga.

KAILASH & MANASAROVAR BOOKS

The following books about Mt Kailash, Lake Manasarovar and the surrounding area are guaranteed to whet your appetite for adventure. Charles Allen's *A Mountain in Tibet* chronicles the hunt for the sources of the region's four great rivers and is perhaps the best introduction to the region. Allen's follow up, *The Search for Shangri-La*, focuses on the region's pre-Buddhist heritage and is also a great read. *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. Sven Hedin's three-volume *Transhimalaya: Discoveries & Adventures in Tibet* (1909–13) will keep you company for many a long night on the Changtang plateau. Hedin was the first Westerner to complete the Kailash kora.

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 bookshop or online.

Most recent is Manosi Lahiri's *Here be Yaks*, an unpretentious travelogue that details a more recent Indian pilgrimage to the region, with a special focus on defining the source of the Sutlej.

Lake Manasarovar

མཚོ་མི་པམ་ 玛旁雄错

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.

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 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. It is

said that some of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were sprinkled into the lake.

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 a smaller lake, Rakshas Tal (known to Tibetans as Lhanag-tso), by the channel called Ganga-chu. Most Tibetans consider Rakshas Tal to be evil, home in Hindu minds to the demon king Ravanna, though to the secular eye it's every bit as beautiful as Manasarovar. 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. Dirt roads encircle most of the shoreline now and some tour groups have already started doing a circuit of the lake by 4WD. For an overview of the kora and a map of the lake, see p259.

👁 Sights & Activities

Chiu Monastery

MONASTERY

(admission free) Thirty-three kilometres south of Darchen, Chiu (Sparrow) Monastery enjoys a fabulous location atop a craggy hill overlooking Lake Manasarovar. The main chapel here contains the meditation cave of Guru Rinpoche, who is said to have passed away here, but most people focus on the lake views, the winding stone staircases and old wooden doorframes of this fairy-tale-like structure. A short kora path leads to a second chapel. On a clear day Mt Kailash looms dramatically to the north.

For a hike, 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 chörtens and prayer wall at Cherkip, returning via the shoreline cave retreats. There are fine views and lots of nesting birds along this route, but bring repellent against the annoying shoreline flies.

If you fancy a long post-hike soak, the small but overpriced **hot springs** (bath Y50; ☉10am-8pm) beside the village pipes water into private wooden tubs.

There are over a dozen simple, friendly guesthouses between the monastery and the lake, all charging an identical Y50 per bed in a four- or five-bed room, with an outdoor pit toilet. There's little to choose between them except perhaps the availability of food and where the big groups are staying.

Gossul Monastery

MONASTERY

Further south along the shore of Manasarovar, this charming monastery is part of the Manasarovar kora (see p259) but can now be reached by road. The three resident monks can show you the meditation cave of Götsangpa (the ascetic who opened up the Kailash kora in the 13th century) and a sacred stone conch shell, and you can buy amulets or packets of holy Manasarovar sand, incense and salt. The views of the lake are breathtaking.

The best way to reach the road is if you are driving from Purang; an unsigned dirt road branches off the main road 10km north

of the Gurla-la (around kilometre marker 36), crosses a pass and then swings left to follow the lakeshore for 10km. From Gossul it's 7km north to the paved main road and then a further 6km to Chiu Monastery.

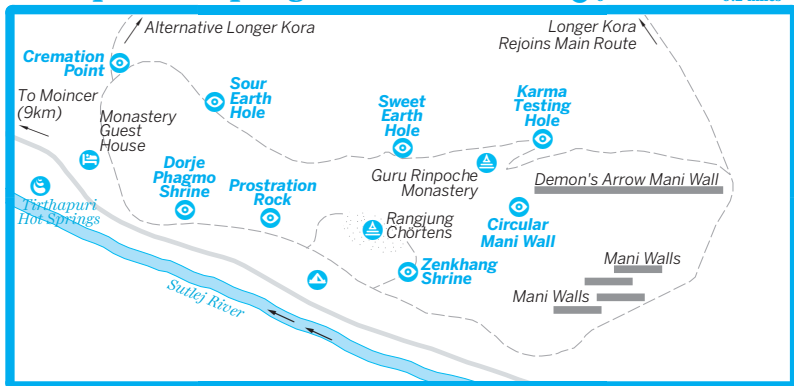
Tirthapuri Hot Springs & Kora འོ་ཏུ་ཕུ་རྫི་ཚུ་ཚུ་ག་ 芝达布日寺

On the banks of the Sutlej, only a few hours' drive northwest of Darchen, the hot springs at **Tirthapuri** (admission Y15) is the place where pilgrims traditionally bathe after completing their circuit of Mt Kailash. The one-hour kora route around the site is interesting, though most people can safely give this place a miss if time is tight. Thirteen Tirthapuri koras are considered to bring equal merit as one Kailash kora.

Starting from the hot springs the kora 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 (a wall made of mani stones). 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.

Where the trail doubles back to enter the Guru Rinpoche (Tirthapuri) 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 200m-long mani wall, the 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 several small shrines and a series of rocky pinnacles revered as *rangjung*, or self-manifesting chörtens.



Accommodation is limited. The **monastery guesthouse** (d Y40) has a couple of very simple rooms, as does a crummy nearby 'resort' trying to attract people with water siphoned off from the springs. There's nice riverside camping (Y15) just below the kora.

Tirthapuri is 9km south of **Moincer** (Mensi), which in turn is 65km west of Darchen along the main paved road to Ali. There's better choice of food and accommodation at Moincer, including at the friendly **Dekyi Neylingkhang** (美滿招待所; Měimǎn Zhàodàisù; dm Y50), a simple but cosy guesthouse just by the Tirthapuri turn-off. The excellent **Chuānyuè Xiǎochǎo** (川粵小炒; dishes Y20-30) in the centre of town offers great food and is a favourite with the local People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers.

Guge Kingdom

古格王国

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 (Gūgē wángguó) 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 manage to make it this far.

Tsaparang is 18km 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). Both sites are in the valley of the Langchen Tsangpo (Sutlej River), the 'elephant river', which rises west of Manasarovar and continues over the border with India into Ladakh and finally Pakistan.

HISTORY

By the 10th century the Guge kingdom was already a wealthy trade centre supporting several thousand people when 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

EXPLORING THE GARUDA VALLEY

Adventurers with a day up their sleeve could explore the Khyunglung (Garuda) region of the upper Suttlej Valley, southwest from Moincer. Around 16km from Moincer (8km from Tirthapuri), the Bönpo-school **Gurugyam Monastery** (ཀུརུགཡམ་རྒྱུ་མཆོད་ལྷོ་གླིང་།; 故如甲木寺; Gùrújiāmù Sì) is worth a visit, primarily for the dramatic cliffside retreat of 10th-century Bön master Drenpa Namka.

A further 14km down the Suttlej Valley, 2km past Khyunglung (曲龙; Qūlóng) village, is the extensive ruined cave city that archaeologists believe belonged to the early kingdom of **Shangshung**. The 20-minute trail to the site leads from a roadside chörten and drops past hot-spring terraces to cross the Suttlej over a bridge hung with severed animal heads. Nearby is a riverside hot-springs pool. You could easily spend a fantastic couple of hours exploring the troglodyte caves and buildings but it's dangerous to continue to the upper citadel. On the way back stop off at **Khyunglung Monastery** just above the village, which also has a couple of simple teahouses.

There are no checkpoints on route to Khyunglung though it would be prudent to have the valley added to your travel permit, either in Ali or Darchen. From Khyunglung the dirt road continues southwest to seriously remote monasteries at Dongpo, Dawa (Danba) and Manam (Malang) en route to Zanda, but also passes near several military bases so you need to bring watertight permissions and to be prepared for some serious exploration.

1624, after a siege by the Ladakhi army (see p175). The centre of Tibet soon became the middle of nowhere.

i Getting There & Away

From Ali there are buses (Y260) every couple of 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 4WD it's possible to make it to Zanda from either Ali or Mt Kailash in a single day.

To/From Darchen

It's about an eight-hour drive from Darchen to Zanda, though the distance is only about 243km. It's 65km along a paved road from Darchen to Moincer, which is the turn-off to Tirthapuri, and then another 50km from there to the army base at Ba'er, where the road branches south. The 122km from Ba'er to Zanda takes four hours of winding up and down fantastically eroded gorges and gullies. Road improvements should speed things up by 2012.

To/From Ali

Coming from Ali, the road is equally scenic and will take around five hours of driving to cover the 200km. The first hour on a paved road climbs to the 4720m Pe-la and then drops down past a great scenic viewpoint to the Gar Valley, home to Ali's new airport at Kūnshā at kilometre marker 1109. 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 towards Zanda. The recently upgraded

road climbs huge switchbacks up to the 5330m Lalung-la (Laling Gutsa), then the 5390m Laochi-la before descending into a valley. About 65km from the turn-off you have to buy a ticket to the area (Y200, including Thöling and Guge).

The road branches left onto a plateau from where there are stunning 180-degree views of the Indian Himalaya, stretching from Nanda Devi in the south to the Ladakh range in the north. Around 90km from the turn-off (36km from Zanda) look for a village surrounded by eroded cliffs with hundreds of tombs carved into the soft rock. The turn-off for Dungkar and Piyang (see p185) is just before the village.

The route then drops down into deep, fantastically eroded wadi-like gullies before finally reaching the Suttlej Valley. The layers of the former sea bed are clearly visible and the scenery is a wonderland of eroded cliff faces that have taken on the most astonishing shapes. You'll swear over and over again that you're seeing the melted ruins of an ancient monastery, or a castle, or the high pillars that once held the roof of a mighty palace.

Just before reaching Zanda, 130km from the turn-off, you cross the Suttlej River on a long bridge before pulling into town.

ZANDA རྩམ་པོ་ལི་མཚེས་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་། 札达

☎0897 / ELEV 3760M

Zanda (Zhada), or Tsamda, is the bland, one-street town that has been built up alongside Thöling Monastery. The town consists of a few hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, two army bases and some brothels.

Budget a couple of hours to visit Thöling Monastery and an hour to wander the cliff-side chörtens at dusk. If you have more time the two sets of ruins south and particularly southwest of town offer amateur archaeologists plenty of scope to explore crumbling monastery walls, ruined chörtens and elaborate cave complexes.

Sleeping & Eating

Héběi Bīnguǎn

HOTEL \$\$

(河北宾馆; ☎262 2475; old block d Y180, new block from Y350, discounts 10%-20%) Conditions here appear grim at first – the rooms have bathrooms but no shower or sinks and the toilets don't flush – but friendly staff makes this quiet place surprisingly ok. There's lots of hot water in thermoses for washing and a bucket by the toilet for flushing. The brand-new next-door annex has luxury, carpeted rooms that boast the town's only en suite hot showers.

Chóngqing Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(重庆宾馆; Chóngqing Bīnguǎn; ☎290 2650; d Y180, tr without bathroom Y210) This large, quiet compound is a favourite with overlanders but the rooms with TV and en suite squat toilet are well overpriced. Triples without bathroom are a decent deal if you bargain hard.

Transportation Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(交通宾馆; Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn; ☎262 2686; s/d/tr Y130/140/180, 5-bed r without bathroom Y200) The spacious tiled rooms here come with attached squat toilet and sink. There's no hot water but guests can get a free hot shower next door in the attached public shower. The down side is that it always seems full.

Sichuān Eats Mill

SICHUANESSE \$\$

(四川食坊; Sichuān Shífáng; dishes Y20-40) Gets the thumbs up from many travellers and has pleasant outdoor tables. It's opposite the Transportation Hotel.

The main street has at least half-a-dozen other places to eat, mostly generic Chinese restaurants, though also a couple of Tibetan options, one Muslim eatery, and an Uighur restaurant that does excellent *suoman* (Y10 to Y12) and kebabs (no nan bread).

Information

A couple of 'telephone supermarkets' offer standard international phone rates.

Agricultural Bank of China (中国农业银行; Zhōngguó Nóngyè Yínháng; ☎10am-1pm, 4-7pm Mon-Fri) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Internet Bar (金鑫网吧; jīnxīn wǎngbā; per hr Y8; ☎9am-midnight) Next door to the Masses Bath.

Jiāotōng Yùshì (交通浴室; showers Y10; ☎10am-11pm) A second shower, attached to the Transportation Hotel.

Masses Bath (大众浴室; Dàzhòng Yùshì; showers Y15; ☎9am-10pm) For a hot shower head to beside the Chóngqing Hotel. On the 1st floor you can get your laundry done for Y6 per piece.

THÖLING MONASTERY མཚོ་གླིང་ 托林寺

Founded by Rinchen Zangpo in the 10th century, **Thöling Monastery** (Tuólin Sì; joint admission ticket with Tsaparang Y200) was once Ngari's most important monastic complex. It was still functioning in 1966 when the Red Guards shut down operations and took a sledgehammer to the chapel's magnificent interiors. Three main buildings survive within the monastery walls. If you have little interest in Buddhist statues and murals, stick to the chörtens, mani walls and open views across the Sutlej Valley just north of the monastery.

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 ornate jewellery and dress, the tight stomach lines and non-Tibetan images of palm trees and *dhotis* (Indian-style loin-cloths). 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

DON'T MISS

AN AFTERNOON STROLL

A few steps east of the monastery compound is the recently restored **Serkhang chörtén**. A similar chörtén 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, when locals do a kora of the complex.

Zangpo. The lower walls of the inner area have murals depicting the life of the Buddha and the founders of the monastery. Murals of the protectors Dorje Jigje (Yamantaka) and Namse (Vairocana) decorate the main entry.

White Chapel (Lhakang 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, somewhat affected by water damage and recently restored by Swiss assistance. 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 are on the right. The far-right-corner murals depict a gruesome sky burial.

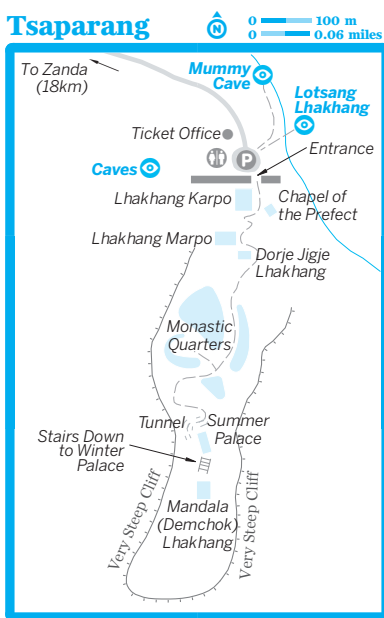
Yeshe Ö's Mandala Chapel (Nampar Nang Lhakang)

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 representation of the world of a meditational deity). All the images have been destroyed but the four chörtens remain along with a few remaining torsos, disembodied heads and limbs, scattered around the chapel like the leftovers from a sky burial. The mood created by the senseless loss of such magnificent art hangs heavy in the air.

You enter the Mandala Chapel through the Gyatsa Lhakang and finish off a visit by walking around an interior kora of chapels. Most are closed and devoid of statues but a few open to reveal broken legs and empty plinths.

TSAPARANG ལྷོག་གུ་ཅེན་ 古格古城

The citadel of **Tsaparang** (Gügé Gūchéng; joint admission ticket with Thöling Y200, optional guide per person Y10), 18km west of Zanda, has been gracefully falling into ruin ever since its slide from prominence in the 17th century. The ruins seem to grow organically out of the hills in tiers and are crowned by a red Summer Palace atop a yellow cockscomb-like outcrop. It's a photogenically



surreal landscape that resembles a giant termites' nest.

The site's early Tantric-inspired murals are of particular interest to experts on early Buddhist art. Even without the magnificent art, it's worth the trip for the views over the Sutlej Valley and to explore 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.

Early morning and evening (particularly around 8pm) offers the best light. No photography is allowed inside the chapels and guardians will watch you like a hawk. Bring a strong torch, snacks and water, and

expect to spend at least half a day exploring the ruins.

Sights

Chapel of the Prefect

CHAPEL

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-people (beside the Buddha's arms), hermits and dog-like 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

CHAPEL

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 (notably at Alchi Monastery in Ladakh). Laypeople can spot the Kashmiri influence in the slender torsos, thin waists and long fingers of the Hindu-inspired deities.

The ceiling is beautifully painted, as are the many thin supporting columns, made from composite pieces of wood (trees are scarcer than hen's teeth in Ngari). 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. In the far left corner are the legs of Jampa; to the right is Yeshe Ö. Originally each statue would have been framed by a *torana* (halo-like garland) and a Kashmiri-style plinth. 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 damaged 5m-high guardian figures, red Tamdrin (Hayagriva) and blue Chana Dorje (Vajra-

pani). 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

CHAPEL

Above the Lhakhang Karpo is the equally large **Lhakhang Marpo**, or Red Chapel, which was built around 1470, perhaps 30 years earlier than the Lhakhang Karpo. 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 Karpo.

The beautiful original chapel door, with its concentric frames and carvings of bodhisattvas, elephants and the syllables of the *om mani padme hum* ('hail to the jewel in the lotus') mantra in six panels, has survived and is worth close inspection. Inside, many thin columns support the chapel roof, similar to those of the neighbouring Lhakhang Karpo. By the main door are images of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), Green Tara and an angry eight-armed White Tara, with Dröлма and Jampelyang (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 that it's easy to forget 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 and dancing snow lions celebrate the completion of the temple. Officials stand in attendance (a Kashmir 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 chörtens, 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 CHAPEL

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. Beside him is a strange dog-faced protector riding a panther.

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, including the central Dorje Jigje.

Summer Palace CHAPEL

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 small but quite well-preserved, red-painted **Mandala (Demchok) Lhakhang** in the centre of the hilltop ridge once housed a wonderful three-dimensional mandala with Tantric murals, only the base of which survived the desecrations of the Cultural Revolution. It is often closed to visitors.

Winter Palace RUINS

Accessed by a steep and treacherous eroded staircase (now with an iron 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 chörtens and ruined chapel of the **Lotsang Lhakhang**. Only the feet of the main statue remain. Also worth a quick visit are the **caves** and **chörtens** to the west of the main site, near the public toilet behind the caretaker's compound.

Dungkar & Piyang ཏུང་ཀར་པི་ཡང་

Caves with extensive wall paintings were discovered at remote **Dungkar** (4250m; N 31°40.638', E 079°49.471') 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 in a side valley before the main village, 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 nearby Dungkar village also has a ruined **monastery** above the town.

A couple of kilometres west, the village of **Piyang** (4180m; N 31°40.962', E 079°47.784') is also worth the small detour. It lies at the foot of a large ridge honeycombed with thousands of caves and topped with a ruined monastery and two caves with fine murals.

Entry to both Dungkar and Piyang are technically included in the Y200 entry fee for Thöling and Tsaparang, though the Piyang caretaker charges an extra Y30 to enter the caves there since no money from the ticket makes it to the village.

Getting to Dungkar and Piyang is not easy. Most 4WD drivers don't know the area and the dirt roads are poorly signposted. If you come from the Ali-Zanda road, look for the turning east, just north of a village with caves behind it, 36km from Zanda. From here it's 9km past a stunning Himalayan viewpoint to Piyang and then another 5km to Dungkar. From Dungkar you can continue 8km to a junction, then turn right for 16km to join the main Zanda-Moincer road. From here it's 86km to the main Ali-Darchen road. This way you can get an early start and visit Piyang and Dungkar en route between Zanda and Darchen.

Rutok རུའོག་ཁྱེད་ལྗོངས་

The new Chinese town of Rutok Xian (Ritü Xiàn), 132km from Ali, is a modern army post, but there are a couple of great sights nearby that warrant a day trip, especially now that the upgraded road between Rutok and Ali has cut travel time down to just two hours.

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

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. It's worth continuing here for views of the lake but beware the tour boats; several Chinese tourists died here in 2010 when theirs capsized.

👁 Sights

Ancient Petroglyphs

ROCK CARVINGS

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 are at around 967. There are two distinct groups on the rock face 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.

Old Rutok

VILLAGE

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 move 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.

i 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

Fully organised trekking groups can trek to the Nepal-China border from Humla, a restricted region in the far west of Nepal. You will need a Nepali liaison officer, a specially endorsed Chinese visa and a full trek crew. See Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* for details of the five-day approach from Humla and the optional return via the Limi Valley.

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 འཇོ་རྒྱལ་མཚན་མོ་

ELEV 3790M

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, escaped the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the damage sustained has been repaired with financial assistance from German and Italian sponsors.

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 small *rangjung* 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.

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, Indian tiger, snow leopard, bear, wolverine and a wolf. The inner kora gives access to a hidden protector chapel. When you finish in-

side do a final kora around the compound to see the unusual *om mani padme hum* mantra painted on the back wall.

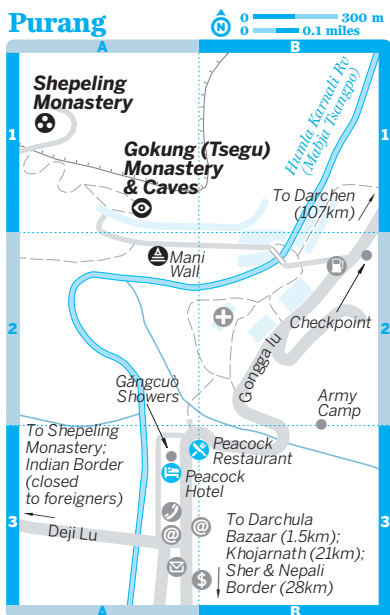
Khojarnath is 130km from Darchen or about 107km from Chiu Village on Lake Manasarovar and is a worthy detour. The drive south from Lake Manasarovar is one of the most scenic in western Tibet and it's easy to visit as a day trip.

PURANG རུ་རྩེ་ 普兰

0897 / ELEV 3800M

Purang (Pülán to the Chinese; 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 and Darchula regions 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.

Sights



In the hills above the Humla Bazaar are many retreat **caves** formed around the cliff-side **Gokung (Tsegu) Monastery**. Here, a ladder leads up to a couple of upper-floor cave chapels decorated with prayer flags and impressive murals.

The ruined **Shepeling (Simbaling) 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 monastery's treasures allegedly included one testicle of Indian invader Zowar Singh, displayed every four years during a festival! The Chinese army shelled the monastery during the Cultural Revolution and today only the assembly hall is partially restored. The views south over the valley and north towards a cave complex are superb but be surreptitious in taking photos. Slogans marked in stones above the military base praise Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several hotels in town, but the PSB only allows foreigners to stay in the Peacock Hotel.

Peacock Hotel

(孔雀宾馆; Kǒngquè Bīnguǎn;  290 0139; Gongga Lu; old block s/d Y120/1600, new block d Y280) This government hotel is actually divided into two hotels: a rundown old block with back-breaking beds, no running water and disinterested staff, and a **new block** (Xi'an Ying Bīnguǎn;  260 3266) with clean bathrooms with hot water and good spacious triples without bathrooms (Y200).

Peacock Restaurant

(孔雀饭庄; Kǒngquè Fànzhǔāng;  290 0139; Gongga Lu; dishes Y20-50; ) Despite the

HOTEL \$

CHINESE \$\$




DANGERS & ANNOYANCES


Be careful not to photograph – even inadvertently – the Chinese military base to the east or any of the small compounds in town. This is unlawful and you or your local guide could get in serious trouble for it.

proximity to Nepal, there's little flavour of the subcontinent in Purang's restaurants. This place has the normal range of good Chinese dishes in pleasant surroundings.

Information

Agricultural Bank of China (中国农业银行; Zhōngguó Nóngyè Yínháng; Gongga Lu;  10am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri) Changes cash and has a 24-hour ATM.

Bǎixīng Wǎngbā (百兴网吧; Gongga Lu; per hr Y6-8;  24hr) Internet cafe next to the Bǎixīng Supermarket, on the upper floor.

Gǎngcǎu Showers (岗措淋浴; Gǎngcǎu Línǚ; Gongga Lu; showers Y10;  10am-11pm) Outside the gate of the Peacock Hotel.

Lóngténg Internet Bar (龙腾网吧; Lóngténg Wǎngbā; Deji Lu; per hr Y6-8;  24hr)

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.

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

The road north from Purang passes the picturesque villages of Toyo and Deraling, with its unusual red chörtens on a ledge above town, en route to the Gurla-la (4715m). Though still part of western Tibet, the lush terraced fields and distinct architecture feels connected to Himalayan communities of Nepal and India. Just beyond the pass, Rakshas Tal and (on a clear day) Mt Kailash come into view. Keep looking back south for dramatic views of the Himalayas.

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