

Western Tibet (Ngari)



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

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

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

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

HIGHLIGHTS

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



History

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

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

In the late 16th century, Jesuit missionaries based in the enclave of Goa took an interest in the remote kingdom of Guge, mistaking it for the long-lost Christian civilisation of Prester John (a legendary Christian priest and king who was believed to have ruled over a kingdom in the Far East). The Jesuits finally reached Tsaparang in 1624 after two failed attempts, but if their leader, Father Antonio de 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.

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

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

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

Permits

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

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

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

When to Go

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

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

