

Overland Routes from Sichuan

Wild, mountainous and deliciously remote, the Tibetan areas of western Sichuan are a cultural and geographical extension of the Tibetan plateau in all but name. The area was once part of the eastern Tibetan region of Kham, before it became part of Sichuan province. It has long been the meeting point of the Chinese and Tibetan worlds and it was this region that first experienced the Chinese invasion and provided the stiffest resistance to it.

It is an irony that because it is part of Sichuan, Tibetan culture is in many ways better preserved here than in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and subject to fewer religious restrictions. You'll see photos of the Dalai Lama freely displayed. Free of the regulations that dog travel in the TAR, travellers are here able to explore to their heart's content.

This chapter details overland routes through western Sichuan to the borders of Tibet. (For other land routes to Tibet, see p335.) The northern and southern roads offer the main sights, including the big monasteries of Ganzi, Derge and Litang. Off the main roads are several spectacularly situated and rarely visited monasteries. Hikers can find bliss in the sublime scenery of Yading Nature Reserve or on horseback in the lovely valleys around Derge.

Western Sichuan sees few visitors, partly because travel is still rough and time-consuming, but there are some real Tibetan cultural jewels here. And if you have the permits to continue over the high passes and deep gorges into remote eastern Tibet, you deserve to feel a little smug in the knowledge that you have completed one of the world's great road trips.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Watch traditional Tibetan block printing done by hand at **Bakong Scripture Printing Press** (p274) in Derge
- Jump off the bus and explore Tibetan monasteries at small towns such as **Rongbatsa** (p272) and Luhuo (p271)
- Explore the mountain valleys around remote **Dzogchen Monastery** (p273)
- Hire horses and ride with Khampa wranglers in the wild west town of **Tagong** (p270)
- Walk the kora of **Yading Nature Reserve** (p277) amid the region's stunning scenery
- Hike and then hitch out to **Tsopu Gou** (p279), a remote monastery by a holy alpine lake surrounded by prayer flags
- Play pool with wild-looking Khampas in the high-altitude town of **Litang** (p275), before exploring the large monastery



PERMITS

The good news is that no permits are required anywhere in western Sichuan. You will technically need permits to continue into the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and the only way to get these is to book a vehicle and guide, either in Lhasa or Chengdu. For more details, see p323 and p337.

KANGDING (DARTSEDO) 康定

☎ 0836 / pop 82,000 / elev 2616m

Kangding (Dartsedo or Dardo in Tibetan) is nestled in a deep river valley at the confluence of the Zheduo and Yala Rivers, known in Tibetan as the Dar-chu and the Tse-chu. (The 'do' of the town's Tibetan name means 'river confluence'.)

Arriving in Kangding, there is a tangible sense that you have reached the border of the Chinese and Tibetan worlds. The town has been a trade centre between the two cultures for centuries with the exchange of yak hides, wool, herbs and, especially, bricks of tea from Ya'an wrapped in yak hide. It also served as an important staging

post on the road to Lhasa, as indeed it does today as western Sichuan's largest town.

Kangding was historically the capital of the local Tibetan kingdom of Chakla (or Chala) and later, between 1939 and 1951, the capital of the short-lived province of Xikang, when it was controlled by opium-dealing warlord Liu Wenhui. Today Kangding is largely a Han Chinese town.

Information

Agricultural Bank of China (Zhongguo Nongye

Yinhang; Xi Dajie; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Can change US dollars and UK pounds and *sometimes* travellers cheques, but there's no ATM or cash advances on credit cards.

China Telecom (Zhongguo Dianxin; Yanhe Xilu) Next to the Black Tent Guesthouse; offers cheap international phone calls.

Internet cafés (Wangba; per hr Y2-3; ☎ 8am-midnight) There's one in an alley off Xi Dajie, or get online at Sally's Knapsack Inn (opposite).

Public Security Bureau (PSB; Gong'anju; ☎ 281 1415; Dongda Xiaojie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Visa extensions in three to five days, maybe even the same day if you ask nicely.

Yala Snow Mountain Outdoor Shop (☎ 139 0516 2433; email 13905162433@e172.com) Mr Lin Yueluan



rents and sells trekking equipment, can advise on local trekking routes and can arrange guides and horses.

Sights

There are several minor monasteries in and around Kangding. Just behind the Black Tent Guesthouse, the **Ngachu Monastery** (Anjue Si) is a fairly quiet temple built in 1654. It is home to around 20 monks and a new Jampa Chapel.

The **Nanwu Monastery** in the west of town is the most active monastery in the area and has around 80 lamas in residence. To reach it, walk south along the main road and follow its bend to the left for 2km. South of town is the **Dorje Drak Monastery** (Jingang Si), which was under renovation at last look.

You can head up **Paoma Shan** for excellent views of Kangding and, if you're lucky, Mt Minya Konka (Gongga Shan; 7556m). Take particular care when wandering around Paoma Shan and try to avoid hiking on your own. A British tourist was murdered here in the spring of 2000.

In town, the **market** on Dongda Xiaojie is worth a look. Locals flock most evenings to **People's Square** for some Tibetan and Western-style dancing.

Festivals & Events

The **Zhuanshanjie**, or 'Walking around the Mountain' festival, takes place on Paoma Shan on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month to commemorate the birthday of

INFORMATION

Agricultural Bank of China 中国农业银行	1	A1
Internet Café 网吧	2	A1
Internet Café 网吧	3	A1
PSB 公安局	4	A2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Market 市场	5	A1
Ngachu Monastery 安觉寺	6	A2
People's Square 人民广场	7	A1

SLEEPING

Black Tent Guesthouse 西藏雨黑帐篷	8	A2
Love Song Hotel 情歌大酒店	9	A2
Qingyuan Dajiudian 清源大酒店	10	B1

EATING

Droma Yudia-Khampa Tibetan Eatery	11	B1
Hongkang Fandian 鸿康饭店	12	A1
Nine Bowls Vegetable of Country 九碗农家乡	13	A2
Sichuan Stalls 小吃店	14	B1

TRANSPORT

Bus Station 汽车站	15	B1
-----------------	----	----

Sakyamuni (Sakya Thukpa). White and blue Tibetan tents cover the hillside and there's plenty of wrestling and horse racing, with visitors from all over western Sichuan.

Sleeping

If you're only staying in Kangding a night, to catch an onward bus, it's convenient to be in the east of town near the bus station, although most guesthouses and attractions are over the river on the west side of town.

Black Tent Guesthouse (西藏雨黑帐篷; Xizang Yuhei Zhangpeng; ☎ 886 2107; 28 Yanhe Xilu; dm/d Y20/50) Next to Ngachu Monastery, this clean and sociable place is the spot to meet other travellers. Showers and toilets are clean, but there's only one of each.

Sally's Knapsack Inn (背包客栈; Beibao Kezhan; ☎ 283 8377; zanglingren666@163.com; dm Y20-30) Next to Dorje Drak Monastery, 2km south of town, this laidback hostel and café has colourful carved wooden beds and the most helpful staff in town. A taxi from the bus station costs Y5.

Qingyuan Dajiudian (☎ 669 9888; Yingbin Dadao; d Y380; ☎) Some rooms here are missing lights, electric kettles and even room switches, but once you stumble on an intact room, they're terrific, with reliable hot water and heating. It's conveniently located right by the bus station, and a discounted room may run as low as Y120 to Y150.

Love Song Hotel (Qingge Dajiudian; ☎ 281 3333; fax 281 3111; 156 Dongda Xiaojie; d Y580) Service here

