

# Overland Routes from Sìchuān

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## Why Go?

Wild, mountainous and deliciously remote, the traditionally Tibetan areas of western Sìchuān are a cultural and geographical extension of the Tibetan plateau in all but name. This area was once part of the eastern Tibetan region of Kham, and has long been the meeting point of the Chinese and Tibetan worlds.

In many ways Tibetan culture is better preserved here than in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). It's certainly subject to fewer religious restrictions, and you'll see photos of the Dalai Lama displayed freely.

Unlike the TAR, western Sìchuān is also permit-free, meaning foreign travellers can explore to their heart's content. If you do manage to get those pesky permits to continue over the high passes and deep gorges into the even more remote eastern Tibet, you'll deserve to feel a little smug in the knowledge that you have completed one of the world's great road trips.

## When to Go

May and June are the prime times for western Sìchuān. It's generally warm and sunny with occasional afternoon rains. If you're in the Kāngdīng area in May, it's worth trying to pay a visit to Pāomǎ Shān for the Walking Around the Mountain Festival.

In July and August the grassland areas are green and full of flowers, and play host to horse festivals such as the one in Lithang. It's worth keeping an umbrella handy for this time of year, though!

Rains lessen in September and October, and days are sunny again, but it's starting to get pretty chilly by this time. Sightseeing can still be on the agenda but think twice before planning any hiking.

## Permits

The good news is that no permits are required anywhere in western Sìchuān, although it's worth noting that from time to time certain areas are closed to foreigners temporarily. You will, though, need permits to continue into the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) – if the border is open (see the box below). For more details, see the Tours & Permits chapter (p29).

## Dangers & Annoyances

Western Sìchuān experiences up to 200 freezing days per year; summers are blistering by day and the high altitude invites particularly bad sunburn. Lightning storms are frequent from May to October, when cloud cover can shroud the scenic peaks.

If you're thinking of crossing into Tibet from Bathang or Derge without the necessary permits, you may want to reconsider. The PSB keeps a very close eye on foreigners straying west of these towns, and drivers can be severely punished for carrying foreigners across the border, so think twice before potentially putting locals at risk.

## Kāngdìng (Dardo) 康定

📍0836 / POP 110,000 / ELEV 2616M

The 'do' of Kāngdìng's Tibetan name, Dardo, means 'river confluence', and this lively town is nestled in a deep river valley at the point where the fast-flowing Yālā (Tse in Tibetan) meets the raging Zhéduō (Dar) which roars its way right through the town centre. More poignantly, Kāngdìng has for centuries also been the point at which two very different cultures converge.

This is the gateway into Sìchuān's Tibetan world, and it's long been a trade centre between Tibetans and Han Chinese, with wool and yak hides travelling in one direction, and bricks of tea in the other. It also served as an important staging post on the road to Lhasa, as indeed it still does today.

Historically, Kāngdìng was the capital of the local Tibetan kingdom of Chakla (or Chala) before, briefly, being the capital of the now defunct Chinese province of Xikāng. Today, although there is a large Tibetan population, the city feels more Chinese, but you can still find elements of Tibetan culture in the food, the dress and, to a lesser extent, in the architecture.

The steep river valley here is set amidst distant snowcapped mountains, includ-

ing the imperious Gōnggā Shān (Minyak Gangkar in Tibetan; 7556m), and Kāngdìng is famed throughout China for Kāngdìng Qínggē, a popular love song inspired by the town's surrounding scenery.

## 👁️ Sights

There are several small monasteries in and around Kāngdìng. The central **Ānjué Temple** (安觉寺; Anjué Sì; Ngachu Gompa in Tibetan) dates back to 1652 and was built under the direction of the fifth Dalai Lama.

**Nánwú Temple** (南无寺; Nánwú Sì) belongs to the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) sect of Tibetan Buddhism and is the most active monastery in the area. It also affords good views of Kāngdìng and the valley. Walk south along the main road, cross the river and keep going for about 200m until you see a rusty old sign for the monastery (in traditional Chinese characters: 南無寺) on your right. Follow that track up hill, beside a stream, and the monastery will be on your right.

Nearby, about 100m further along the main road, is **Jīngāng Temple** (金刚寺; Jīngāng Sì), a 400-year-old Nyingma monastery set around a lawned courtyard. Turn right at the sign for Knapsack Inn.

You can head up 2900m **Pǎomǎ Shān** (admission ¥50) for some excellent views of Kāngdìng and the surrounding mountains and valleys. The ascent takes you past oodles of prayer flags and several Buddhist temples up to a white chörten. Avoid hiking alone, as a British tourist was murdered here in 2000 and one or two muggings have been reported.

To reach the hill, bear left at the fork in the road south of the bus station and walk about 10 minutes until you reach a monastery on the left; a stairway leads up the



### TIBET BORDER CLOSED

At the time of research foreigners were forbidden from travelling overland from Sìchuān into Tibet proper because Tibet's far eastern prefecture of Chamdo, which borders Sìchuān, was completely off limits. Check the Tibet branch of Lonely Planet's online forum, Thorn Tree ([lonelyplanet.com/thorntree](http://lonelyplanet.com/thorntree)), for the latest information.