

Eastern Bhutan



Even though it is the most densely populated region, eastern Bhutan remains the kingdom's hinterland. Roads reach the major towns, but most settlements are hidden in the steep hillsides of remote and isolated valleys, some of which are home to minority ethnic groups comprising less than 1000 people.

The dominant language here is Sharchop (language of the east), although there are many local languages and dialects. Sharchop is different enough from Dzongkha that people from eastern and western Bhutan usually have to use English or Nepali to communicate. If you visit a particularly remote village your guide may have to resort to sign language.

Eastern Bhutanese love their home-brewed *arra* (rice wine) and locally grown green chillies. Because of the slash-and-burn system of shifting cultivation called *tseri*, the forest cover at lower elevations is less extensive than in other parts of Bhutan. The lower altitudes mean that spring and summer here are hot, humid and sweaty.

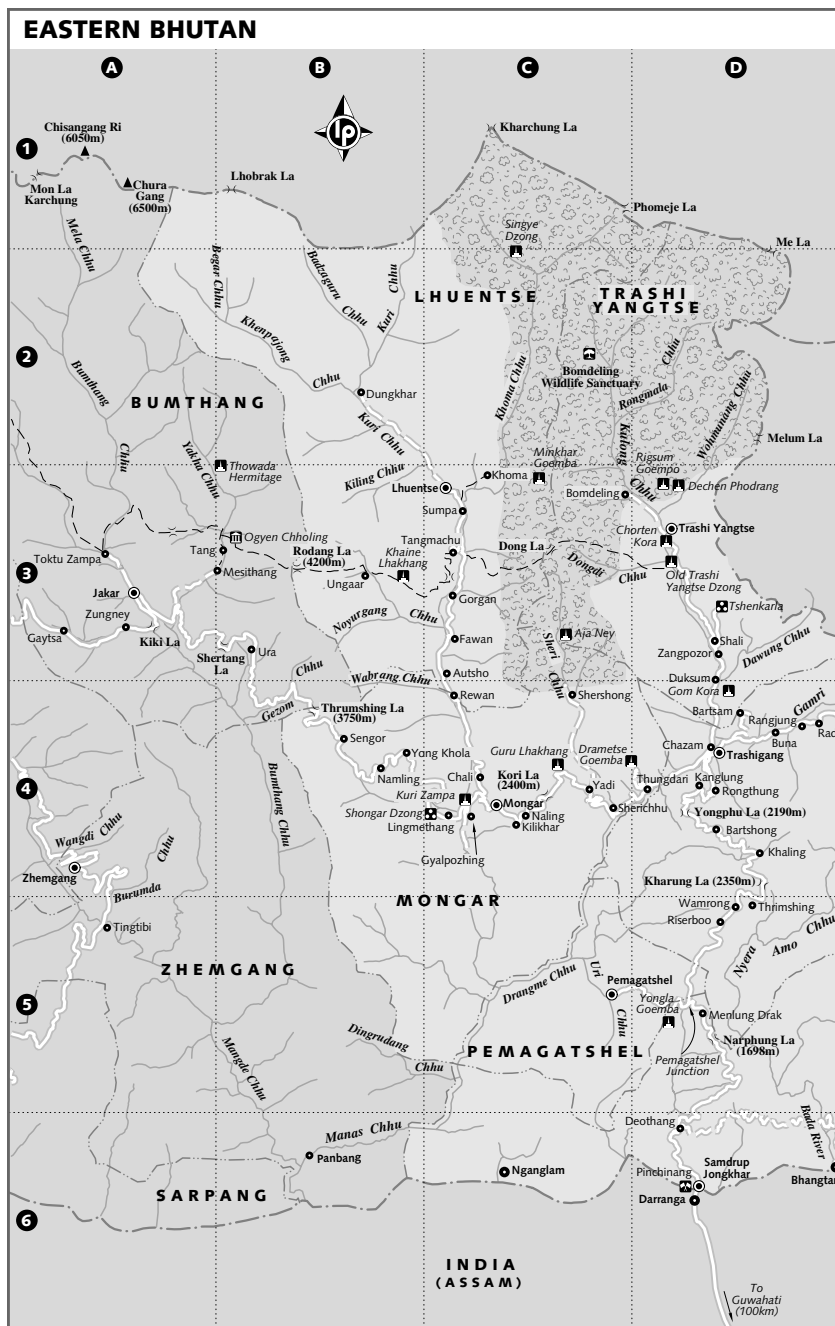
The general quality of hotels, food and service in eastern Bhutan is lower than it is in Thimphu and Paro. Don't venture into this part of the kingdom unless you have a sense of humour and are able to take a possible lack of hot water and Western toilets in your stride.

It's a *looong* drive out to the far east. The good news for tourists is that the border crossing at Samdrup Jongkhar is once again open to foreigners (though for exit only), so you can avoid the winding three-day drive back to Thimphu, with Guwahati and direct flights to Bangkok just a two-hour drive away.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit **Trashigang** (p190), one of the most attractive and lively towns in Bhutan
- Fasten your seatbelt for the dramatic cliff-hugging road over the 3750m **Thrumshing La** (p184)
- Take the picturesque drive up to **Lhuentse Dzong** (p187) in the remote and ancient region of Kurtoe
- Watch some of Bhutan's finest cloth being woven at the remote and traditional weaving village of **Khoma** (p188)
- Check your sin levels at the picturesque pilgrimage spot of **Gom Kora** (p193)
- Walk around the impressive Chorten Kora and watch handicrafts made at the National Institute for Zorig Chusum in remote **Trashi Yangtse** (p195)





Geography

Eastern Bhutan is separated from the rest of the country by a large and extremely steep chain of hills that runs from the Tibetan border almost to the Indian border. The road from Bumthang crosses these hills over the Thrumshing La (3750m). Other than trails, this one road is the region's only link to the rest of the country.

The Manas river system, Bhutan's largest river and a major tributary of the Brahmaputra, drains most of eastern Bhutan. The Kuri Chhu (with its headwaters in Tibet), the Drangme Chhu (with part of its source in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh), and the Kulong Chhu (which drains the Trashi Yangtse valley) all flow into the Manas. Just before it exits Bhutan, the Manas is joined by the Mangde Chhu, which drains Trongsa and most of central Bhutan.

History

In ancient times eastern Bhutan was ruled by a collection of separate petty kingdoms and an important trade route between India and Tibet. Goods flowed via Bhutan through what is now Singye Dzong in the Lhuentse district to the Tibetan town of Lhodrak.

The most important figure in this region's history was Chhogyel Mingyur Tenpa. When he was *penlop* (governor) of Trongsa he led his armies to eastern Bhutan to quell revolts in Bumthang, Lhuentse, Trashingang, Mongar and Zhemgang. His efforts were responsible for bringing eastern Bhutan under the rule of the *desi* (secular ruler of Bhutan) and went a long way towards the ultimate unification of the country. Mingyur Tenpa built the dzong at Trongsa and was responsible for the construction of most of the dzongs in eastern, as well as central, Bhutan. In 1668 he was enthroned as the third *desi* and ruled until 1680.

MONGAR DZONGKHAG

The Mongar district is the northern portion of the ancient region of Khyeng. Shongar Dzong, Mongar's original dzong, is in ruins, and the new dzong in Mongar town is not as architecturally spectacular as others in the region. Drametse Goemba, in the eastern part of the district, is an important Nyingma monastery, perched high above the valley.

JAKAR TO MONGAR (193KM)

It takes about seven hours to travel between Jakar and Mongar, crossing two passes and passing numerous sheer drops on what is one of the most spectacular drives in the country, descending 3200m in a distance of 84km. During winter the Thrumshing La is occasionally closed for a day or two during heavy snowfall.

Ura to Thrumshing La

36km / 1½ hours

Beyond the office of the Thrumshing La National Park and the Japanese-funded hydro-electric plant, the road crosses the small Lirgang Chhu on a bridge called Liri Zam to enter the territory of the national park. It climbs past overhanging cliffs and cedar trees, more often than not framed in mist, and crosses a ridge that is labelled Wangthang La on some maps. It then drops into the Gayzam Chhu valley and starts climbing again past a road workers' camp. Because the soil is very sandy, the road is unstable and has left a large scar on the hillside.

Three kilometres before the pass is a small park that features over 40 species of rhododendron. It's possible to follow the trail inside the park and hike up through the forest for 40 minutes to the pass. If you have a keen interest in rhododendrons it's often possible to get the park ranger to accompany you and point out the different species; mention this to your guide in advance and ask at the national park office in Ura.

If you are lucky enough to travel on a clear day, watch for a view of Gangkhar Puensum (7541m) as you approach the pass. A *mani* wall and prayer flags adorn the pass and a fallen sign proclaims: 'You are at highest point'. This is Thrumshing La (3750m), 85km from Jakar, and the border of Mongar Dzongkhag; you are now officially in eastern Bhutan.

Thrumshing La to Sengor

22km / 1 hour

The eastern side of the pass is much rockier; the road switchbacks down through a fir forest past a road sign that says 'Life is a journey, complete it'. At about 3000m, 20km from the pass, the route emerges from the trees and enters the pastures of the Sengor valley. The settlement at Sengor has a few houses near the road, although the main part of the village, about 20 houses, is in the centre of the valley. If you're carrying a picnic lunch and have not already eaten it,

this is an excellent place to do so – there is no good place to stop for the next two hours. A sign in Dzongkha adorns the rustic **Kuenphen Hotel** (☎ 03-635002) where you can get a simple local-style meal. A large road-construction contingent here toils to keep the pass open.

Sengor to Kuri Zampa

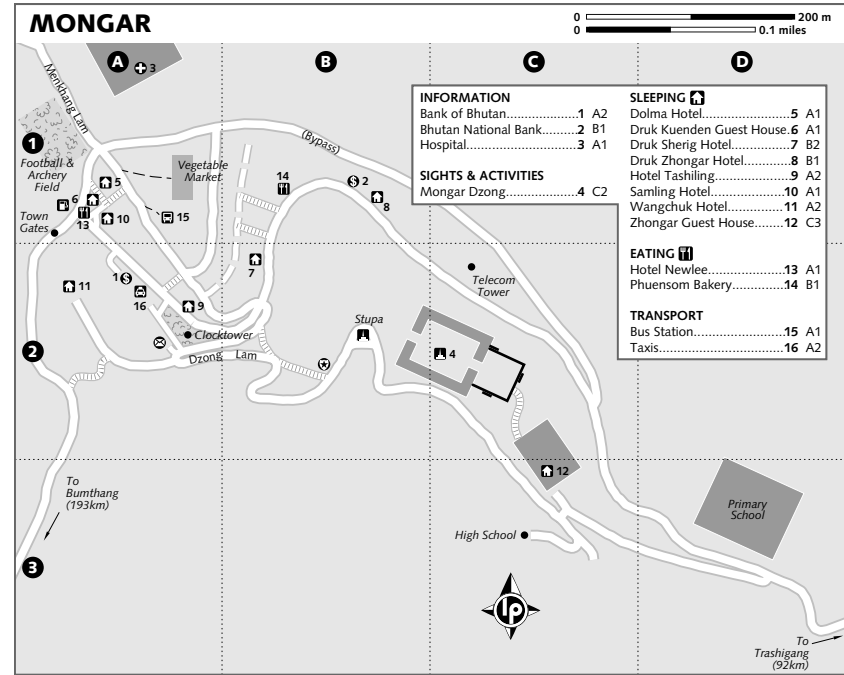
62km / 1¾ hours

The next stretch of road is the wildest in Bhutan. Five kilometres beyond the Sengor valley the road begins a steep descent into the Kuri Chhu valley, clinging to the side of a rock cliff, with numerous streams and waterfalls leaping out onto the road. The frequent fog and cloud on this side of the pass makes it difficult to see what's below – for which you should be profoundly grateful, since more often than not, there's nothing.

There are several chortens here – erected as memorials to the almost 300 Indian and Nepali contract labourers who were killed during the construction of this portion of the road. As you drive along the narrow track that was hacked into the side of a vertical cliff, it's hard not to be concerned that you might well join them soon. Prayer plaques and Shiva tridents offer some limited spiritual protection. There are no settlements here except for a camp at **Namling**, 22km from Sengor, where a crew works frantically to protect the road from tumbling down the mountainside.

About 17km from Namling, after a long descent that traverses the side of a cliff, the road reaches safer ground and leaves the territory of the Thrumshing La National Park. At Yong Khola it emerges into the upper part of a large side valley of the Kuri Chhu, a lush land of bamboo, ferns and leeches (and good bird-watching). You pass cornfields and descend to the valley floor on a road that winds around like a pretzel. Rice terraces appear and tropical fruits such as mango and pineapple start to flourish.

Atop a hill on the opposite side of the river, near the kilometre marker 123, is a view of the ruined **Shongar Dzong**. There's not much to see – just some stone walls almost hidden by trees on the top of a hillock – but this is believed to have been one of the earliest and largest dzongs, perhaps built as early as 1100. Like Trongsa, Shongar was powerful because the dzong was ideally situated to control movements between eastern and western Bhutan. The new dzong was built in Mongar town



when the old one was destroyed by fire in 1899. You can hike to the dzong on a sweaty overgrown trail rich with birdlife.

A few kilometres further, Lingmethang (650m) has a large Public Works Department (PWD) station, some small rough wooden shops, a pig farm and a big sawmill.

The road turns north at a chorten that marks the junction of the main Kuri Chhu valley. At Kuri Zampa (570m) you finally hit the valley floor with a bump – an amazing descent of 3200m from the pass. Step out of your vehicle and breathe in the thick syrupy air before frantically stripping off three layers of clothing. On the east side of a prayer flag-strewn Bailey bridge is a large concrete **chorten** that is patterned after Bodhnath in Nepal; it is said to contain relics from the original Shongar Dzong. Beside the bridge is a deserted factory that used to extract oil from lemongrass, before the funding ran out.

A secondary road leads downstream to the new town of Gyalpoching and the Kuri Chhu power project. The government is in the process of building an entire town similar to Khuruthang here, including a 64km-long

road down the Kuri Chhu valley to Nanglam on the Indian border.

Kuri Zampa to Mongar

25km / 45 mins

The road to Mongar climbs through chir-pine forests up the eastern side of the Kuri Chhu valley. To the north you can see the road to Lhuentse traversing the side of the valley. This road leaves the Mongar road at Gangola, 12km before Mongar, and travels 65km to Lhuentse (see p186).

The Mongar road climbs up and up through cornfields towards a cluster of houses on top of the hill. A final switchback leads into Mongar.

MONGAR

☎ 04 / elev 1600m

Most towns in the west of Bhutan are in valleys. In eastern Bhutan most towns, including Mongar, are on the tops of hills or ridges. A row of large eucalyptus trees protects the town from the wind.

There is little of real interest to see in Mongar, but many people spend a night here before continuing to Trashigang. It takes about

11 hours to drive from Jakar to Trashigang. This often means driving at night, which is a waste in such interesting countryside.

The pleasant main street is lined with traditionally painted wooden Bhutanese buildings decorated with colourful potted plants. Archers sharpen their aim on the football ground most afternoons.

Orientation

Mongar was redesigned in 1997 when a bypass road was constructed and a large part of the bazaar razed and rebuilt. The dzong is on a ridge above the town.

Information

Bank of Bhutan (Map p185; ☎ 641123; 🕒 9am-1pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat)

Bhutan National Bank (Map p185; ☎ 641495)

Hospital (Map p185; ☎ 641112) Eastern Bhutan's new main hospital should open here in 2007.

Sights

MONGAR DZONG

The present **Mongar Dzong** was rebuilt in 1953; unusual because it has two entrances and because the monk and administrative bodies share the same courtyard. The dzong was established here in 1930 to replace the original Shongar Dzong, although the original *utse* (central tower) dates from an earlier age. There are 250 monks in the dzong, many of them young boys aged eight to 10 years old. The week-long Mongar tsechu is held here in November. The main Sangay Lhakhang is probably the only chapel in Bhutan equipped with comfy sofas!

Sleeping

Several new tourist hotels should have opened by the time you read this, including the top-end **Wangchuk Hotel** (Map p185) and **Druk Sherig Hotel** (Map p185), and these will be the hotels of choice.

Druk Zhongar Hotel (Map p185; ☎ 641587; fax 641590; r Nu 1800, ste Nu 2200; 📺) Until the new hotels open, this well-run modern hotel is easily the best place in town. Rooms are excellent, with a balcony and satellite TV, though some are larger than others. The Phuntso Delek Restaurant here is also good and a steam room is planned.

Zhongar Guest House (Map p185; ☎ 641107; s Nu 500-1200, d Nu 800-1400) This government guesthouse is in a charming traditional-style wooden building, complete with royal quarters, great views over the dzong and a fabulous sense of history. Unfortunately staying here is a bit of

a gamble; if at any time government employees turn up, you'll be turfed out, even with a reservation, so agents are naturally reluctant to book you here. Some of the rooms have shared bathrooms.

Dolma Hotel (Map p185; ☎ 641508; d Nu 500) A clean and modern place in a shopping plaza, with a balcony and private bathrooms.

There are numerous small local-style hotels in Mongar because the Trashigang-Thimphu bus stops here on the first night of its three-day journey. The only place occasionally used by foreigners is the overpriced **Druk Kuenden Guest House** (Map p185; ☎ 641240; r Nu 400-900), though there's also the **Hotel Tashiling** (Map p185; ☎ 641207) and **Samling Hotel** (Map p185; ☎ 641111), both with rooms from Nu 250 to 350.

Eating

Almost everyone eats in their hotel. Both the **Druk Kuenden Guest House** (☎ 641127) and the **Samling Hotel** (☎ 641111) have cosy lodge-style restaurants, as does the nearby **Hotel Newlee** (Map p185; ☎ 621240). The **Phuensom Bakery** (Map p185; ☎ 641143) is the place to load up for the following day's picnic lunch. The entire town closes by 8pm.

Getting There & Away

Buses run daily to Trashigang (6am) and Lhuentse (1pm), and on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday to Thimphu (two days, 6am) and Samdrup Jongkhar (6.30am).

LHUENTSE DZONGKHAG

Formerly known as Kurtoe, the isolated district of Lhuentse is the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family. Although geographically in the east, it was culturally identified with central Bhutan, and the high route over Rodang La was a major trade route until the road to Mongar was completed. Many Lhuentse women have looms at home and Khoma is especially famous for its *kushuthara* (brocade) weaving.

MONGAR TO LHUENTSE (76KM)

Lhuentse is 63km from the junction at Gangola and a three-hour drive from Mongar. It's a dramatic trip, frequently taking you alongside cliffs high above the river valley, but it's a comfortable ride if there have not been any recent landslides.

Mongar to Autsho

38km / 1¼ hours

It is 12km down the hill from Mongar to the junction of the Lhuentse road at Gangola (1110m). The Lhuentse road winds around the hill to Chali and passes the few houses of Palangphu and then the new suspension bridge to Banjor village (the previous bridge further upstream was washed away when a glacial lake burst, sending floodwaters surging down the valley). The road descends through an unstable slide area to the banks of the Kuri Chhu and the two shops that make up the village of Rewan. Passing a large Tibetan-style brick chorten surrounded by 108 smaller chortens, the road reaches the extensive cornfields and impressive riverside location of **Autsho** (920m). Near the river you may be able to spot rhesus monkeys playing on stones, and black cormorants looking for fish.

Autsho to Tangmachu

26km / 1 hour

The road passes towering cliffs, half hidden in the mist, en route to Fawan. The road switchbacks 100m above the river to the scruffy roadside settlement of Gorgan opposite the large valley of the Noyurgang Chhu, which enters from the west. Near this part of the road, in Umling, are said to be the remains of an ancient underground stone castle built by Bangtsho Gyalpo in about 1500 BC.

After a while the Kuri Chhu valley begins to widen. Beyond a large white chorten the road crosses to the west bank of the river on a suspension bridge. On the hillside high above the bridge locals are building a 41m-high statue of Guru Rinpoche, above the improbably located settlement of **Tangmachu** (known locally as Darkila). The statue will be one of the world's tallest and will cost 100 million ngultrum. A rough unpaved road leads 10km up to the village and high school, 600m above the road, but the road is often impassable if it's been raining.

Tangmachu to Lhuentse

13km / 30 mins

The road traverses the foot of the Tangmachu valley for about 6km, passing a road construction camp and a hydrology station at Sumpa. Rounding a corner there's a view of **Lhuentse Dzong**, which dominates the head of the valley. A small suspension bridge leads across the river here, providing access to

the trail to Khoma and Singye Dzong (see p188).

A short distance on the valley narrows and the road begins climbing towards the town. As the road passes the hospital there is an excellent view of the dzong perched dramatically atop a bluff. The road to Dongkhar branches off by the hospital.

LHUENTSE

☎ 04 / elev 1440m

There is little to see in Lhuentse and there's no actual village here, but the dzong is one of the most picturesque in Bhutan. The series of concrete terraces you see as you enter the town, just above the current collection of wooden shops and bars, is the site for yet another of Bhutan's new towns. The pillared pavilion nearby is a cremation ground.

The road terminates in front of the dzong. Adjoining the parking lot are quarters for government officials working in Lhuentse who have been posted to this remote area where housing is scarce.

It's worth driving up to the Royal Guest House for views of the dzong and the snow peaks at the head of the Kuri Chhu valley. The peak at the head of the valley to the northwest of the guesthouse is Sheri Nyung.

As you leave Lhuentse for Mongar, look out for the ancient ruined bridge down in the valley below, just before the bend in the river.

Sights

LHUENTSE DZONG

Lhuentse Rinchentse Phodrang Dzong, as it is correctly known, sits high on a rocky outcrop overlooking the Kuri Chhu valley, with near-vertical drops on all sides.

Although Pema Lingpa's son Kuenga Wangpo established a small goemba on this site early in the 16th century, the dzong itself was built by the Trongsa *penlop* Mingyur Tenpa in 1654. It has been renovated several times and numerous lhakhangs have been added. A three-day tsechu fills the dzong to capacity in December/January.

Visitors can visit seven lhakhangs, assuming you can find someone with the keys. The 100 or so resident monks see few tourists and are very friendly, which perhaps explains why visitors here have more freedom to explore than they do in any other dzong in Bhutan.

Sleeping & Eating

Royal Guest House (☎ 545102; bed Nu 120-200) Lhuentse's only hotel is this government guesthouse, on a hill 100m above the town. It's possible to get a booking here but it's a hassle (the local *dzongkhag* administration prefers you have permission from the Home Ministry in Thimphu) and you could get bumped by visiting officials.

It's best to arrive in Lhuentse with a packed lunch, otherwise you can get Bhutanese dishes and perhaps *momos* (dumplings) at the basic **Shangri-la Hotel** (☎ 545123) or nearby and slightly nicer **Karma Hotel**.

Transport

Buses run three times a week to Thimphu, overnighing in Bumthang.

AROUND LHUENTSE Khoma

If you are interested in weaving (and even if you're not) it's worth making the hike up to this traditional weaving village. The village produces some of Bhutan's most sought-after and expensive *kushutara* weavings and almost all of the 30 houses in the village have traditional back-strap looms set up in their porches. The weavings are so elaborate that they resemble embroidery and are generally used as *kiras* (women's traditional dress), though bags and other pieces are produced. The village's comparative wealth has translated into Sony TVs and Hoyt bows, and mule caravans frequently shuttle consumer goodies up to the well-stocked shops. The Zangto Pelri Lhakhang sits on a spur overlooking the river junction.

It's an easy 90-minute hike up to the village, passing the Drak Kharmo (White Hermitage Cave) of Guru Rinpoche, visible high on the far cliffs.

A few Bhutanese travel companies offer three-day tours of surrounding weaving villages, including Gonpokarpo, Chenling, Minje and Nyilamdun (Ngangladung)

Dungkhar

An unpaired road runs from Lhuentse for 39km to the small village of Dungkhar, named because the ridge upon which it sits is shaped like a conch (*dungkhar*). Pema Lingpa's son Kuenga Wangpo settled here, and it is through him that Bhutan's royal family, the Wangchucks, trace their ancestry to the Kurtoe region. Jigme Namgyal, father of the first king, was born here in

1825 and left home when he was 15 to eventually become Trongsa *penlop* and the 51st *desi*.

Special permission is required to visit Dungkhar, although check with your travel agency as this may soon change. The Jigme Namgyal Naktshang and the renovated 16th-century Dungkhar Naktshang are above the village. (A *naktshang* is a temple dedicated to a warlord or protective deity.) Also here is the renovated Dungkhar Choeje, the birthplace of the first king. Guru Rinpoche meditated in a cave overlooking Dungkhar, and Pema Lingpa visited the area many times and built Goeshog Pang Lhakhang near the river below the village.

Singye Dzong

Singye Dzong is on the old trade route from Bhutan to Lhobrak in Tibet. Guru Rinpoche meditated here and it's an important pilgrimage place for Bhutanese. The trek takes three days in each direction, but is off-limits to tourists. Yeshe Tsogyal, the consort of Guru Rinpoche who concealed many *terma* here, founded the goemba.

TRASHIGANG DZONGKHAG

Trashigang is the heart of eastern Bhutan and was once the centre of important trade with Tibet. There are several goembas and villages that make a visit worthwhile, but a lot of driving is required to reach this remote region.

MONGAR TO TRASHIGANG (92KM)

The Mongar to Trashigang stretch is easier and shorter than the journey from Jakar to Mongar, but you still need about 3½ hours to cover the 92km between the two towns, plus an extra two hours if you detour to Drametse Goemba. The road crosses one low pass, then follows a river valley before making a final climb to Trashigang.

Mongar to Kori La

17km / 30 mins

Leaving Mongar, the road climbs past fields of corn to the power substation and *shedra* (Buddhist college) at Kilikhar, then through rhododendron and blue-pine forests to the few houses in the scattered settlement of Naling. Soon the road is clinging to the side of a

cliff, passing through a deep forest of rhododendrons and orchids.

About 3km past a forest nursery is Kori La (2400m), where there is an array of prayer flags and a small *mani* wall. The forest surrounding the pass is under a management plan regulating the harvest of trees and bamboo.

Kori La to Yadi

21km / 1 hour

The road drops from the pass into the upper reaches of the extensive Manas Chhu drainage, switchbacking down through broadleaf forests to the small private Guru Lhakhang, near the village of **Naktshang**. Above the road are several small buildings used by monks as retreat and meditation centres.

The road continues its descent past fence-like prayer flags (the Bhutanese equivalent of road safety barriers) and through fields of corn and mustard, past the road-crew camp at Ningala, finally reaching the substantial village of **Yadi** (1480m). The **Choden Restaurant** (☎ 04-539113) here is a good place to break for a cup of tea and a look at the village lhakhang just across the road.

Below Yadi a dirt road branches off 17km to Shershong (or Serzhong) and, for Bhutanese pilgrims only, a two-day walk to Aja Ney. The 'A' of Aja is a sacred letter and 'ja' means 'one hundred'. Guru Rinpoche placed one hundred letter As on rocks here, and for devotees it's like a spiritual treasure hunt: the more you see the more merit you gain. Those without sin usually find the most.

Yadi to Thungdari

33km / 1 hour

Beyond Yadi a long stretch of prayer flags lines the road; below are numerous switchbacks, nicknamed the **Yadi Loops**, that lead down through a forest of chir pine, dropping 350m in 10km. There is a good viewpoint where you can see the road weaving down the hill; pictures taken from here often appear in books and brochures to illustrate just how circuitous Bhutan's roads are. The unpaired road that heads west before the loops begin leads to the village and hydro plant of Chaskhar.

After more switchbacks, the road crosses a bridge painted with the eight auspicious symbols and continues for 10km to the nondescript bazaar of Sherichhu (600m). Climb out of the Sherichhu valley to a chorten and cross a

ridge to meet the large Drangme Chhu, which flows from the eastern border of Bhutan and is a major tributary of the Manas Chhu. The road winds in and out of side valleys for 12km to Thungdari, 71km from Mongar, where a side road leads to Drametse Goemba.

Drametse Goemba

Drametse is the biggest and most important monastery in eastern Bhutan. It's an 18km, hour-long detour on a dirt track off the main road, gaining 1350m, and you'll need a 4WD vehicle if it's been raining.

There are about 60 *gomchen* (lay or married Nyingma monks) at Drametse. The monastery was founded in 1511 by the great-granddaughter of Pema Lingpa, Ani Chhoeten Zangmo, and her husband, Yeshe Gyalpo, in a place she named Drametse, which means 'the peak where there is no enemy'.

The monastery is famous as the home of the Nga Cham drum dance that features in many tsechus and which was proclaimed a masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage by Unesco in 2005.

The murals of the guardian kings in the entryway were painted in the 1950s and repainted in 1982. In the main chapel, to the right of a central Guru Rinpoche, is the gold chorten of Chhoeten Zangmo, next to a statue of her great-grandfather.

The middle floor has chapels dedicated to the protectors Palden Lhamo (Sri Devi) and the 'horse-necked' Tamdrin (Hayagriva). The upstairs **Goenkhang Chenmo** (Great Protector Chapel) is jam-packed with weapons, a stuffed lynx, a dead flying fox (that looks like it's been blown up with a foot pump), lots of arrows and the three local protector deities of Gyelpo, Drametse and Tsong Tsoma. Make an offering and you'll be blessed with a sacred thread. The next-door Tseringma Lhakhang houses the black hats used in the annual tsechu in September/October (see p247), as well as five versions of Tseringma, all riding different mythological beasts. Finally the Kanjur Lhakhang houses a box of sacred relics, including bowls and *drilbu* (Tantric bells).

This is wonderful potato-growing country. In the autumn there are huge piles of potatoes waiting for trucks to carry them down to the market for eventual sale in India and Bangladesh. In the distance to the southeast you can see the college at Kanglung (see p196).

Thungdari to Chazam

11km / 30 mins

Back down on the main road you'll catch glimpses of Trashigang Dzong high above the south bank of the Drangme Chhu. Much of the hillside beside the road is made up of loose alluvial deposits. Boulders embedded in the sand often break loose during rainstorms and fall onto the road, causing delays while road crews scramble to remove them.

After passing a PWD camp at Rolong, the road reaches a new 90m-long bridge at Chazam (710m). This place was named after the original chain-link bridge here, said to have been built by the Tibetan bridge builder Thangtong Gyalpo (see the boxed text, p131) in the 15th century (*cha* means 'iron', *zam* means 'bridge'). The large building that formed the abutment of the old bridge has been partially restored and can be seen a short distance upstream of the new bridge. Look for the ruins of watchtowers on the ridge above the old bridge.

Chazam to Trashigang

9km / 15 mins

On the south side of the bridge is an immigration checkpoint where police inspect your travel permit. The road north from here follows the Kulong Chhu valley and then climbs to Trashi Yangtse (p195).

The road switchbacks up through cornfields towards Trashigang, passing a turn-off that leads down to the small settlement of Chenary. The Druk Seed Corporation here produces seeds for subtropical fruit.

At the top of the hill is a collection of motor workshops and a road junction. The road to southern Bhutan leads to the right. The left fork leads to Trashigang, 3km away. Go round a bend where there's a good view of Trashigang Dzong, then follow the road into Trashigang, which is well hidden in a wooded valley.

TRASHIGANG

☎ 04 / elev 1070m

Trashigang is one of Bhutan's more interesting towns and a good base for excursions to Trashi Yangtse, Khaling, Radi, Phongme and elsewhere in eastern Bhutan.

Accommodation here is fairly limited, but there is a variety of restaurants and you're bound to find at least one amusing place to drink among the town's 21 bars. Not many tourists make it to Trashigang, but there used to be many Canadian teachers working here

and the people of Trashigang are used to Westerners.

Villagers come to town on holy days, which occur on the first, 10th and 15th of the Bhutanese month, to trade and sample the local *arra*.

Orientation

Trashigang is at the foot of a steep wooded valley with the tiny Mithidang Chhu channelled through it. The road crosses the stream on a substantial bridge near a chorten. A side road leads downhill from the chorten past a handsome collection of shops, bars and small restaurants, then through trees and bougainvillea past a chorten to the dzong.

The town's focal point is a central plaza and parking area. A large prayer wheel sits in the centre of the square. The pedestal on the covered structure, holding the prayer wheel, is a favourite sleeping place for villagers waiting for buses. Surrounding the parking area are several hotels and restaurants, a bakery and the main liquor outlet.

The road north of here quickly branches, left to Rangjung, Radi and Phongme, or right to the upper town's main administrative offices.

Information

Bank of Bhutan (Map p191; ☎ 521294; 🕒 9am-1pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat)

Bhutan National Bank (Map p191; ☎ 521129; 🕒 9am-1pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat) On the ground floor of the post office.

Jigme Wangmo Photo Studio (Map p191) Sells *Kuensel* as well as print film.

Kuenphen Medical Store (Map p191; ☎ 521175) For medical supplies.

Pelden Digital Café and Gift Corner (Map p191; 🕒 8am-9pm; per min Nu 3) Internet access.

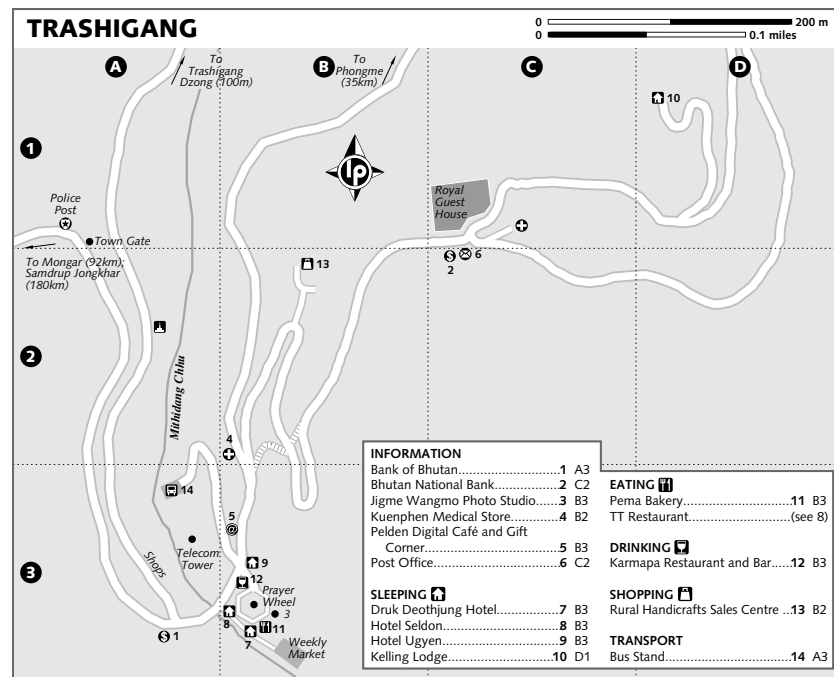
Post Office (Map p191; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Above the town, near the high school.

Sights

TRASHIGANG DZONG

The **dzong** is on a high promontory that overlooks the confluence of the Drangme Chhu and the Gamri Chhu. It was built in 1667 by Mingyur Tenpa, Bhutan's third *desi*. The entire eastern region was governed from this dzong from the late 17th century until the beginning of the 20th century.

This dzong is unusual in that both the administrative and monastic bodies face onto a single *dochey* (courtyard). As always, the



gorikha (porch) has paintings of the Four Guardian Kings. Inside the Kunrey Lhakhang is a statue of the deity Gasin-re or Yama, the wrathful aspect of Chenresig. He is a protector of the faith, the god of death and the king of law, and the one that weighs up the good and evil at the end of a person's life. You can see him in the vestibule of most lhakhangs holding the Wheel of Life in his mouth. Many lama dances are performed in Trashigang to appease Yama, especially during the four-day *teschu* in November/December.

Sleeping & Eating

An alternative to staying in Trashigang is to continue 16km east of town and overnight at the pleasant guesthouse of the Rangjung Wodsel Chholling Monastery (see p192).

Druk Deothjung Hotel (Map p191; ☎ 521214; fax 521269; s/d Nu 1150/1500; 📺) This family-run hotel near the central prayer wheel is the best in town. It's comfortable, with satellite TV and hot-water showers, and is an authentic Bhutanese hotel unlike many of the ones that tourists get herded into, but it's far from luxurious, with concrete grills in the walls that let in bugs and

street noise. The pleasant al-fresco dining area serves up the best food in town. The owner is planning a 20-room hotel 1km west of town but has yet to gain permission to build.

Kelling Lodge (Map p191; ☎ 521145; s/d Nu 150/300, deluxe s/d Nu 250/450) Travellers can in theory obtain permission to stay at this slightly neglected government guesthouse. The two top-floor deluxe rooms are perfect for a group of four.

Hotel Ugyen (Map p191; ☎ 521140; s/d Nu 100/200) Formerly the Sonam Wangchuck, this basic place is very much a third or fourth choice. It has rooms that are similar in standard to a trekking lodge in Nepal, with basic bathrooms down the corridor.

Hotel Seldon (Map p191; ☎ 521362; s/d Nu 500/800) This also has some basic overpriced rooms for rent upstairs, if you are desperate.

Pema Bakery (Map p191; ☎ 521196) Next-door to the Druk Deothjung Hotel, this bakery serves bread and pastries, as well as a good range of imported goodies from Pringles to Coffee Mate.

TT Restaurant (Map p191; ☎ 521184) For a quick meal of rice, *ema datse* (chillies with cheese)

and meat try this busy place, downstairs in the back of the Hotel Seldon.

Entertainment

The garden of the Druk Deothjung Hotel is a favourite place to savour a cold beer. If you prefer something more Bhutanese in flavour, try the **Karmapa Restaurant and Bar** (Map p191) but drink quickly, because the entire town starts to close at 8pm.

Shopping

The small **handicrafts shop** at the Druk Deothjung Hotel is your last place to load up on souvenirs.

The **Rural Handicrafts Sales Centre** (Map p191; ☎ 521150; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm, Mon-Fri) is a showroom for Khaling's National Handloom Development Project, so is the place to pick up woven *kiras*, table runners and scarves, particularly if you can't make it to the weaving centre in Khaling (see p196). *Kiras* aren't cheap (Nu 4000 to 16,000) but bear in mind that an elaborate piece can take up to six months to weave.

Getting There & Away

From Trashigang it's 281km to Bumthang, 349km to Trongsa and 551km to Thimphu.

The local jeep drivers that wait at the bus stand say that if you leave Trashigang at 3.30am, you can reach Thimphu at 8.30pm, a total of 17 hours' gruelling driving.

There are daily local buses to Thimphu, Samdrup Jongkhar and Radhi, as well as less-frequent services to Mongar (Monday to Saturday), Trashi Yangtse (Wednesday and Saturday) and Phongme (Wednesday, Friday and Sunday). On many of these services the 'bus' is actually a converted truck, which provides a very bumpy and dusty ride.

MIGOI – THE BHUTANESE YETI

Naturally, Bhutanese yetis have different characteristics from yetis found (or not found) in Tibet and other Himalayan regions. The Bhutanese name for a yeti is *migoi* (strong man) and they are believed to exist throughout northern and northeastern Bhutan, particularly in Sakten Wildlife Sanctuary.

The *migoi* is covered in hair that may be anything from reddish-brown to black, but its face is hairless, almost human. It is similar to the yetis of Nepal and Tibet in that the breasts of the female are large and sagging, and both sexes have an extremely unpleasant smell. But Bhutanese *migoi* are special because they have the power to become invisible, which accounts for the fact that so few people have seen them. Another feature that helps them escape detection is that the feet of many yetis face backwards, confusing people who try to follow them.

The book *Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti* by Kunzang Choden is a wonderful collection of tales told by village people in Bhutan who have seen, or have met people who have seen, a *migoi*.

FAR EASTERN BHUTAN

The paved road east from Trashigang travels up the valley of the Gamri Chhu to Rangjung, and then continues as a dirt track to Radi and Phongme. This is the end of the line, as far east as you can go in Bhutan. If you're short on time, you won't miss much by skipping this route.

Trashigang to Rangjung

16km / 45 mins

The road descends from Trashigang, weaving in and out of side valleys to the banks of the Gamri Chhu at 820m. A side road crosses the river here and leads 19km uphill in great zigzagging gashes to the town and goemba at Bartsam. The Rangjung road stays on the south side of the river, passing through an area affected by flooding in 2005 (the chorten in the middle of the plain that protects against floods didn't do a very good job...). Shortly afterwards is the village of Lungtenzampa.

After traversing fields for 6km, past the large Vocational Training Institute at Buna, the road crosses the small Kharti Chhu and makes a short climb to **Rangjung** at 1120m. Beyond the high school an elaborate chorten dominates the pleasant centre of town. The weekly vegetable market is sheltered by a huge mango tree. The new road layout for a planned expansion is in place just to the north of the village.

Above the town is the **Rangjung Woesel Chholing Monastery**, a large Nyingma goemba founded in 1990 by Garub Rinpoche. The main chapel has some impressive *torma* (sculptures of barley and butter), including one depicting the five senses, with eyeballs, earlobes, nostrils, a tongue and skin. The lower courtyard hosts *cham* dancing at the end of a 10-day *drup* (festival) in the 12th month.

The monastery has a good new **guesthouse** (☎ 04-561145; s/d Nu 600/800) just up the hill that is occasionally booked by tourists and particularly Buddhist groups. The modern concrete bungalows smell like a hospital but have private bathrooms and offer great views over the goemba.

Rangjung to Phongme

17km / 1 hour

The road continues east, climbing through large rice terraces and fields of corn to Radi (1570m).

For an unusual outing, hike downhill for about 30 minutes from the Yeshi Lhundup shop, at a hairpin loop just before Radi (kilometre marker 23), to the small village of **Tzangkhar**. Most of the women here are weavers who specialise in fabrics made from *bura* (raw silk), and it's fun to walk from house to house to see the results. Enough cloth to make a *gho* or *kira* costs about Nu 30,000 for a flower design and about Nu 10,000 for a plainer pattern. It's a stiff uphill climb back to the road, gaining 130m.

Beyond Radi the road climbs past terraced hillsides and above the large modern **Thakcho Kunzang Choeden Anim Goemba**. A few kilometres later, past Khardung village, is the collection of shops that is Phongme (1840m).

On the hill above the village is the 150-year-old **Phongme Lhakhang**. The central statue is of Chenresig with 1000 arms and 11 heads. A rolled-up *thondrol* (building-sized *thangka*) hangs from the rafters and *cham* masks are stored in boxes at the foot of the statues.

Sakten Wildlife Sanctuary

From Phongme a trail leads east to the remote minority villages of **Merak** and **Sakten**, which are inhabited by seminomadic tribesmen called Brokpa. Tourists were permitted to make this three-day trek in the past, but since 1995 the route has been closed to foreigners out of concern for the unique culture of the people living there. Tall Brokpa men often come into Phongme, Khaling and Trashigang to trade. You can recognise them by their sheepskin and yak-hair clothing and unusual yak-felt hats called *shamo*, which have hanging spider-like legs that act as rainspouts.

Katie Hickman gives a good description of her visit to the region on horseback in her travelogue *Dreams of the Peaceful Dragon* (see p17).

Apart from the Brokpas, the sanctuary's most famous resident is the *migoi*, or yeti, for whom the park was allegedly established in 2002. The sanctuary office is 1km east of Phongme, at the end of the motorable road.

TRASHI YANGTSE DZONGKHAG

Previously a *drungkhag* (subdistrict) of Trashigang, Trashi Yangtse became a fully fledged *dzongkhag* in 1993. It borders the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, and there is some cross-border trade. The old trade route between east and west Bhutan used to go through Trashi Yangtse, over the mountains to Lhuentse and then over Rodang La (4200m) to Bumthang. This difficult route fell into disuse when the road from Trashigang to Bumthang via Mongar was completed. The district lies at the headwaters of the Kulong Chhu, and was earlier known as Kulong.

TRASHIGANG TO TRASHI YANGTSE (53KM)

The drive from Trashigang to Trashi Yangtse takes about 1½ hours' driving time, but you should budget extra time to visit Gom Kora on the way. There's lots to see en route and it's a great day trip from Trashigang. Even if you don't have time to drive all the way to Chorten Kora, do make the effort to make the short trip to Gom Kora.

To get from Trashigang to Chazam (9km, 15 minutes), follow the switchbacks down to the bridge at Chazam. Just past Chazam, an unpaved side road leads steeply uphill to Gangthung and Yangnyer. The complex that is visible a short distance up this road is a jail.

From Chazam, the road is level as it winds its way through sparse clumps of chir pine above the west bank of the Drangme Chhu to Gom Kora (13km, 30 minutes). A couple of kilometres before Gom Kora, by the side of the road, is a *nye* (holy spot), where a rock shrine is covered in *tsha-tshas* (small images moulded in clay) and brass images of the Rigsum Goempo.

Gom Kora

Gom Kora is an extraordinarily picturesque temple to the east of the road, 13km north of Chazam. The lush green of the fields, the red

robes of the monks and the yellow roof of the temple combine with colourful painted Buddhist carvings and the rushing of the nearby river to create an idyllic atmosphere.

The correct name for the site is Gomphu Kora. Gomphu denotes a sacred meditation site of Guru Rinpoche and *kora* means 'circumambulation'. The Guru meditated here and left a body impression on a rock, similar to that in Kurjey Lhakhang in Bumthang.

The central figure in the goemba is Guru Rinpoche. To the right is Chenresig in his 1000-armed aspect. To the far right is an image of the snake demon Gangan Yonga Choephel, who holds a golden mirror in his right hand. The murals on the walls of the goemba are believed to date from the 15th century.

On a shelf below Chenresig are numerous sacred objects that either miraculously appeared here or were brought by the Guru. The largest item is a *garuda's* egg, which is a very heavy, perfectly shaped, stonelike egg. Other relics include the traditional bootprint of the Guru, the footprint of his consort Yeshe Tsogyal (aged eight), the hoofprint of Guru Rinpoche's horse and a phallus-shaped rock belonging to Pema Lingpa.

Gom Kora's celebrated old *thondrol*, unique because it is painted, not appliquéd, is now kept in Chorten Kora. Gom Kora has a new *thondrol*, which is displayed at the tsechu in the second lunar month (March/April). This festival is different from most other tsechus and pilgrims circumambulate the goemba and sacred rock throughout the night (one article in *Kuensel* salaciously suggests that the evening's activities result in many marriages!).

Behind the goemba is a fantastical large black rock. It is said that Guru Rinpoche was meditating in a small cave near the bottom of the rock when a demon in the shape of a cobra suddenly appeared. The Guru, alarmed, stood up quickly (as you would), most likely swore and left the impression of his pointed hat at the top of the cave. The Guru then made an agreement with the demon to stay away until the end of his meditation. The contract was sealed with thumb prints, which are still visible on the rock. The serpent also left a print, with his hood at the top of the rock.

A small sin-testing passageway leads from the cave to an exit below the rock – one successful participant reported that you must indeed move like a snake to get through the cave. Visitors also test their sin levels and rock climbing

skills by trying to climb up the side of the rock (the 'stairway of the dakinis'); only the virtuous can make it. On certain auspicious days holy water, believed to be the Guru's nectar of immortality, flows down from a crevice in the rock and pilgrims line up to spoon it into empty Sprite bottles. You may also see childless women carrying a holy stone around the *kora* path to boost their chances of conceiving.

The monastery is home to 25 student monks.

Gom Kora to Trashi Yangtse

28km / 1¼ hours

Two kilometres from Gom Kora is the sleepy village of **Duksum** (860m), the roadhead for many large villages higher in the valley. A couple of shops (try the 'Shantimo Tsongkhag and Cum Bar Shop') sell colourful patterned cloth and belts woven by the local women using back-strap looms. Duksum's iron chain-link bridge, believed to be the last surviving example of those built by Thangtong Gyalpo (see the boxed text, p131) was tragically washed away by flooding in 2004, but some links were recovered and used in the reconstructed bridge at Tamchhog Lhakhang (see p131). Duksum has had a difficult few years; a rock-fall recently caused the villagers to abandon the upper section of the bazaar.

The road turns northwest and follows the Kulong Chhu valley towards Trashi Yangtse. The eastern fork of the river flows from Arunachal Pradesh in India and is known as the Dawung Chhu. There are proposals to build a dam along this section of the Kulong Chhu.

Climbing high above the Kulong Chhu, at Zangpozor the road passes the junction of a paved road that leads 9km to the village of Tshenkarla. Above the village school are the ruins of **Tshenkarla dzong**, which was built in the first half of the 9th century by Prince Tsangma, the eldest son of Tibetan king Trisong Detsen. The prince established himself in eastern Bhutan after he was banished from Tibet. The old name of this town is Rangthang Woong.

Beyond the small settlement of Shali the habitation gets more sparse as the valley becomes steeper and less suitable for cultivation. Snowy peaks at the head of the valley come in an out of focus. After traversing along a rocky cliff, a house-like building appears on a promontory where a side stream, the Dongdi Chhu, joins the valley. This is the original **Trashi Yangtse Dzong**, built by Pema Lingpa

alongside the former trade route, and now houses the town's community of 100 monks. The *dratshang* (monastic college) has a dramatic main assembly hall and an *utse*, which holds the dzong's most precious relic, a statue of Chenresig that flew here from Ralung in Tibet. The dzong is 1.5km up a side road, past a wonderful traditional cantilevered bridge.

TRASHI YANGTSE

☎ 04 / elev 1700m

The new settlement of Trashi Yangtse is near the Chorten Kora, 3km from the old dzong. The new dzong and rapidly growing town occupies a large bowl in one of the furthest corners of the kingdom, 550km from Thimphu. The dzong was inaugurated in 1997 and, being new, has little historical or architectural significance.

The town is known for the excellent wooden cups and bowls made here from avocado and maple wood using water-driven and treadle lathes. Trashi Yangtse is also a centre of paper making. They use the *tsasho* technique with a bamboo frame, which produces a distinctive pattern on the paper.

Orientation

The road enters from the south near the large Chorten Kora. North of the chorten is a bazaar area with a few shops and a tall, elaborately decorated Bhutanese-style chorten. From here one road leads to the impressive headquarters of the Bomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary and another climbs to the new dzong and administrative offices, on a ridge 130m above the town.

The turn-off to the local hospital and Institute for Zorig Chusum is in the south of town, just before you pass the Chorten Kora.

Sights

CHORTEN KORA

Chorten Kora is large, but not nearly as large as the stupa of Bodhnath, after which it was patterned. It was constructed in 1740 by Lama Ngawang Loday in memory of his late uncle, Jungshu Phesan, and to subdue local spirits. The lama went to Nepal himself and brought back a model of Bodhnath carved in a radish. He had it copied here so that people could visit this place instead of making the arduous trip to Nepal. The reason that Chorten Kora is not an exact copy of Bodhnath is because the radish shrank during the trip and distorted the carving.

During the second month of the lunar calendar there is a *kora* here, whereby people

gain merit by walking around the chorten. It is celebrated on two separate dates, 15 days apart. The first day is for the people from the Dakpa community in Arunachal Pradesh, India, who make the three-day pilgrimage here to celebrate the sacrifice of an eight-year-old girl from Arunachal Pradesh who was enshrined in the chorten during its construction to appease a troublesome demon. The second *kora* is for the Bhutanese, who come from all over eastern Bhutan. A month before the festival the chorten is whitewashed anew, with funds earned from rice grown in the fields immediately surrounding the chorten.

In front of the chorten is a natural stone stupa, the *sertho*, which is referred to as the 'mother' of the chorten. There's also a small goemba here. A popular recent Bhutanese film of the same name was shot at the chorten.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR ZORIG CHUSUM

This red-roofed **institute** (☎ 781141; fax 781149; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-3.30pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) was opened in June 1997 to provide opportunities in vocational training for those who do not continue in the system of higher education. The school strives to produce technically proficient craftspeople, while providing them with a basic educational foundation. Six of the Zorig Chusum (13 arts and crafts) are studied here, including *thangka* painting, sculpture, metalwork and woodcarving. You can visit the school, watch the 96 students at work and take photographs, though the selection of crafts for sale was disappointing during our recent visit. The students are on holiday from December to March and for two weeks in July.

Sleeping & Eating

Dzongkhag Guest House (☎ 781148; r Nu 300-500) If you have connections, you might be able to stay at this tin-roofed government guesthouse, just below the dzong and Royal Guest House (off-limits to visitors). All rooms have a bathroom but only half have hot water.

Karmaling Hotel and Bakery (☎ 781113; s/d Nu 600/800) With attached western bathrooms, a veranda and a bakery restaurant, this place could be nice if it weren't for the hard beds and bare concrete walls.

Sonom Chhoden Hotel (☎ 781152; s/d Nu 120/160) This hotel has basic rooms and you can get a simple meal here, but don't upset the owner – he's the school's tae kwan do instructor.

The Bomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary office (see below) has a couple of basic rooms in its **guesthouse** (r Nu 300-400), which you could use as a base to visit the sanctuary. Upper-floor rooms are the best. It's also possible to **camp** near Chorten Kora.

Transport

Public buses run to Thimphu on Monday and Friday and to Trashigang on Wednesday and Saturday.

AROUND TRASHI YANGTSE Bomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary

Bomdeling is a two- to three-hour walk or a 13km 4WD drive north of Chorten Kora. It is the winter (November to early March) roosting place of a flock of black-necked cranes (see p88). The flock of 141 cranes, smaller than the flock in Phobjikha, returns here year after year, though the recent flooding of roosting habitat reduced crane numbers considerably in 2006. The sanctuary is also home to red pandas, tigers and snow leopards.

The **visitor centre** (☎ 781155; bws@druknet.bt; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) in Trashi Yangtse has some good displays on the 1445-sq-km sanctuary and the manager can advise on hiking and camping options (in the central part of the sanctuary only). Apart from crane-watching, there are possible hikes up to the Buddhist sites of Rigsum Goempe, Dechen Phodrang and Minkhar Goemba.

SAMDRUP JONGKHAR DZONGKHAG

The only reason to make the tortuous drive into southeastern Bhutan is to leave it, at the recently reopened border crossing with India at Samdrup Jongkhar.

TRASHIGANG TO SAMDRUP JONGKHAR (180KM)

The winding drive from Trashigang to Samdrup Jongkhar takes at least six hours.

Trashigang to Kanglung

22km / 45 mins

Three kilometres from Trashigang bazaar the southern road turns off the Mongar road and climbs past the petrol station.

Climbing around a ridge and heading south the road passes the settlement of Pam. There are few houses near the road, but there is an extensive settlement and a lhakhang on the hillside above. The narrow unpaved road that leads uphill from here goes to Rangshikhar Goemba.

Descend into a side valley, cross a stream and climb through rice terraces to the prosperous farming community of Rongthung, 17km from Trashigang. The road then climbs to a ridge and enters Kanglung (1870m), where you can see the clock tower and extensive campus of Sherubtse College.

The late Father William Mackey, a Jesuit priest, was instrumental in setting up Sherubtse (Peak of Knowledge), Bhutan's only college, in the late 1970s. India aided the construction of the original school in 1964 as part of the construction of the road from Trashigang to the Indian border. Most foreigners know of the college through reading Jamie Zeppa's *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*, which chronicles her time teaching here as a Canadian volunteer. The clock tower and green lawns give the town the feel of a Himalayan hill-station.

Kanglung to Khaling

32km / 1 hour

The road climbs through fields of corn and potatoes, then switchbacks around a line of eight chortens. There are fine views down over the college and as far as Drametse Goemba (p189), far across the valley. Above the road is the Yongphula army camp and further on is Yongphu Goemba. Hidden on a ridge above the road is Bhutan's second airstrip. There is occasionally talk that this small military airstrip might eventually be served by domestic flights, which would make eastern Bhutan much more accessible, but weather patterns would make any flights highly unreliable.

The road crosses the **Yongphu La** (2190m), offering you a last glimpse of the Himalaya, and swoops along the top of the Barshong valley, cuts across a ridge into another valley, then winds down again. A short climb leads over yet another ridge marked by chortens. It then descends to Gumchu, below which is a pretty valley, with several traditional houses surrounded by large, lush meadows.

Rounding a corner, the road enters Khaling, spread out in a large valley high above the Drangme Chhu. Above the valley is a small lhakhang. In the centre of the valley below

Khaling is the **National Institute for the Disabled**. This is a very well-organised institution that tries to assimilate students from all over Bhutan who are blind or otherwise disabled into the local educational system by providing special resources and training. One of their accomplishments is the development of a Dzongkha version of Braille. The school was originally set up by missionaries but has been run by the government since 1987.

Three kilometres beyond Khaling is the **National Handloom Development Project** (☎ 04-581122; nhdp@druknet.com ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), operated by the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB). It contracts out weaving and provides cotton yarn on credit to about 400 villagers, who then return the finished product to be sold here, in Trashigang or at Handicraft Emporiums in Thimphu, Paro and Bumthang. It has samples of about 300 designs and, although it doesn't have fabric from every design in stock, it will take orders.

Particularly interesting are samples of the plants that are used to produce the natural dyes, including rhododendrons (pale yellow), an insect secretion called *lac* (purple) and the stem of the madder creeping plant (pale pink). Photography of the workshops and of the design samples is strictly prohibited. Prices for a length of woven cloth vary from Nu 950 up to Nu 12,000 and there are also shawls. Most of the basic cotton is imported from Kolkata.

Khaling to Wamrong

27km / 45 mins

Beyond Khaling the road traverses above scattered houses and cornfields before climbing to the head of a rhododendron-filled valley and crossing the Kharung La at 2350m. There's a short descent through lots of loose rock, then another climb to another pass at 2430m.

Curling around the valley, the route descends past a side road to Thrimshing then curves round the **Zangto Pelri Lhakhang**. This may well be the last Bhutanese goemba you see, so check out the unique and wonderfully detailed murals and ceiling mandalas for old times' sake. Two kilometres below the lhakhang is the pleasant town of **Wamrong** (2130m), where you can get a good lunch at the local-style **Dechen Wangdi Restaurant** (☎ 04-571103). Wamrong is a *drungkhag* and so has a small dzong.

Wamrong to Pemagatshel Junction

20km / 45 mins

The road here descends for 6km to Riserboo and its Norwegian-funded hospital. There is a good view down the huge valley as the road traverses in and out of side valleys past the hamlet of Moshi, halfway between Trashigang and Samdrup Jongkhar. At a bend in the road at kilometre marker 77 you get your first glimpse of the Assam plain below.

Before long you meet the junction to Pemagatshel, from where you can see Yongla Goemba on a hill across the valley.

Pemagatshel Junction to Deothang

55km / 1¼ hours

Below the junction comes the day's most dangerous section of road, the **Menlong Brak** (*brak*, or *brag*, means cliff in Sharchop), high above the upper Bada valley. The fragile road passes prayer flags, prayer plaques and chortens to reach the Dantak-sponsored Hindu shrine at Krishnagiri, where your car will get a tikka from the resident sadhu. It's an amazing descent, with sheer drops putting the fear of Shiva into you.

From the two-road village of **Narphung** (with its one-way system!) the road passes a checkpoint to the Narphung La at 1698m. It crosses a ridge and climbs to 1920m before beginning the final descent to the plains.

The road weaves down, reaching the PWD camp at Morong at 1600m, whose workers are responsible for the Indian-style homilies that line the roads here: 'speed thrills but kills', 'no hurry, no worry', and our favourite 'it is not a rally, enjoy the valley'.

The Choekey Gyantso Institute for Advanced Buddhist Philosophy marks the outskirts of **Deothang** at 850m. The town's old name town was Dewangiri, and it was the site of a major battle between the Bhutanese and the British in 1865. The town is dominated by a large Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) camp and to the south is a chorten with the names of all those who died building Bhutan's roads. A side road branches off here to Bhangtar, a border town not open to foreigners.

Deothang to Samdrup Jongkhar

18km / 30 mins

The road eventually hits the valley floor with a thud, as a rock painting of Guru Rinpoche marks the end of the Himalayan foothills. The road curves past Bhutan Chemical Industries to the fairly cursory **customs and immigration**

check at Pinchinang, 4km or so before Samdrup Jongkhar. It is here that you will get your exit stamp from Bhutan, even if you are spending the night in town before heading on to India.

SAMDRUP JONGKHAR

☎ 07 / elev 170m

There's little reason to linger in this sweltering border town. The streets are jammed with Tata trucks and every morning and afternoon a tide of Indian workers crosses the border to work in the town. A Bhutanese-style gate decorated with a dragon and *garuda* bids you farewell as you cross into the heat and chaos of India.

Electricity is rather haphazard in Samdrup Jongkhar.

Orientation

The highway enters the town from the north, passing the small modern dzong, post office, Dzongkhag (former Hifi) Guest House and Bank of Bhutan. The main road crosses a bridge then turns left by an internet café into the compact bazaar area, where you'll find the hotels, shops and restaurants. If you go straight instead of turning left, you will hit the border, with the Indian town of Darranga 400m beyond.

Information

Bank of Bhutan (☎ 251149; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat) Will change ngultrum into Indian rupees but not US dollars.

PCO & Internet (☎ 8am-9pm; per min Nu 1.50)

Sleeping & Eating

No hotels in Samdrup Jongkhar offered air-conditioning at the time of research.

TLT Guesthouse (☎ 251470; fax 251502) This Indian-style place next to the bazaar is probably the best option, with clean attached bathrooms and a decent restaurant.

Hotel Menjong (☎ 2511094; s/d Nu 650/850) The former Peljorling Hotel has spacious rooms but check the mattresses as these vary. There's a decent lobby restaurant and bar.

Other options include the basic Indian-style **Hotel Shambhala** (s Nu 210-260, d Nu 260-360) and **Hotel Friends** (☎ 251544, r Nu 300), where some rooms come with an 'air cooler', as well as bathroom and satellite TV.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to Guwahati is to arrange an Indian taxi through your hotel. A Bolero jeep costs US\$40 for the 100km drive. Buses from the Indian town of Darranga, a 10-minute walk or rickshaw ride over the border, depart for Guwahati (Rs45 to 55) at 6.30am and 2pm.

Due to security concerns, all Bhutanese vehicles have to travel in a convoy as far as Ragiya (convoys do not run on Thursday or Sunday), 49km from the border. Indian vehicles face no such restrictions. For more on onward travel into India, see p261.

PEMAGATSHEL DZONGKHAG

The name Pemagatshel means 'blissful land of the lotus'. This rural dzongkhag in the southeastern part of the country is Bhutan's smallest district. Its headquarters, Pemagatshel, is reached via a side road that leads off the Samdrup Jongkhar to Trashigang road.

Yongla Goemba

Yongla Goemba is one of the holiest shrines in eastern Bhutan. It was founded in the 18th century by Kheydup Jigme Kuenduel, who was advised by the great *terton* Rigzin Jigme Lingpa to establish a monastery on a mountain that looked like a *phurba* (ritual dagger) and overlooked the vast plains of India. Later the goemba was used as a base for religious ceremonies by Trongsa *penlop* Jigme Namgyal during the great Duar War with the British in 1865.

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