

Ü ཡུལ་



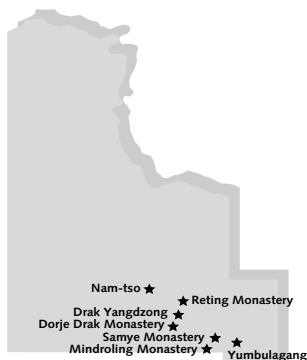
The traditional province of Ü is very much the historical, cultural and modern heartland of Tibet and, along with Tsang to the west, forms the power centre of central Tibet. The Tibetans trace the very birth of their nation to the valleys of the Yarlung and Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra), in particular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

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

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

HIGHLIGHTS

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



Permits

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

NORTHERN Ü འདུས་ཀྱི་

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

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

TSURPHU MONASTERY མཚོ་རུ་དགོན་པ་ 楚布寺

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

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

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

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

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

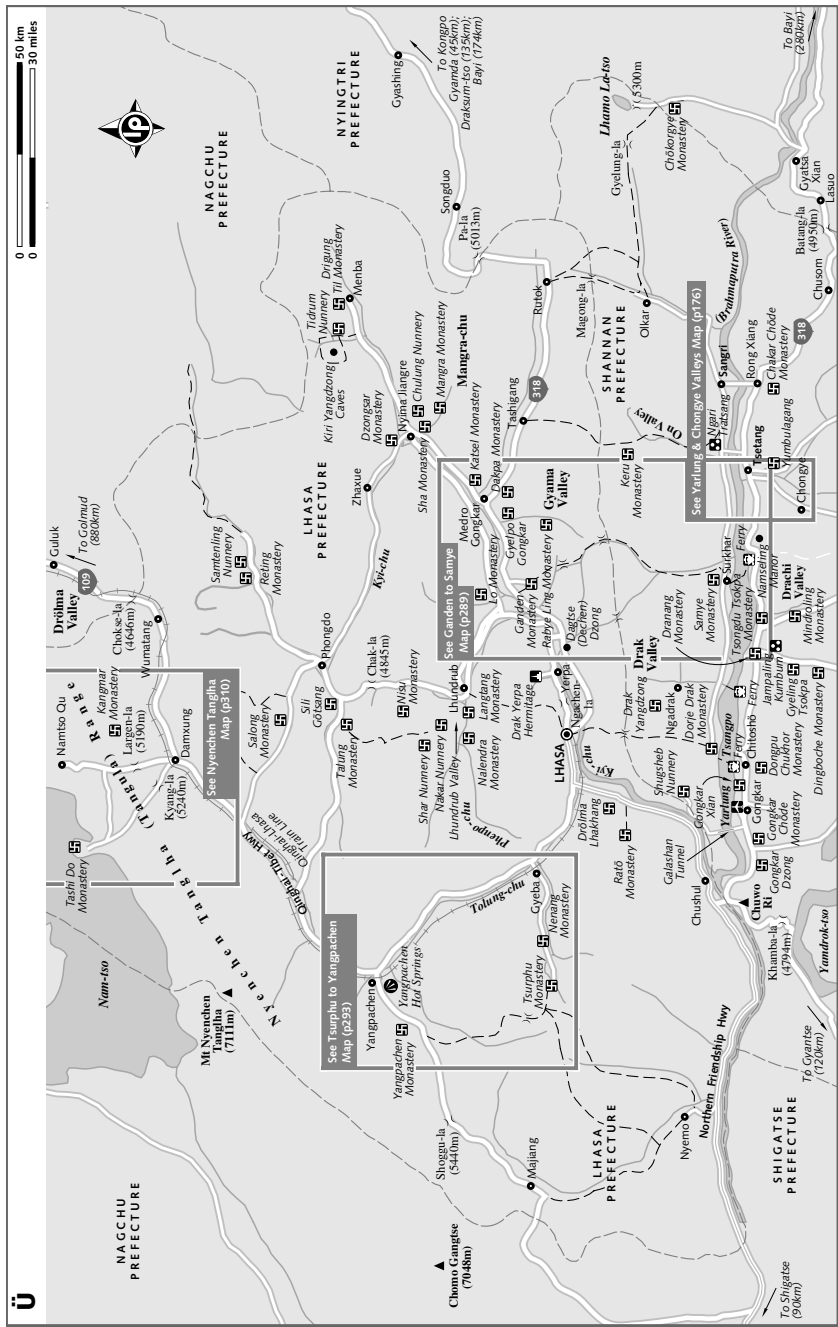
History

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

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

Viewing the Monastery

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



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