



Tsang གཙང་

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Why Go?

The great overland trip across Tibet – from Lhasa to the Nepali border via Gyantse, Shigatse and Mt Everest Base Camp – passes straight through Tsang. Most of the highlights of the region lie right along (or close to) the Friendship Hwy, making cross-country travel a relatively straightforward process. A great variety of sights and activities are experienced along the way, from hardcore treks in the Everest region to a smorgasbord of ancient Tibetan monasteries and historic towns. For many travellers, Tsang is either the first or last place they experience in Tibet, and the ride either up or down from Nepal is a border crossing for the ages.

When to Go

The best time of the year to visit Tsang is from May to June, when views of Mt Everest are usually clear before the monsoon brings cloud cover. This is also an excellent time for trekking in the Himalayas.

The colourful three-day festival at Tashilhunpo takes place in June or July (dates change each year) and culminates in the unrolling of a massive thangka.

Visit Gyantse for the horse racing and archery festival in June (dates change each year), which includes traditional games, folk singing, picnics and much swilling of barley beer.

History

Tsang lies to the west of Ü and has shared political dominance and cultural influence over the Tibetan plateau with its neighbour. With the decline of the Lhasa kings in the 10th century, the epicentre of Tibetan power moved to Sakya, under Mongol patronage from the mid-13th to the mid-14th centuries.

After the fall of the Sakya government, the power shifted back to Ü and then again back to Tsang. But, until the rise of the Gelugpa order and the Dalai Lamas in the 17th century, neither Tsang nor Ü effectively governed all of central Tibet, and the two provinces were rivals for power. Some commentators see the rivalry between the Panchen Lama and Dalai Lama as a latter-day extension of this provincial wrestling for political dominance.

Permits

Most of Tsang's sights involve detours from the Friendship Hwy and you need permits to visit these areas. At the time of writing the only way to get permits was by travelling with an organised 4WD tour. Special trekking permits are needed if you plan to trek in the Everest region beyond the base camp. Trekking permits for Camp III (also known as Advanced Base Camp or ABC) are issued by the China Tibet Mountain Association. Trekkers will need help from an agency to get the permits. A number of trekking companies organise treks to ABC, including Great Adventure Treks (www.greatadventuretreks.com).

Itineraries

For most travellers, visiting Tsang means a straight shot from Lhasa to the Nepali border, with stops at Gyantse, Shigatse and Mt Everest. This journey takes about eight days if done at a reasonable pace.

From Lhasa, head out on the Southern Friendship Hwy, which takes you over the Kamba-la pass to the shores of Yamdrok-tso, then on to Nangartse and Gyantse. You'll need a full day in Gyantse before you can

move on to Shigatse. West of Shigatse the next obvious stop is Lhatse, but there are two worthy side trips on the way – Sakya Monastery and Phuntsoling Monastery. From Lhatse it's on to Baber and Shegar, a key stop before heading on to Everest Base Camp (EBC). Back on the main highway there is old Tingri and Nyalam before you finally reach the border town of Zhāngmù. The best hike in the region is from old Tingri to EBC (or vice versa), which will add another four days to your journey.

If you are in a hurry, it's quicker to take the Northern Friendship Road when travelling between Lhasa and Shigatse but going this way you'll miss Gyantse, one of the highlights of Tsang. Any way you go you'll find good facilities along the way and relatively easy drives as the Friendship Hwy is entirely paved. The exception is the Everest region, which has dirt roads and basic accommodation.

i Getting Around

The main road through Tsang, the Friendship Hwy, is paved almost all the way to the Nepali border (the final two kilometres before Zhāngmù were being sealed at the time of research, but should be done by the time you get there). The southern route via Yamdrok-tso has a brand-spankin' new paved highway that winds its way over Kamba-la to Yamdrok-tso and onto Shigatse. 4WD trips (the usual way to travel through the region) take this more scenic route.

Public transport runs along the Northern Friendship Hwy as far as Shegar. The Qinghai-Tibet train from Lhasa to Shigatse is not due for completion until 2014.

The entries in this chapter follow a south-westerly route through Tsang from Lhasa to the border with Nepal, taking in the main attractions of the area on the way.

Yamdrok-tso

ཡར་འབྲོག་མཚོ། 羊卓雍措

ELEV 4441M

Dazzling Yamdrok-tso (Yángzhuō Yōngcuò) is normally first seen from the summit of the Kamba-la (4700m). The lake lies several hundred metres below the road, and in clear weather is a fabulous shade of deep turquoise. Far in the distance is the huge massif of Mt Nojin Kangtsang (7191m).

Yamdrok-tso is shaped like a coiling scorpion. It doubles back on itself on the western side, effectively creating a large island within its reaches. For Tibetans, it

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.