The eastern region of Tibet, known as Kham, is a land apart. Its climate, geography, flora and fauna all lend it a unique, almost magical atmosphere. The stone villages have more in common with neighbouring Bhutan, the chörtens (stupas) seem lifted from Mustang in Nepal and the forested scenery is more Swiss Alps than high Tibetan plateau. The traditional Tibetan province of Kham incorporates the eastern Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), western Sichuan and northwest Yunnan. This chapter covers only the eastern TAR, where travel permits are required. For information on overland travel through western Sichuan, see p267.

Geographically the region varies from the lush subtropical jungle and raging rivers of the southern borderlands to the arid plateau and purple gorges of the east, where the headwaters of some of Asia’s greatest rivers – the Mekong, Salween and Yangzi – tumble off the Tibetan plateau. The glaciated peaks of Namche Barwa (7756m) and the remote gorges of the Yarlung Tsangpo, the world’s deepest, form one of Asia’s last secret corners.

Kham gains much of its charm from its people. Khampa cowboys, dressed in sheepskin cloaks and braided hair, cruise the region’s highways on their motorbikes. Kham sometimes feels like the America’s Wild West, with the cowboys and buffalos replaced by Khampas and yaks. There are two main routes through the region, offering a once-in-a-lifetime route in or out of Tibet. The busier and strategically important southern road takes in the best of the alpine scenery. The unpaved northern road is a higher roller-coaster ride past ancient temples, remote Bön monasteries and herding communities.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take a perfect photo of Draksum-tso (p247), a sublime alpine lake with a fairy-tale island monastery
- View the magnificent scenery from Nyingtri to Pomi (p251), climbing from lush subtropical forest to alpine valleys and snowy passes
- Picnic by the stunning turquoise waters of Rawok-tso (p254), a mirror lake fringed with snow-capped peaks
- Peer up in awe at the towering statues of the remote Riwoche Tsuglhakhang (p261)
- Clamber up wooden ladders to cliff-top shrines at the amazing Tsedru Monastery (p262), Tibet’s most spectacularly sited monastery
- Follow the pilgrims around the charming Lamaling Temple (p250), shaped like Guru Rinpoche’s celestial paradise
- Join the monks in a debate at Chamdo’s Galden Jampaling Monastery (p257), one of the largest monastic communities in Tibet
History

The area around Chamdo was one of the first settled in Tibet, as attested to by the 5000-year-old Neolithic remains at nearby Karo. Fossilised millet hints at a 5000-year tradition of agriculture in the region.

Kham was the home of many early lamas, including the founders of the Drigungpa and Karmapa schools. In 1070, many Buddhists fled persecution in central Tibet to Kham, where they set up influential monasteries, later returning to central Tibet to spearhead the so-called second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet.

Lhasa’s control over the region has waxed and waned over the centuries. Lhasa first gained control of Kham thanks to Mongol assistance, but the majority of the region has enjoyed de facto political independence. Until recently, much of Kham comprised many small fiefdoms ruled by kings (Derge), lamas (Litang) or hereditary chieftains (Batang). Relations with China were mostly restricted to the trade caravans, which carried bricks of Chinese tea in, and pastoral products out.

Chinese warlords such as Zhao Erfeng and Liu Wenhui swept through the eastern part of Kham (modern-day western Sichuan) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, eventually to set up the Chinese province of Xikang (western Kham). Khampa rebellions occurred frequently, notably in 1918, 1928 and 1932, though not all were against the Chinese; in 1933 the Khampas tried to shake off Lhasa’s nominal rule.

In 1950 Chamdo fell to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and much of eastern Tibet came under Chinese control. In 1954 the eastern part of the TAR was officially closed to foreigners unless you have a guide, private transport (normally a Land Cruiser) and a fistful of permits, including a military permit (p323). Once on the road nervous guides will often want to register your group with every county-level PSB office along your route, which can be a real pain.

One irritation is that the Public Security Bureau (PSB) in Lhasa generally doesn’t write monastery names on their permits, only towns. The occasional obstructive local PSB office in eastern Tibet may then deny you access to a monastery because only the local town is listed on your permit… Even with all the requisite permits you will still encounter problems visiting Sok Tsanden Monastery and, to a lesser extent, the Riwoche Tsuglhakhang. To stand the best chance of gaining access you’ll need to insist that the specific monastery (not just the local town name) is listed on your permits.

Places close to the disputed Indian border such as Namche Barwa and the Tsangpo gorges are very difficult to get permits for; your agency will need military connections for these.

If you decide to hitch through eastern Tibet without a permit, you will have to keep the main highways, Khampa life remains culturally strong.

Climate

Kham has a dramatically different climate from the rest of Tibet. The summer monsoon from Assam brings a lot of rain from early June to September, when much of the southern route is shrouded in mist and fog. Snowfall generally starts in October. Northern areas between Sok and Nagchu receive strong winds year-round and sudden blizzards even in summer. Nagchu is Tibet’s coldest city; July temperatures range between 3°C and 15°C, with January temperatures bottoming out at minus 25°C. In March, while the northern road remains dry and bleak, southern farms around Pomi are already filled with verdant crops.

The best times to travel are from late March to early May, and from September to early November. At other months you can find the roads temporarily blocked for anything from a couple of hours to a few days.

Permits

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Places close to the disputed Indian border such as Namche Barwa and the Tsangpo gorges are very difficult to get permits for; your agency will need military connections for these.

If you decide to hitch through eastern Tibet without a permit, you will have to keep
a very low profile at all checkpoints and in larger towns and county capitals. If you’re caught without a permit, you will most likely be fined between Y200 and Y500 and sent back in the direction from which you came. Hot spots that permitless travellers should avoid include Bayi, Markham and Chamdo. Generally speaking, it’s easier to hitch out of the region than hitch in. See p337.

**Getting There & Around**

Lhasa is the logical place from which to launch an expedition to Kham. It’s the closest gateway city and permits are relatively hassle-free to acquire, as long as you are on an organised tour. The most popular routes are the loop route along the southern road to Chamdo and back along the northern road to Lhasa, and the one-way shot along the southern road between Lhasa and Zhongdian (and vice versa).

For a two-week loop of Kham (taking in Draksum-tso, Bayi, Pasho, Riwoche and Sok), Foreign Independent Traveller (FIT) in Lhasa charges around Y16,000 for transport, guides and permits. A shorter six-day loop from

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**FOUR RIVERS, SIX RANGES: THE KHAMPA RESISTANCE**

By the late 1950s thousands of Khampa warriors had begun to rebel against Chinese rule and reforms. News of the armed rebellion filtered through to central Tibet, but the Khampas’ pleas for help fell on deaf ears. The Dalai Lama, keen to avoid conflict with the Chinese, asked the Khampas to disarm. Without organisation or cohesive leadership the rebellion was routed.

Yet a core of Khampa fighters managed to regroup in Lhoka, in southern Tibet, and in a rare moment of Khampa unity formed an organisation called Chizhi Gangdrung (Four Rivers, Six Ranges), the traditional local name for the Kham region. Soon 15,000 men were assembled, led by Gonbo Tashi, and a new flag was created.

The Khampas eventually attracted the attention of exiled Tibetan leaders in Kalimpong (India), as well as the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT or Nationalist Party; some Khampas were trained in Taiwan) and even the CIA, who liaised with the Tibetans through Thubten Norbu and later Gyalo Dhundup, both brothers of the Dalai Lama.

Before long, Tibetan leaders were liaising with CIA agents in Kolkata (Calcutta), arranging secret meetings through dead letter drops and secret messages. The first batch of six Khampa agents trekked over the border to Kalimpong, were driven to Bangladesh and then were flown to the Pacific island of Saipan, where they were trained to organise guerrilla groups. Agents were later parachuted behind enemy lines into Samye and Litang.

In 1957, guerrilla attacks were made on Chinese garrisons and road camps, and in 1958, 700 Chinese soldiers were killed by guerrillas near Nyemo. The movement met with the Dalai Lama in southern Tibet when he fled Lhasa in 1959 as the CIA readied three plane loads of arms – enough for 2000 people.

The flight of the Dalai Lama to India marked a setback for the resistance and the focus switched to a base in Mustang, an ethnically Tibetan area in Nepal, where initially at least the Nepalis turned a blind eye to the movement. Between 1960 and 1962 over 150 Tibetans were sent to Colorado for training.

Yet the resistance was living on borrowed time. The Americans never had much confidence in the Tibetans and by the mid-1960s CIA funding had dried up. By 1972 the international political climate had changed; US president Richard Nixon’s visit to China and the coronation of Nepal’s pro-Chinese king had left the Khampas out on a limb. Moreover, the resistance was riddled with feuds – most of the Khampa rebels had always been fighting more for their local valley and monastery than for any national ideal. In 1973 the Nepalis demanded the closure of the Mustang base and the Dalai Lama asked the rebels to surrender. It was the end of the Khampa rebellion and the end of Tibetan armed resistance to the Chinese.

For more on the CIA’s funding of Tibetan resistance guerrillas and the diplomatic behind-the-scenes wrangling, read *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Freedom* by John Kenneth Knaus. Knaus, a 44-year veteran of the CIA, was personally involved in training Tibetan agents in Colorado. For a Tibetan perspective, try *Warriors of Tibet* by Jamyang Norbu, a slim volume recalling the Khampa rebellion in Nyarong (western Sichuan).