

Sìchuān 四川



Interpret literally the five Chinese elements (water, earth, wood, metal, fire) and you may understand the attraction that Sichuān has had for millennia. Sichuān means 'Four Rivers' and the name pays tribute to that most essential element, water. Indeed, the 'four' are but the mightiest of the 1300-plus rivers roiling or sedately meandering across the southwest's most expansive province and long dominating the ethos.

Underappreciating the land ('earth') here defies possibility; one can't help but note the high quotient of set-in-Sichuān poetry and *shānshuǐ huà* ('mountain water painting', a traditional Chinese form). Sichuān is ensconced to the north, west, and south by sublime mountain ranges at once majestic and foreboding (and the reason why Sichuān remained so isolated for so much of China's history). In the west, the sparsely populated Tibetan plateau, birthplace of many ribbony waterways, pushes skyward with each kilometre. The rivers spill eastward into the Chuānxī plain of the preternaturally fecund Sichuān basin, which supports one of the densest (and most diverse) populations on the planet (and filling a billion other mouths).

With epic tracts of forest ('wood') and vast deposits of ore ('metal'), Sichuān has become one of China's wealthiest provinces and in no small part is the engine of western China.

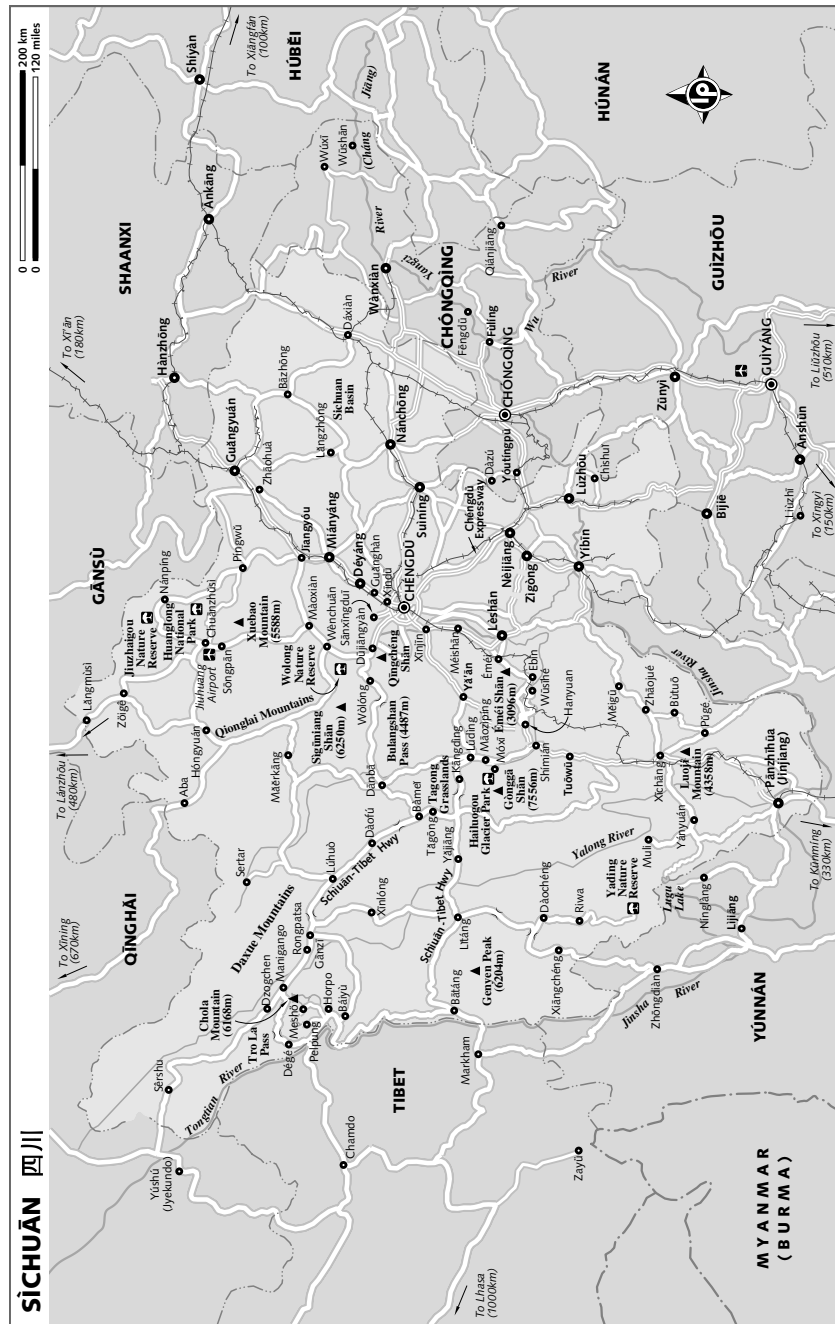
Ah, but fire may be the most esoteric. No volcanoes, but to toy with a metaphor, 'fire' here really means spice, as in *hot* (italics essential) peppers, the key 'element' of Sichuān's renowned flamethrower cuisine. The preponderance of peppers isn't arbitrary; their spiciness is believed to help reduce a person's internal dampness caused by high humidity and rainy weather.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wear out your legs, bribe some monkeys and hope for a blessed sunrise at the sacred mountaintop of **Èméi Shān** (p769)
- Feel your mortality (from the bottom up) on the **Sichuān–Tibet Hwy** (p777) amid soaring snow-capped peaks, grasslands and Tibetan villages
- Indulge your inner cowpoke atop a (tame) pony through the magnificent splendour surrounding **Sōngpān** (p792)
- Coo baby talk to panda cubs at Chéngdū's **Giant Panda Breeding Research Base** (p757)
- Get some statuary exercise by scaling the Grand Buddha, the world's largest Buddha statue, in **Lèshān** (p774)
- Wander streets filled with funky traditional architecture and prepare for your Imperial examination in **Lǎngzhōng** (p768)



■ POPULATION: 84 MILLION



History

Not until 1986, with a major archaeological discovery of the late-Shang dynasty culture of Shu at Sǎnxingduì, was the Sichuān basin's importance to Chinese history fully realized. Never really a backwater as long assumed, the region's rough land (if not fiery food) perhaps giving rise to a rough character of people, it has been the site of various breakaway kingdoms, ever skirmishing with central authority. It was finally wrestled into control and established as the capital of the Qin empire in the 3rd century BC and it was here that the kingdom of Shu (a name by which the province is still known) ruled as an independent state during the Three Kingdoms Period (AD 220–80). The Kuomintang (p48) spent its last days in Sichuān before being vanquished and fleeing to Taiwan; and most recently Chóngqing split from Sichuān when it was promoted to the status of Municipality in 1997.

During the Warring States period (475–221 BC) a famed engineer, Li Bing, managed to harness the Du River (Dū Hé) on the Chuānxī plain with his weir system, allowing Sichuān some 2200 continuous years of irrigation and prosperity. No exaggeration – this bread-basket region in no small part helped unify (and feed) the nation. Sadly, the Great Leap Forward (p51) dealt Sichuān an especially cruel blow: it's believed that one in 10 people starved.

In 1975 Zhao Ziyang, governor of Sichuān and the province's first Communist Party secretary, became the driving force behind the agriculture and economic reforms that put Sichuān back on the map (Zhao was also the CCP's national general secretary from 1987 to 1989 before he fell from grace and into lifelong house arrest for opposing the use of troops during the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations). His system (the 'Responsibility System'), whereby plots of land were let out to individual farmers on the proviso that a portion of the crops be sold back to the government, was so successful that it became the national model and was later applied to the industrial sector. As of 2006, this fertile land of 'Heaven's Granary' was still producing over 10% of the nation's grain, soybeans, pork, and more.

Climate

Chéngdū and the east have a subtropical, humid monsoon climate with temperatures

ranging from 3°C to 8°C in winter (Dec-Feb) and 25°C to 29°C in summer (Jun-Aug). The Qinghai-Tibet plateau in the west experiences intense sunlight and low temperatures most of the year with temperatures dropping to -9°C in winter and reaching highs of only 17°C in summer.

Language

In addition to Mandarin, which is spoken by the Han and the Hui, the other major languages in Sichuān belong to the Tibeto-Burman family and are spoken by Tibetans and the Yi. Sichuanese is one of the 'Mandarin dialects', even though the pronunciation is different enough that it is often very difficult for those who speak standard Chinese to understand.

Getting There & Away

For more details about travelling between provinces see p966.

AIR

Chéngdū's Shangliu Airport is the largest international airport in southwest China. Air China and Sichuān Airlines link Chéngdū with all major Chinese cities and fly direct to Lhasa in Tibet. Currently international flights serve Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Macau, Kuala Lumpur, Kathmandu, Japan, Vienna, Amsterdam and Seoul (more are allowed in the pipeline).

Jiuhuang Airport in northern Sichuān closed in May 2006 for expansion to allow for flights from other major Chinese cities.

BUS

Sichuān's provincial government has been throwing hundreds of billions into highway construction since the mid-1990s as part of China's 'Develop the West' migration plan. High-speed expressways link Chéngdū with Chóngqing and Lèshān; and the construction of highways to link Chéngdū with Shànghǎi, Běihǎi in Guǎngxī province and Tibet are underway (to get to Tibet as yet requires superhuman endurance).

Travel to Gānsù is possible via Jiūzhàigōu and Zōigè. To get to Yúnnán you can travel south via Lèshān, Èméi Shān and Pānzhihuā on the border, or you can travel along the southern route of the Sichuān-Tibet Hwy through Litáng and Xiàngchéng to Shangri-la (Zhōngdiàn).

TRAIN

Chéngdū is an important railway hub in China's southwest. Direct trains run to cities such as Běijīng, and Shànghǎi. Travel to Kūnmíng in Yúnnán and Xī'ān in Shaanxi tend to be the most popular options, although Chéngdū now has a direct train to Lhasa that is becoming wildly popular. To get to Gānsù you need to change in Hānzōng, Shaanxi province.

Getting Around

Jiuhuang Airport connects Chéngdū with Sōngpān and Jiǔzhàigōu. New expressways connect Chéngdū with the eastern part of the province, including those from Chéngdū to Lèshān/Chóngqīng. The buses on this side of the province are generally modern and comfortable. Trains in the east have generally been slow and irregular, but in 2006 new high-speed lines to Miányáng, Lèshān, and Chóngqīng were being finalised.

Travel in the west of the province can only be done via bus (or hitching in logging trucks; see p971). But make sure you have enough time (and pain medication), the roads in this part of Sichuān remain in buttbreakingly awful condition and the buses are, if possible, even worse.

CENTRAL SICHUĀN**CHÉNGDŪ 成都**

☎ 028 / pop 4.1 million / elevation 500m

Judging by the laid-back attitude, admirable green space and pockets of, well, 'old' Chéngdū, you'd hardly know that the city is China's fifth-most populous city (the greater metropolitan area has just broached 13 million and is growing fast even by China's hyper standards). 'Charm' – not a word often used with Chinese supercities – is not altogether inappropriate. In 2006 Chéngdū was rated by several Chinese media as the nation's second-most liveable city.

Oh, true, the city is still in China. Traditional wooden architecture and tree-draped streets have been gradually giving way to neon-drenched malls, glassy high-rises, or resolutely practical new apartment complexes. That same survey above glumly noted that Chéngdū, while eminently liveable, is also choking on exhaust fumes, ranking third in cars per capita.

Yet bustling side streets chock-full of gingko trees and hibiscus flowers do exist, bicycles for the nonce almost equal cars and buses, and eating out with mates still trumps all else. You'll stumble upon markets, countless tiny restaurants specialising in Sichuan snacks, and parks where old men walk their song birds or hunch over a game of chess (as auburn-haired seen-on-the-scene hipsters yapping on their mobile phones stroll nearby). A dash of old-time artisans – cobblers, weavers, itinerant dentists and the like – scattered throughout and you've got your lively-yet-relaxed Chéngdū.

History

'Chéngdū', or Perfect Metropolis, has seen the rise and fall of nearly a dozen independent kingdoms or dynasties since its founding in 316 BC; agricultural potential and strategic geography were key to its political power. Yet throughout history it has been equally well-known for culture; not by accident did the Tang dynasty poet Du Fu brush his strokes here. The city is also split by the Brocade River (Jīn Jiāng), a reminder of the city's silk brocade industry which thrived during the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220); from here the Southern Silk Road guided caravans to the known world. The city's name eventually shifted from Jīnchéng (Brocade City) to 'Hibiscus City', still used today by locals. By the time of the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907) the city had become a cornerstone of Chinese society. Three hundred years later, during the Song dynasty, Chéngdū began to issue the world's first paper money.

It is also a survivor. Devastated first by the Mongols in retaliation for its fierce resistance, from 1644 to 1647 it was presided over by the rebel Zhang Xianzhong, who set up an independent state in Sichuān and ruled by terror and mass executions. Three centuries later the city became one of the last strongholds of the Kuomintang.

Orientation

Ring roads circle the outer city: Yihuan Lu (First Ring Rd), Erhuan Lu (Second Ring Rd) and Sanhuan Lu (Third Ring Rd). These are divided into numbered segments (*duàn*). The main boulevard that sweeps through the centre of everything is Renmin Lu – in its north (*běi*), central (*zhōng*) and south (*nán*) manifestations.

STREET NAME HEADACHE

Chéngdū is a true Asian city in its nonchalant disregard of systematic street numbering and naming. It's not unusual, when following street numbers in one direction, to meet another set coming the other way, leaving some places with five sets of numbers on their doors. Street names, also, seem to change every 100m or so – with very little apparent logic involved. Try to bear this in mind when you're looking for somewhere in particular, and rely more on nearby landmarks and relative locations on maps than on street numbers and names.

The nucleus of the city is the square that interrupts Renmin Lu, where you'll find the Sichuān Exhibition Centre, a sports stadium and the colossal Mao statue. Just south is Tianfu Sq, a pedestrianised neon extravaganza and the main shopping district. Note that a new subway system and ongoing plans to relocate government offices and industries are affecting the lay of the downtown land.

MAPS

Tourist maps of Chéngdū, including a handful of English-language ones, abound at train and bus stations, bookshops and newspaper kiosks. City maps in Chinese can be useful for tracing bus routes, though not even the best ones can hope to capture the insanity that is Chéngdū's street naming (see the box on above).

Information**BOOKSHOPS**

South West Book Centre (Xínán Shūchéng; Xiadong Dajie) Has maps and a small selection of English titles.

INTERNET ACCESS 网吧

Well-located options include one on Chunxi Lu, another above Xinnanmen bus station, and one on Renmin Beilu south of the train station. All guesthouses – but not all hotels – have internet access (though few of these are adept at CD burning and other higher-tech endeavours, so do be patient with them). All charge about Y3 per hour.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Chengdu (www.chengdu.gov.cn) This provincial government website has an OK English version with information on the city and surrounding areas.

MEDICAL SERVICES

No 3 Hospital (Dongmen Jie) Helpful staff with a handful of English speakers.

Global Doctor Chéngdū Clinic (☎ 8522 6058, 139-8225 6966; ground fl, Kelan Bldg, Bangkok Garden Apts, Section 4, 21 Renmin Nanlu; ☎ 9-11am & 1.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Has a 24-hour English-speaking helpline.

MONEY

Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Renmin Nanlu; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-5pm Sat & Sun) Can change money and travellers cheques and offer cash advances on credit cards. Other well-located branches include those on Renmin Zhonglu and just north of Xinnanmen bus station. All have ATMs.

POST & TELEPHONE

China Post (Yóujú; 71 Shawan Lu; ☎ 8am-6pm) The main international post office is west of the train station. A smaller branch can be found on Dongchenggen Jie near People's Park.

PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

PSB (Gōngānjú; ☎ 8640 7067; 136 Wenwu Lu; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) The foreign affairs entrance is on Tianzuo Jie; this is where you can get visa extensions. PSB says it's a five-day wait. Period. Consider picking yours up in Lèshān, Kāngdīng, or – best – Sōngpān.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The best source for up-to-the-minute restaurant, bar and entertainment listings is the free monthly magazine *Go West* which you can pick up at guesthouses and restaurants.

Tourist booth (☎ 9am-9.30pm in summer) The city maintains an information booth with English (well, some anyway) speakers along Chunxi Lu.

Tourist hotline (☎ 8292 8555) Free hotline with English-speaking operators.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Every other building in the city seems to be a travel agency; note that dissatisfaction with private agencies is a none-too-rare thing, so ask around first. Basically everywhere you can lay your head has a travel agency of some sort. The more useful travel agencies are at the Dragon Town Youth Hostel, The Loft and Sim's Cozy Guesthouse.

Tours offered differ at every place, but many include those to Hǎiluógōu Glacier Park, Wolong Nature Reserve, Jiǔzhàigōu, Èméi Shān and Sōngpān. Also on offer are day trips to the Giant Panda Breeding Research Base and local Sichuān opera performances.



Prices depend upon the number of travellers but are generally good value.

Agencies can often arrange Yangzi River (Chāng Jiāng) cruise tickets, train and flight tickets and permits to Tibet.

China International Travel Service (CITS; Zhōngguó Guóji Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 8642 8212, 8666 4422; Renmin Nanlu) Arranges pricey tours including packages to Tibet, and offers train and airline ticket booking for a substantial fee.

Dangers & Annoyances

There have been several reports of foreigners becoming targets for rip-offs and theft in Chéngdū, though violent encounters are rare. Definitely lock your bicycle! Some travellers have reported having things stolen out of their bicycle basket while they're pedalling!

Sights

GIANT PANDA BREEDING RESEARCH BASE 大熊猫繁殖研究中心
About 10km north of Chéngdū at the **Giant Panda Breeding Research Base** (Dàxióngmāo Fánzhí Yánjiū Zhōngxīn; admission ¥30; ☎ 8am-6pm) you can experience the *de rigueur* city activity: gushing over a panda.

The base holds nearly 50 giant and red pandas, although only a dozen are generally out and about. Breeding is the focus here (March to May is the 'falling in love period', wink wink) and if you visit in autumn, you may also have the opportunity to see tiny newborns in the 'nursery'. It costs ¥50 to hold a baby red panda; ¥400 to sit next to an adult panda; and a whopping ¥1200 to hold a baby panda.

A museum has detailed exhibits on panda evolution, habits, habitats and conservation efforts, all with English captions.

Note that feeding takes place at around 9.30am and very soon thereafter the pandas return to their other favourite pastime – sleeping.

Getting to the base is tricky. Cycling is rough, as you run the risk of becoming road-kill on the congested streets. Bus 10 runs out to Qinglong, from where you'll have to change for bus 1 to the terminus. From here, hop on a motorised rickshaw to the breeding centre. A lot less hassle are the tours run by most guesthouses for ¥50 including the entrance fee.

INFORMATION

Bank of China ATM 中国银行	..... (see 59)
Bank of China 中国银行	..... 1 C4
Bank of China 中国银行	..... 2 B3
Bank of China 中国银行	..... 3 B4
Bank of China 中国银行	..... 4 C5
China Post 邮局	..... 5 B4
China Post 邮局	..... 6 A2
CITS 中国国际旅行社	..... 7 B5
German Consulate 德国领事馆	..... 8 B6
Global Doctor Chengdu Clinic	..... 9 B6
Internet Café 网吧	..... 10 C4
Internet Café 网吧	..... 11 B2
No 3 Hospital 三医院	..... 12 B3
PSB (Foreign Affairs Section) 省公安厅外事处	..... 13 B3
South West Book Centre 西南书城	..... 14 C4
Tourist Booth	..... 15 C4
US Consulate 美国领事馆	..... 16 B6

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Green Ram Temple 青羊宫	..... 17 A4
Mao Statue 毛主席像	..... 18 B4
Municipal Sports Stadium 市体育场	..... 19 B4
Sichuan Exhibition Centre 省展览馆	..... 20 B4
Sichuan University Museum 四川大学博物馆	..... 21 C5
Tomb of Wang Jian 王建墓	..... 22 A3
Wenshu Temple 文殊院	..... 23 B3
Wuhou Temple 武侯祠	..... 24 A5
Zhaojue Temple 昭觉寺	..... 25 D1

SLEEPING

Chéngdū Dàjiùdiàn 成都大酒店	..... 26 B2
Dragon Town Youth Hostel 龙堂客栈	..... 27 B4
Holly's Hostel 九龙鼎青年客栈	..... 28 A5
Jindi Fāndiàn 金地饭店	..... 29 C3
Jinjiang Bīnguǎn 锦江宾馆	..... 30 B5
Loft 四号工厂旅馆	..... 31 B3
Róngchéng Fàndiàn 蓉城饭店	..... 32 B4
Sheraton Chengdu Lido Hotel 天府丽都喜来登饭店	..... 33 B4
Sim's Cozy Guesthouse 观华青年旅舍	..... 34 C3
Tibet Hotel 西藏大酒店	..... 35 B2
Bāguó Bùyì Fēngwèijūlǒu 巴国布衣风味酒楼	..... 36 B6
Chén Mǎpó Dòufu 陈麻婆豆腐	..... 37 C3
Chén Mǎpó Dòufu 陈麻婆豆腐	..... 38 B3

EATING

Grandma's Kitchen & Deli 祖母的厨房	..... 39 C6
Grandma's Kitchen 祖母的厨房	..... (see 36)
Highly Cafe 高飞咖啡	..... 40 B5
Lóngchāoshǒu Cǎntīng 龙抄手餐厅	..... 41 C4
Sichuan University Museum 皮得德州扒房	..... 42 C6
Shiqiǎo Shǒumiàn 石桥手面	..... 43 C4
Renmin Teahouse 人民茶馆	..... 44 B4
Roo Bar 大袋鼠酒吧	..... 45 C6

Shamrock Irish Bar & Restaurant 三叶草爱尔兰西餐酒吧 46 B6
Temple of Mercy 大慈寺 47 C4

ENTERTAINMENT

Jinjiang Theatre 锦江剧场 48 C4
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SHOPPING

Airwolf 非狼户外 (see 49)
Mountain Dak Outdoor Sports Club 高山户外旅游探险用品 49 B5
Outdoor Equipment Shops 户外用品商店	..... 50 B5
Qingshiqiao Market 青石桥市场	..... 51 B4
Songxinqiao Art City 送心桥艺术城	..... 52 A4
Tibetan Shops 西藏专卖店	..... 53 A5
Tóng Rén Tǎng 同仁堂	..... 54 C4

TRANSPORT

Advance Rail Booking Office 火车站售票处	..... 55 B4
Air China 中国民航	..... 56 B4
Dragon Air 港龙航空公司	..... (see 33)
North Bus Station 城北汽车客运中心	..... 57 B2
Sichuan Airlines 四川航空公司	..... 58 B4
Xinnanmen Bus Station 新南门汽车站	..... 59 C5
Zhaojue Bus Station 昭觉寺汽车站	..... 60 D1

LIFE ON THE EDGE FOR THE GIANT PANDA David Andrew

The Giant Panda is one of the most instantly recognisable large mammals in the world, and in China you will see its moniker on everything from cigarette packs to souvenir tie pins. But although there are vague references to its existence in Chinese literature going back 3000 years, it was not until 1869 that a remarkable French curate-naturalist, Père Armand David, brought a pelt back to the West and formally described the Giant Panda to the scientific world. Endemic to China, it is now restricted to just five mountain ranges straddling the provinces of Sichuān, Shaanxi and Gānsū, and is thought to number just 1000 or so individuals in the wild.

One Chinese name for the Giant Panda is *da xióngmāo* (big bear-cat), and it is so unlike other bears that scientists have long debated whether it in fact belongs to the raccoon family, or even whether it should be in a separate family of its own. Recent genetic evidence shows it to be a bear, and like other bears it has a carnivorous (meat-eating) ancestry. However, the similarities pretty well end there and almost every aspect of the Giant Panda's ecology and behaviour is adapted to a diet of bamboo. Bamboo is a poor food for a large, warm-blooded animal – it is low in protein and high in indigestible plant fibres, and barely provides enough nutrition to support the panda's metabolism. But it grows as a superabundant food resource in the damp, chilly mountains of southwest China, and through a suite of adaptations the Giant Panda has overcome the challenge of surviving on what is effectively woody grass.

Most famous of these adaptations is the 'panda's thumb' – not a real thumb, but a modified wrist bone that enables the Giant Panda to strip bamboo leaves from their branches, and to manipulate shoots and stems. Its rounded body shape (by bear standards, at least) and extremities conserve heat in winter, thus enabling the panda to feed year-round without hibernating. Its striking black-and-white coloration and prominent eye patches serve as a warning both to other pandas and to potential predators, since both social and threatening interactions would mean wasting precious energy.

However, the Giant Panda must still ingest an extraordinary amount of bamboo to extract its daily nutrition requirements. And just to make life interesting, every 25 or so years bamboos flower and die *en masse*, and the pandas must move to other feeding areas to survive. With the increased fragmentation of their natural forest habitat their choices for new feeding sites are limited, and in the mid-1970s more than 130 pandas starved to death when bamboos flowered and died in Mǐn Shān, Sichuān.

With world attention focused on the panda's survival, the Chinese government has set up 11 panda reserves in the southwest and thrown itself behind a captive breeding program. Chinese laws now strictly forbid hunting or tree-felling in Giant Panda habitat. Peasants are offered rewards equivalent to double their annual salary if they save a starving panda, and life sentences or public executions are imposed on convicted poachers. Even though Giant Pandas are notoriously difficult to breed in captivity, Chéngdū's Giant Panda Breeding Research Base (p757) has recently had successes with the birth of a number of pandas. But sceptics would rather leave the pandas to their own devices and see more efforts made to preserve natural panda habitat; captive breeding has in only a very few cases been used successfully to save wild populations of large animals. And one cannot ignore the profit motive in China's burgeoning economy: Giant Pandas draw a crowd wherever they are displayed and nearly 200 are kept in China's zoos. Few, if any, captive-bred pandas have so far been released in the wild.

WENSHU TEMPLE 文殊院

This Tang dynasty monastery is Chéngdū's largest and best-preserved Buddhist temple. **Wenshu Temple** (Wénshū Yuàn; Renmin Zhonglu; admission Y5; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) epitomises a Buddhist temple – the air is redolent with incense, there's a low murmur of chanting, exquisite relief carvings, and best of all, there is a sense of serenity and solitude, despite the

crowd of worshippers who flock to the temple. A vegetarian restaurant (p762) and two atmospheric teahouses (p762) are on the grounds.

The alleys surrounding the temple are their own curiosities, filled with joss-stick vendors, foot-callus removers, blind fortune-tellers with bamboo spills and, naturally, teahouses.

TOMB OF WANG JIAN 王建墓

In the northwest of town, the **Tomb of Wang Jian** (Wángjiàn Mù; Yongling Lu; admission Y40; ☎ 7am-7pm) was, until excavations undertaken in 1942, thought to be the pavilion in which Zhuge Liang (see Wuhou Temple, right) played his zither. Wang Jian (AD 847–918), a general who established the Former Shu kingdom after the collapse of the Tang in 907, ruled in a hands-off manner and during his reign agricultural output rose significantly.

The only mausoleum excavated in China so far that features above-ground tomb chambers, its main feature is a tomb surrounded by statues of 24 musicians all playing different instruments, considered to be the best surviving record of a Tang dynasty musical troupe.

ZHAOJUE TEMPLE 照觉寺

Zhaojue Temple (Zhàojué Sì; admission Y8; ☎ 7am-7pm) dates back to the 7th century although little remains of the original architecture. During the early Qing dynasty, it underwent extensive reconstruction under the supervision of Po Shan, a famous Buddhist monk who established waterways and groves around the temple. The temple has since served as a model for many Japanese and Southeast-Asian Buddhist temples.

The temple went through hard times during the Cultural Revolution and has only been restored during the last decade. There's a vegetarian restaurant on the grounds (p762) and a teahouse next door.

Zhaojue Temple is about 6km northeast of Chéngdū city centre. Loads of buses run to the nearby Zhaojue bus station (*zhàojué chēzhàn*) from around town. Cycling is possible though you risk asphyxiation from traffic fumes.

TEMPLE PARKS

West of the Mao statue is **Culture Park** (Wénhuà Gōngyuán; ☎ 7am-10pm), home to the **Green Ram Temple** (Qīngyáng Gōng; admission Y5; ☎ 7am-6.30pm), the oldest and most extensive Taoist temple in the Chéngdū area. What's with the name and the two bronze goats inside? Purportedly, Lao-tzu, the high priest of Taoism, was to meet a friend here. Arriving, the man saw only a boy leading two goats – and in an impressive leap of lateral thinking realised the boy was Lao-tzu. (The ungoat-like goat, by the way, combines features of all the Chinese zodiac animals. The other goat can vanquish life's troubles and pains if you stroke its flank.)

The highlight otherwise is an eight-sided pagoda – with no bolts or pegs used in construction – considered to be an architectural illustration of Taoist philosophy that 'the sky is round and the earth is square'.

The temple has excellent nightly performances of Sichuān opera and theatrical performances.

It's well-nigh impossible not to find your muse at nearby **Du Fu's Cottage** (Dùfū Cǎotáng; 38 Qinghua Lu; admission Y60; ☎ 7am-7pm), former humble home of the revered Tang dynasty poet who has inspired countless generations of Chinese artists. Along with fellow Sichuān poet Li Bai (Li Po), his work represents the zenith of Chinese poetry. Du Fu (AD 712–70) was born in Hénán but a young life of peregrination brought him to Chéngdū, where he lived for four years, penning more than 200 poems here on simple themes around the lives of the people who lived and worked nearby. Dance troupe performances are also given here regularly.

Next to **Nanjiao Park** (Nánjiāo Gōngyuán; admission Y2; ☎ 6am-10pm) is **Wuhou Temple** (Wúhòu Sì; admission Y60; ☎ 6.30am-8pm), surrounded by picturesque gardens with mossy cypresses draped over walkways. Zhuge Liang was a legendary military strategist (known for his wisdom and culture) of the Three Kingdoms period (AD 220–80) and immortalised in one of the classics of Chinese literature, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The temple also features Sichuān opera performances nightly. To the east of the temple is 'Jinli Lu', actually a gentrified (in the 'new-old' style of so many cities) historic district – during the Han Dynasty and Three Kingdom Period, this neighbourhood was filled with brocade workshops, and with alleys running north to the Jinjiang (the river) chock-full of shops, restaurants, pubs, teahouses and more.

In the southeast of town, near Sichuān University, is **River Viewing Pavilion Park** (Wàngjiānglóu Gōngyuán; admission Y5; ☎ 6am-9pm). The impressive, restful, four-storey wooden Qing pavilion overlooking Brocade River was built in memory of Xue Tao, a female Tang dynasty poet with a great love for bamboo. Nearby is a well where Xue Tao is believed to have drawn water to dye her writing paper.

The park is justly celebrated for its bamboo and features over 150 varieties from China, Japan and Southeast Asia, ranging from bonsai-sized potted plants to towering giants.

PEOPLE'S PARK 人民公园

To the southwest of the city centre, **People's Park** (Rénmín Gōngyuán; admission Y2; ☎ 6am-8pm) is one Chinese park well worth visiting. The teahouse here draws most visitors (and locals after their taichi practice) for good reason (see p762).

Plotted in the middle of the park's bonsai and perennials is the **Monument to the Martyrs of the Railway Protection Movement** (1911). This obelisk memorializes an uprising of the people against corrupt officers who pocketed cash that was intended for railway construction. People's Park then was a private officer's garden, so it was a fitting place to erect the structure.

Across the lake from the teahouse is the entry to a one-of-a-kind underground **fun-house** (admission Y5). All aboard a ride on a rickety shuttle-train through a converted air-raid shelter (!), bypassing squeaky animatronic dioramas spanning the gamut: Wild West to Christmas via a horror movie and straight into the mouth of a shark. Tackily appealing.

SICHUĀN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

四川大学博物馆

The **Sichuan University Museum** (Sichuan Dàxué Bówùguǎn) was one of the better museums in the southwest. The collection is particularly strong in the fields of ethnology, folklore and traditional art. Sadly, though, it's currently homeless, as the city's relocation of universities saw it bulldozed. It's tentatively slated to move to a location near Sòngxinqiáo Art City (p763).

Sleeping**BUDGET**

Chéngdū has a baker's dozen of backpacker-friendly places; nope, we do not have space for all!

Sim's Cozy Guesthouse (Guānhuá Qīngnián Lǚshè; ☎ 8691 4422; www.gogosc.com; 42 Xīzhū Shìjìe; 西珠市街42号; dm Y15-35, s/d without bathroom from Y50/70, with bathroom Y100/120; ☎ ☎ ☎) A stone's throw from the serene Wenshu Temple, this rambling yet, well, cozy place in a century-old traditional building is run by a backpacker couple (he Singaporean, she Japanese) and the facilities, service and, true, warmth show they know the Road. Bottom line: it's that rare place where money doesn't seem to be the point. It's also got lovely minority-styled family rooms. Credit cards accepted.

Loft (Shìhào Gōngcháng Lǚguǎn; ☎ 8626 5770; www.lofthostel.com; 4 Shāngtóngren Lu, Xiāotóng Xiāng; 同仁路4号小通巷; dm Y15-30, s/d without bathroom Y90/100, with bathroom Y140; ☎ ☎) 'Chic hostel' is not oxymoronic here, a smart new place in an early 20th century printing factory. Billy, the friendly backpacker-owner and his team of artists painstakingly blended the original brick and wood work with new touches. A café serves Danish food, there's heat in winter and the relaxing top-floor loft has free internet.

Holly's Hostel (Jiǔlóngdīng Qīngnián Kèzhàn; ☎ 8554 8131; Hollyhostelcn@yahoo.com; 246 Wuhoucí Dajie; 武侯祠大街246号; dm Y20-30; ☎) This boisterous place lies smack in the heart of the Tibetan quarter. Things are a tad cramped, but rooms are large and clean, and the staff are quite friendly.

Dragon Town Youth Hostel (Lóngtáng Kèzhàn; ☎ 8664 8408; www.dragontown.com.cn; 27 Kuan Xiāngzi; 宽巷子27号; dm Y30, s/d without bathroom Y100, s/d with bathroom Y100/160; ☎ ☎) Those wanting China-out-of-a-coffee table-book aesthetics need go no further. Tucked down a quiet back alley, this building – replete with courtyard – dates from the Qing dynasty. Rooms are clean and comfortable; staff are great. Honeymoon suites feature antique Chinese furniture.

MIDRANGE

There isn't much in the way of midrange options in Chéngdū, but fortunately all of the budget guesthouses have midrange value doubles for bargain prices.

Chéngdū Dàjiùdiàn (☎ 8317 3888; 29 Renmin Beilu; 人民北路29号; d Y150-280; ☎) This place is a bit far north to be convenient for anything but the train station, but as the rooms are pretty much always on offer for a steep discount, it may be worth the trouble.

Jindi Fāndiàn (☎ 8691 5339; 8691 7778; 89 Xinhua Dadao; 新华大道89号; s/d Y220/280; ☎) Nicely located for sights and activities in the north of downtown (it's also off main drags and thus is a bit quieter), this place has always provided decent value for money.

Róngchéng Fāndiàn (☎ 8611 2933; 130 Shanxi Jie; 陕西街130号; d Y240; ☎) This place has cleaned up its act – that is, the rooms – quite a bit judging from a recent visit though the staff can be a bit flustered at times. Nice courtyard areas.

TOP END

With continuously growing competition, you may often get huge discounts (up to 40%) at top-end hotels during winter. A Shangri-la

hotel (like a city-state) is in the works and if it matches the plans, it should be spectacular. The prices listed are what you can expect to pay during high season.

Tibet Hotel (Xizàng Dàjiùdiàn; ☎ 8318 3388; fax 8319 3838; 10 Renmin Beilu; 人民北路10号; s/d Y648/1330; ☎ ☎) The location is not the most convenient but the rooms here are beautifully decorated and the staff are lickety-split and solicitous. This hotel continually garners positive reviews from travellers.

Jinjiang Binguan (☎ 8550 6666; www.jjhotel.com; 80, Section 2, Renmin Nanlu; 人民南路80号2段; d Y880-2200; ☎ ☎ ☎) The first of the city's luxury hotels, this place has seen its ups and downs but of late has been upgrading with a bit of a verve to match – or exceed – any competition. The rooftop restaurant has superlative views.

Sheraton Chéngdū Lido Hotel (Tiānfú Lidú Xīlǎidēng Fāndiàn; ☎ 8676 8999; www.sheraton.com/Chengdu; Section 1, 15 Renmin Zhonglu; 人民中路15号1段; d Y1310-2220; ☎ ☎ ☎) Alternatively, one of the newer luxury – and that word is not misplaced here – hotels is this sybaritic place. Rooms aren't exactly spacious, but more than make up for it in careful appointment and décor.

Eating**CHINESE**

Chinese people revere Sichuan's hot and spicy cuisine (see boxed text, below). The most sali-

ent pepper flavour is *huājiāo* (*Xanthoxylon*, a wild pepper); some love it, some cringe at its over-the-top numbing effect (rural dentists purportedly use it as an anaesthetic) and say its aftertaste is a bit like a detergent.

You should also learn *xiǎo chí* (little eats); cheap, quick snacks are the way of life here. Popular with the on-the-fly lunchtime crowd is *shāokǎo*, Sichuanese barbecue. Skewers of meat, vegies and smoked tofu are brushed with oil and chilli and grilled.

Sadly, city officials have begun clearing many streets of itinerant roadside food stalls and instead of forming night markets for food, many have had to either close or move indoors. Yet prowling around you'll still find roadside stalls on back streets, many simply portable grills on bikes.

With more time you can savour *huòguō* though it's becoming a bit of a yuppified sit-down affair. It's similar to fondue: dip skewered meat and vegies into big woks filled with hot, spiced oil and then into little dishes of peanut oil and garlic. Be forewarned – hotpot can be very hot; even many Sichuanese can't take it. To prevent the sweats, try asking for *báiwèi*, the hotpot for wimps. Peanut milk, sold in tins, can help arrest the dragonesque results.

Shiqiāo Shǒumiàn (Hongxing Lu; dishes Y2) This place serves up excellent bowls of filling noodles that you can watch being made fresh on

HOT & SPICY

The Chinese have a saying 'Shí zài Zhōngguó, wèi zài Sīchuān' (China is the place for food but Sichuan is the place for flavour). Flavour starts with mouth-singeing peppers. With such fiery food the Sichuanese themselves have a reputation for being a little hot-headed and the local women are even referred to as *là mēizi* (spice girls). The province boasts a repertoire of over 5000 different dishes. This may be due to the province's history. 'Liáng Hú, Liáng Guǎng' translates as 'two Hus (Húběi and Húnán), two Guangs (Guǎngdōng and Guǎngxī)'. During an uprising, an enormous number of people in the province were slaughtered, and others from these provinces were forcibly relocated here by the emperor's troops, bringing their own cuisine with them. We'll just start with five of the most popular:

- *huíguō ròu* (boiled and stir-fried pork with salty and hot sauce; 回锅肉)
- *gōngbào jīdīng* (spicy chicken with peanuts; 宫保鸡丁)
- *shuǐzhǔ yú* (boiled fish in a fiery sauce; 水煮鱼)
- *gānbǎn sījīdòu* (dry-fried green beans; 干煸四季豆)
- *mápó dòufu* (pock-marked Mother Chen's bean curd; 麻婆豆腐)

The last two dishes can be made suitable for vegetarians, just ask them to leave out the meat 'bú fàng ròu' (不放肉).

the premises. The friendly staff are happy to cater to vegetarians.

Lóngchāoshǒu Cāntīng (cnr Chunxi Lu & Shandong Dajie; meals ¥5-15) Run the whole gamut of the Chéngdū snack experience here at this long-time fave. The cheapest option gives you a range of sweet and savoury items, with each price bracket giving you the same deal on a grander and more filling scale. Unfortunately it hasn't much to offer vegetarians.

Chén Mápó Dòufu (Pockmarked Grandma Chen's Bean Curd; Jiefang Lu; dishes from ¥5) *Mápó dòufu* is served here with a vengeance – soft, fresh bean curd with a fiery sauce of garlic, minced beef, salted soybean, chilli oil and fiery Sichuān pepper. So popular is this place that a handful of franchise options are now found throughout town.

Bāguó Bùyì Fèngweijiǔlù (4 Section, 20 Renmin Nanlu; dishes from ¥10) This place is named after the traditional cotton clothing worn by peasants in an ancient state of eastern Sichuān. Best described as country Sichuān, the food here is superlative and the atmosphere (casually upscale) among the best in the province. An English menu helps, but it's more fun to wander and point.

VEGETARIAN

A special treat for vegetarians is to head out to the Wenshu Temple (p758) where there is an excellent vegetarian restaurant with an English menu (dishes ¥6 to ¥10).

Zhaojue Temple (p759) also serves up vegetarian dishes for lunch (from 11am to 3.30pm, dishes from ¥8) and if you're really keen, you might ride out to Monastery of Divine Light (p765) in Xīndū, 18km north of Chéngdū, in time for lunch (11am to noon, dishes from ¥7).

Most of the Western restaurants also feature vegetarian options on their menus.

WESTERN

The number of Western restaurants springing up in Chéngdū continues to grow and the following are just a few options.

Highfly Cafe (Gāofēi Kāfēi; ☎ 8544 2820; 18 Binjiang Zhonglu; dishes from ¥12; ☞ 9am-late) The happy staff gets overwhelmed with hipster Chinese at times, but it's a relaxing place with great food; try the delicious calorie-laden fudge brownies. Free internet access.

Peter's Tex-Mex (Pídé Dèzhōu Páifāng; ☎ 8522 7965; 117 Kehua Beilu; dishes from ¥15; ☞ 7.30am-11pm) This

place, with a jaw-dropping menu, gets a big ol' cowboy *yee-haw* from carnivores and anyone who knows what it's like to be without refried beans and tortillas for too long. It's also – cool – wi-fi friendly.

Grandma's Kitchen & Deli (Zǔmǔ Dèchūfāng; ☎ 8524 2835; 73/75 Kehua Beilu; mains from ¥20) Burgers, steaks, salads and delicious desserts are great; a particular favourite are the shakes and smoothies. The deli here is also quite popular. A second branch, **Grandma's Kitchen** (☎ 8555 3856; 22 Renmin Nanlu) serves up similar dishes but has a more limited menu.

Drinking

TEAHOUSES

Positively nowhere in China more than Sichuān better represents the culture of tea; hey, the 'art' of drinking tea dates back 3,000 years. Traditionally, the teahouse functioned as the centre of social life, a place where people had haircuts, watched opera performances, played cards, bantered over poetry, had their earwax removed (no kidding) and gossiped about their neighbours. A bit like going to the pub today, other than the earwax and opera.

Renmin Teahouse (Rénmín Chāguǎn; People's Park; tea ¥5-20; ☞ 10am-6pm) This is one of Chéngdū's finest. A most pleasant afternoon can be spent here in relative anonymity over a bottomless cup of stone-flower tea.

Another charming family type teahouse is in Wenshu Temple (p758), with an amazingly crowded and steamy ambience. This is in addition to the huge tea garden outside – one of the largest and most lively in Chéngdū. If you want to join in, sit on the west side of the path, closest to the main temple, where tea costs ¥2. The tea must be greener on the other side of the path where it costs ¥10. Also, try the teahouse in **Temple of Mercy** (Dàcí Sì; Dàcí Sì Lu; admission ¥1; ☞ 10am-6pm). The temple itself doesn't offer much to see, but the grounds, with tables piled high with mah jong pieces and teacups, are a perfect place for a lazy afternoon in the sun.

PUBS & BARS

Chinese media have finally begun to recognise Chéngdū as one of the country's most happening cities. Then again, like most Chinese cities, what is one week's hot spot is next week's ghost haunt with shuttered doors and a new Starbucks clone. Very problematic. Get hold of a copy of *Go West* (see p755) to keep up with the latest.

Shamrock Irish Bar & Restaurant (Sānyècǎo Àièrlán Xīcān Jiǔbā; ☎ 8523 6158; 4 Section, 15 Renmin Nanlu; ☞ 10am-late) The name says it all – heavy on the Hibernian warmth and hospitality here. Great food during the day, then at night you'll hardly find a better spot for camaraderie and regular live music and/or dancing – you might find local rock acts, salsa, or even jazz.

Roo Bar (Dàdàishū Jiǔbā; ☎ 8540 1318; 6 Kehua Jie; ☞ 11.30am-2am) Equally boisterous – without as much live music – is this place, where in addition to your beer you can indulge in a burger with beetroot and egg, among other delicacies.

Entertainment

Chéngdū is the home of Sichuān opera, which has a tradition dating back more than 250 years, and features slapstick, eyeglass-shattering songs, men dressed as women, gymnastics and even fire breathing. Several opera houses are scattered throughout the older sections of town, a couple of which are in temples listed above (the ones in the temples are pricey and filled with tourists). Many offer daily performances; some are weekends only. No matter where you go, it's a grand, fun-filled experience.

Try to go on the weekends when performances are often a combination of the high-lights from a number of operas. Any of the guesthouses will be able to organise tours for a similar price; some even have local connections to possibly get you backstage.

Jinjiang Theatre (Jīnjiāng Jùyuàn; Huaxingzheng Jie) This combination teahouse, opera theatre and cinema is one of the more centrally located. High-standard Sichuān opera performances are given here every Saturday and/or Sunday afternoon (¥120 per person) though the teahouse itself often has performances for ¥15!

Shopping

The main downtown shopping area extends from the eastern end of Renmin Donglu south to Shangdong Dajie, with trendy clothing shops and department stores. Glitzy department store complexes are pretty much ubiquitous now.

Qingshiqiao Market (Qīngshìqiáo Shìchǎng; Xīnkai Jie) This large market is one of the most interesting and busiest places to wander in town. Shops and stalls sell brightly coloured seafood, flowers, cacti, birds, pets and a thousand dried foods.

South of the river, on a street across from the entrance of the Wuhou Temple, is a small Tibetan neighbourhood. While it's not evident in the architecture, it is in the prayer flags, colourful scarves, beads and brass goods for sale. You won't find the variety of things (nor the bargains) that you'll find in the northwest of Sichuān, but it still makes for an interesting wander.

Sòngxīnqiáo Yìshùchéng (Songxingqiao Art City; Qinghua Jie) Not far from Du Fu's Cottage (p759), this large covered market features a selection of stalls selling art and antiques. It's not cheap but worth a browse.

Outdoor clothing and equipment are a big buy in the city (lots of folks headed into the western hills and Tibet, match). **Mountain Dak Outdoor Sports Club** (Gāoshān Hùwài Lǚyóu Tānxiǎn Yòngpīn) and **Airwolf** (Fēiláng Hùwài) are located near Highfly Café. Another half-dozen are to the south along Renmin Nanlu at the corner of Nan Yihuan Lu. Quality varies; experts don't call a lot of it 'North Fake' for nothing.

Tóng Rén Táng (Tong Ren Tang Pharmacy; 1 Zongfu Lu) Even if your knowledge of Chinese medicine is zilch, this traditional Chinese pharmacy, over 260 years old, is a superb place to just browse and gape at the enormity of knowledge accrued over four millennia.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Flights internally go everywhere, virtually all the time. Whatever you do, shop around; outside of highest periods posted rates should mean little. Internal destinations include Běijīng (¥1440, 2¼hr), Chóngqīng (¥440, 45 minutes), Dàlián (¥1810, 3½hr), Shànghǎi (¥1660, two hours and 20 minutes), Guǎngzhōu (¥1300, one hour and 50 minutes), Lǐjiāng (¥880, one hour), Kūnmíng (¥700, one hour) and Xī'ān (¥630, one hour and 20 minutes).

Within Sichuān there are four flights a day to Jiuhuāng Airport (¥700, 40 minutes), the new air link for Jiùzhàigōu and Sōngpān in northern Sichuān.

International destinations include Hong Kong (¥2200, 2½hr), Tokyo (¥3000, 6½hr), Singapore (¥1900, four hours and 20 minutes), Seoul, and Bangkok (¥1700, two hours and 55 minutes). Flights should operate between Amsterdam, Vienna, and Macau by the time you read this.

CHÉNGDŪ BUS TIMETABLES

Buses from Xinnanmen bus station:

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Éméi	Y33	2hr	every 20min	6.40am-7pm
Dūjiāngyàn	Y17	1½hr	half-hourly	8-noon
Kāngdīng	Y98-122	6-8hr	hourly	7am-2pm
Lèshān	Y36	2hr	every 20min	7.30am-7.30pm
Jiǔzhàigōu	Y110	12-13hr		8am

For northern destinations you will need to trek over to the Chadianzi bus station in the north-west of the city.

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Dūjiāngyàn	Y16	1½hr	every 40 minutes	7am-8pm
Jiǔzhàigōu	Y110	12-13hr	4 daily	7.20am, 8am, 8.40am, 4pm
Sōngpān	Y74	8hr	3 daily	6.30am, 7am, 7.30am
Wólóng	Y24	4hr	daily	11.40am
Xiǎojīn	Y46	7hr	4 daily	6.30am, 7am, 7.30am, noon

For eastern and northeastern destinations your best bet is to try the north bus station, near the north train station. However, to get to Dazu, you'll most likely need to head to Wuguigiao bus station outside the second ring road.

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Éméi	Y33	2hr	half-hourly	6.30am-5.25pm
Chóngqīng	Y85-105	4-4½hr	hourly	7.30am-5pm
Dūjiāngyàn	Y16	1½hr	every 20 min	7am-6pm
Lèshān	Y36	2hr	every 40 min	6.40am-7pm
Lǎngzhōng	Y89	5hr	daily	8.30am

Airline offices in Chéngdū include:

Air China (Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 8666 1100; 41, Section 2, Renmin Nanlu ☎ 8am-7.30pm).

Sichuan Airlines (Sichuan Hángkōng Gōngsī; ☎ 8665 7163, 8665 4858; 31, Section 2, Renmin Nanlu)

Dragon Air (Gǎnglóng Hángkōng Gōngsī; ☎ 8676 8828; Tiānfú Lidū Xīlǎidēng Fāndiàn; Section 1, 15 Renmin Zhonglu). In the Sheraton Chéngdū Lido Hotel.

BUS

Connections in Chéngdū are 248 comprehensive than in other parts of the southwest. High-speed expressways from Chéngdū to Chóngqīng and Lèshān have greatly cut down travel time. More are under construction.

Xinnanmen bus station in the southern part of town is the main bus station and has tickets to most places around Sichuan.

See box above for bus times. Note that some destinations have departures from more than one station; not all can be listed so double-check with your guesthouse or hotel.

TRAIN

To repeat – *ad infinitum* – though train tickets are a lot easier to land these days, don't expect next-day middle-berth hard sleeper miracles for the most popular routes. Almost all the hostels can book tickets for trains (with a fee of around Y20) but read that note about miracles again. To wit: expect everyone and their dog to be trying to get on the Chéngdū–Lhasa train.

Daily departures include Kūnmíng (Y248, 18 hours), Éméi (Y22, two hours), Chóngqīng (Y91, 11 hours; express Y118, five hours), Běijīng (Y405, 26 hours) and Xī'ān (Y122, 18 hours). A high-speed train line has recently started between Chéngdū and Miányáng; another to Lèshān was close to finished at the time of writing. The express to Chóngqīng that started in 2006 is nearly as fast as the bus.

TO TIBET

OK, listen up, as this is topic *numero uno* in Chéngdū. As the Lhasa Express train

opened service in October 2006 (see p924 for details), rumours abounded that the Chinese government would at some point ease the maddening, through-the-looking-glass regulations regarding travel to the Roof of the World.

That is, no, you still cannot fly solo and yes, you still must sign on for a 'tour' with a travel agency (in order to get the required Tibetan travel permit) – all guesthouses do this as necessary means of economic survival. You may have twenty people in your guesthouse's 'tour group' but you'll never see them again after you get off the plane. Yes, it's still an absurd shakedown. If the permits are canned and solo travellers are allowed in, outstanding; we'll believe it when we see it.

At the time of writing these packages were priced at about Y1900 including flights and were the most cost-effective way of getting into Tibet. CITS runs its own four to six day tours (Y2000 to Y4000).

If you can arrange for a permit from a travel agency (unlikely) you can try picking up a ticket from one of the airlines yourself; regulations change and travellers occasionally – no, rarely – get lucky. Just make sure you have the cash on hand to buy the ticket before they change their mind. Another trick is to ask for a 1st-class ticket.

Sichuan's land borders into Tibet are still closed to foreigners. Some travellers attempt to sneak across but the majority are turned back and fined heavily. Don't believe anyone who says they can drive you to Lhasa; they can't. Stories of travellers being dumped off in the middle of nowhere once they've crossed the border into Tibet (minus their bags and money) are not uncommon. The US State Department in 2006 was reporting incidents of travellers being physically assaulted by authorities after they were caught.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Shangliu Airport is 18km west of the city. Bus 303 (Y10) is actually an airport bus which leaves from outside the Air China office on Renmin Nanlu; another Bus 303 (Y1) is a local bus running to/from the north railway station, taking pretty much forever.

Sichuan Airlines provides a free shuttle from your hotel to the airport if you purchase your ticket with them. A taxi will cost around Y70.

BICYCLE

Cycling is a great way to get around Chéngdū although the pollution (and traffic) can be terrible. Guesthouses rent bikes for about Y10 per day. The bikes are in fairly good condition but the usual rules apply: check your bike before you cycle off and make an effort to park it in a designated parking area. See Dangers & Annoyances p757).

BUS

The most useful bus is 16, which runs from Chéngdū's north train station to the south train station (*nán chēzhàn*) along Renmin Nanlu. Regular buses cost Y1, while the double-deckers cost Y2. Bus 81 runs from the Mao statue to Green Ram Temple and bus 12 circles the city along Yihuan Lu, starting and ending at the north train station. Bus 4 runs from the centre of town to Chadianzi bus station and Wuguigiao bus station.

SUBWAY

In 2006 ground was broken (immediately snarling traffic) on the city's new subway, slated for a 2010 completion. When finished it will be one of the most extensive in China; expect traffic headaches till the day it's done.

TAXI

Taxis have a flag fall of Y5 (Y6 at night), plus Y1.4 per kilometre. Motorised rickshaws also scuttle around the city and are cheaper, but slower, than cabs.

AROUND CHÉNGDŪ

Monastery of Divine Light 宝光寺

In Xindu County, 18km north of Chéngdū, this is an active Buddhist temple complex founded in the 9th century (some parts date from the first century). The **Monastery of Divine Light** (Bǎoguāng Sì; admission Y5; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) houses treasures including a white jade buddha from Myanmar (Burma), Ming and Qing paintings, calligraphy, a stone tablet engraved with 1000 Buddhist figures and ceremonial musical instruments. The 19th century **Arhat Hall** contains 500 2m-high clay figurines of Buddhist saints and disciples (and one of Boddhidharma).

Buses run to the monastery from a stop about 600m east of Chéngdū's north train station and north bus station from around 6am to 6pm. The trip takes just under an hour. On a Chinese bicycle, the round trip would be about 40km, or at least four hours cycling time.

Sānxīngduī 三星堆

Forty kilometres north of Chéngdū, west of Guǎnghàn, is a site some Chinese archaeologists regard as more important than the terracotta warriors of Xī'ān (gasp!). The smashing exhibits (with English captions) of **Sanxingdui Museum** (Sānxīngduī Bówùguǎn; ☎ 0838-550 0349; admission Y80; ⌚ 8.30am-5pm; Y80) retell a gripping story: throughout the 20th century farmers continually unearth intriguing pottery shards and other dirt-encrusted detritus, but prevailing wisdom (and war and lack of funds) prevents anyone from taking it seriously. Until 1986, that is, when archaeologists finally launched a full-scale excavation. And – presto! – a major site of the kingdom of Shu was unearthed, a site considered the cradle of Chinese civilization in the upper reaches of the Yangzi River.

Buses run from Zhaojue (and possibly Xinanmen) bus station to Guǎnghàn (Y10, two hours); from there you'll have to hop on bus 1 or 6 (Y2) for the remaining 10km to the site. You could also come here after a quick stop in Xindu and the Monastery of Divine Light.

Qīngchéng Shān 青城山

A holy Taoist mountain some 65km west of Chéngdū, with a summit of only 1600m, **Qīngchéng Shān** (Azure City Mountain; Y60) is an excellent day trip into the subtropics. It offers beautiful trails lined with gingko, plum and palm trees, boatloads of temples, picturesque vistas and plenty of atmospheric sights along its four-hour return route. The weather here is better than Ēméi Shān, so the views are far less likely to be obscured by mist and cloud. It's also a far easier climb.

Note: the front of the mountain is chock-a-block with Chéngdū day-trippers clamouring for the Yuèchéng Hú (Yuecheng Lake) ferry (Y5) and then the cable car (one way/return Y30/50) to the near-summit.

Thus, the secret: head instead for **Qīngchéng Hòushān** (青城后山, Azure City Back Mountain) some 15km northwest of the base of Qīngchéng Shān proper. With over 20km of hiking trails, this mountain offers a more natural environment, with **Five Dragon Gorge** (Wùlóng Gǒu) offering dramatic vistas. Not a few travellers who come here spend several days. There is a cable car to help with part of the route, but climbing the mountain will still require an overnight stay; you won't want to rush the trip anyway.

SLEEPING & EATING

Besides pricey resort-style (and a few budget) hotels on the road leading up to Qīngchéng Shān's main gate, there are atmospheric temples on the mountain.

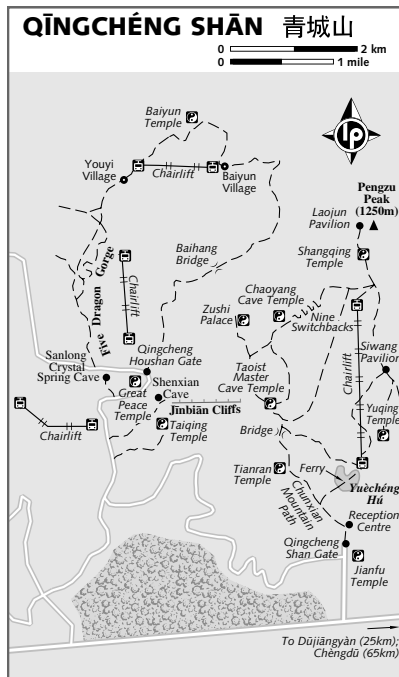
Shangqing Temple (Shàngqīng Gōng; dm Y36-60, d Y120) This charming wooden temple offers hotel-like facilities. Rooms are basic and clean and have common balconies that look out over the surrounding forests. The restaurant there serves up excellent food; its omelettes are especially good.

More restaurants, as well as snack stands and noodle stops, are scattered along Qīngchéng Shān's trails.

At Qīngchéng Hòushān there's accommodation in Great Peace Temple (Tàipǎn Gé), at the mountain's base, or at Youyi Village (Yòuyi Cūn), about halfway up. Dorm beds at both are around Y15.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Qīngchéng Shān you generally must first travel to Dūjiāngyàn, 25km away. Buses run to Dūjiāngyàn (Y16, 1½ hours, 7am to 8pm) from Chéngdū's Chadianzi bus station,



departing when full. From Dūjiāngyàn frequent minibuses roll for the mountain, stopping at Qīngchéng Shān (Y4) and then Qīngchéng Hòushān (Y10). The last bus to Dūjiāngyàn leaves Qīngchéng Hòushān around 7pm. During the high season there are likely to be buses running directly between Chéngdū's bus stations and Qīngchéng Shān.

Dūjiāngyàn Irrigation Project

都江堰水利工程

Some 60km northwest of Chéngdū, the **Dūjiāngyàn Irrigation Project** (Dūjiāngyàn Shuǐlǐ Gōngchéng; admission Y60; ⌚ 6am-8pm) was undertaken in the 3rd century BC by prefect and engineer Li Bing to divert the fast-flowing Min River via weirs into irrigation canals (Chéngdū's riverside parks are an extension of the project). The Min River was subject to flooding at this point, yet when it subsided, droughts could ensue.

Li Bing's most brilliant idea was to devise an annual maintenance plan to remove silt build-up. Thus the mighty Min was tamed and nary a flood has hit the Chéngdū plain since. Difficult enough today, positively Herculean then; the guy deserves every accolade.

The project is ongoing (and, naturally, modernising); it originally irrigated over a million hectares of land and since 1949 this has expanded to three million hectares. A good overall view of the outlay can be gained from **Èrwáng Miào** (Two Kings Temple), which commemorates Li Bing and his son, Er Lang.

While the whole idea of visiting a mocha-coloured, massive irrigation project may not be everyone's cup of tea, remember that were it not for Li Bing and his mountain-moving spirit, there would be no Sichuān as we know it today.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run regularly to Dūjiāngyàn's bus station (in the south of town) from the Chadianzi bus station in Chéngdū (Y16, 1½ hours, 7am to 8pm). The last bus back to Chéngdū leaves around 8pm. There is also a direct bus from Dūjiāngyàn to Wòlóng (Y40.5, 2½ hours) at 8am and 2pm.

Bus 1 runs to the irrigation project from outside the bus station.

Wolong Nature Reserve

卧龙自然保护区

Wolong Nature Reserve (Wòlóng Zìrán Bǎohùqū; admission Y40) lies 140km northwest of Chéngdū, about

four hours by bus (via Dūjiāngyàn). A UN-designated International Biosphere Reserve it's the largest (200,000 hectares) of the 16 panda conservation reserves (of these, 11 are in Sichuān), and one which in 2005 and 2006 the Chinese government dropped more than a half-million US dollars to upgrade.

The **Giant Panda Breeding Station** (Dàixióngmāo Sìyǎng Chǎng; admission Y30; ⌚ 8am-noon & 1.30-5pm) is home to some 80 pandas that have been artificially bred in captivity. Techniques and facilities have improved so much that in 2005 11 females gave birth to 16 cubs; stunningly, and happily, all had survived through 2006. However, there is little chance of seeing a panda in the wild; the pandas have a hard enough time finding each other. In spring, the park is closed so that trekkers don't disturb the pandas' hunt for each other during their mating season.

The rainy season is a bad time to be here as leeches take over the park. Summer is the most popular time to visit. Doesn't much matter, as all year trekking here is fairly tough and the trails are faint. Other animals protected here are the golden monkey, takin, deer and snow leopard. The Park Administration Office in Wòlóng village (also called Shawan), at the centre of the reserve, can give information on hiking trails and researchers at the breeding station (some of whom speak English) are good sources of info on conditions. Be sure to bring your own supplies, including warm clothing.

And if you can't get here, you can check out the utterly cool 'Panda Cam' set up by the reserve on the internet (www.pandaclub.net).

At the breeding station, 6km from Wòlóng village, the **Panda Inn** (☎ 0837-624 3028; fax 0837-624 3014; d Y200) has clean, comfortable doubles with hot showers and heaters. There is also a restaurant in the hotel and barbecue stalls across the road.

Wòlóng village also has a so-so **museum** (☎ 624 6912; admission Y20; ⌚ 9am-noon & 1pm or 2-5pm), which is useful, however, for maps.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

One bus leaves daily from Chéngdū's Chadianzi bus station to Wòlóng village (Y24, four hours, 11.40am). If you miss that bus then head over to Dūjiāngyàn from where buses to Wòlóng run twice daily (Y12, 2½hr, 8am and 2pm). If you want to get dropped at the Conservation Centre, rather than Wòlóng village, be sure to tell the bus driver.

Onward buses continue on from Wólóng village over the 4487m Bulangshan Pass to Rilóng and Xiàojin, from where you can catch buses to Kǎngdìng (p778). Schedules on these routes are irregular.

Lǎngzhōng 阆中

☎ 0817 / pop 112,000

Those decrying the demise of 'old' Chéngdū should immediately hop on a bus for this funky little town some 220km northeast of the capital. A significant chunk of it time has forgotten and tourists have overlooked, for the most part: photo-ops of endless black-tile roofs with swooping eaves overlooking the narrowest of alleys, flagstone streets and temples atop misty hills across a river. World Heritage site à la Píngyáo (Shānxī) or Lǐjiāng (Yúnnán) it ain't – call it Lǐjiāng Lite – but Lǎngzhōng has Sīchuān's largest grouping of regional/traditional architecture and, in fact, was the capital for 17 years during the Qing dynasty. It has been the centre of provincial/kingdom politics and economics for much of its 2300 years.

Orientation & Information

The town is sits on a peninsula surrounded by Jiǎng Hé and is laid out according to a traditional Tang dynasty plan. Zhangfei Lu is the main artery running roughly north-south through town. At the intersection with Xīncun Lu as it heads west is a statue memorialising Zhang Fei; the old town is southwest of here.

No banks handle traveller's cheques or credit card issues.

An internet café (Y2 per hour) is not far from the corner of Dadong Jie and Neidong Jie in the old town.

Sights

Lǎngzhōng would require an entire book just to list the dozens of amazing sights, many of which showcase the town's rich history in advanced learning. Here astronomer Hong Luoxia developed the first complete written calendar and the world's first astronomical instrument (an achievement still feted by Unesco annually). **Gōng Yuàn** (Xuedao Jie; admission Y17; ☎ around 8am-5pm), a prime example, is the best-preserved imperial examination hall in China.

Most people will be happy just wandering the alleys and gazing at the eclectic archi-

ecture – a wondrous blend of North China quadrangle and South China garden styles. Most tourists head directly for **Zhang Fei Temple** (Zhāngfēi Miào; Xī Jie; admission Y30), the tomb of and shrine to local boy done good Zhang Fei, a respected general during the kingdom of Shu who administered the kingdom from here.

Across the river to the south and east you can have a grand time exploring. At the foot of Mt Daxiang sits the sedate-looking **Grand Buddha** (Dàfó Sì; 大佛), one of the largest buddha statues in Sīchuān. Nearby, among Buddhist statuary, grottoes, and caves littering the hillsides, is **No 1 Scholars Cave** (Zhuàngyuán Dòng; 状元洞), where two legendary court officials crammed for their examinations.

Sleeping & Eating

The modern town has loads of perfectly fine hotels, but a couple of options exist in the old town to let you really soak up the atmosphere.

Xīnyuè Kèzhàn (欣悦客栈; ☎ 801 9674; 100 Nanjie; 南街100号; s/d without bathroom Y100) Utterly unassuming as you walk past, this place is nonetheless a treat, with small and simple but spotless rooms (with clean facilities) and unvanquishably helpful owners – a real mom-and-pop kind of place.

Dùjiā Kèzhàn (杜家客栈; ☎ 622 4436; 63 Xiaxin Jie; 下新街63号; s/d from Y140/200; ☎) The finest option in Lǎngzhōng, this inn is housed in the largest – and one of the oldest – courtyard structure in town (seriously, leave a popcorn trail). Rooms run from basic but comfortable to sybaritically well-appointed. It's roaringly popular with tour groups who come for the tea, the food, and the legendary Lǎngzhōng leather puppet shows.

One thing you'll notice is the air redolent with essence of vinegar – indeed, everything is pickled here. Indeed, Lǎngzhōng has been one of China's four vinegar production centres for centuries; local recipes are guarded as seriously as those of Coke or any Scotch whisky distillery. You'll find infinite varieties of local soft drinks using this, er, unique brew. You'll also find – we kid you not – public vinegar bathhouses! Famed local fare otherwise includes *zhāngfēi niúròu* (soup preserved beef) and myriad noodle soup variations – two faves being noodles cooked in goat entrails, or noodles in (naturally) pickled vegetables and bean curd.

Dàoxiāngcūn Jiūjiā (稻香村酒家; ☎ 626 6333; Xīncun Lu; 新村路; dishes from Y10) The old town has loads of great snacking joints, but this sit-down restaurant a bit outside the alleys harkens back to the old days, with its rustic décor.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The town has two bus stations. The main one is north of the Zhang Fei statue, but you may be dropped off at the smaller one to the south. Buses to Chéngdū (Y89, five hours, 8am) are infrequent but this should change, as the province plans to upgrade highways in order to develop the town's tourism industry. Buses to Guǎngyuán (Y39, 5-6 hours) leave throughout the morning and wind their carsick-inducing way through the hills; from here you have train and bus options towards Xī'ān or west into the rough terrain of northern Sīchuān.

GUǎNGYUÁN

☎ 0839 / pop 213,200

This minor manufacturing centre roughly equidistant between Chéngdū and Xī'ān is the main hub to get to many of the sights in northeastern Sīchuān. The ancient Shǔdào, or the 'Way to Sīchuān' (which impelled Li Bai to brush his famous lines 'The way to Shu is harder than the way to heaven' – to translate it roughly) sliced right through what is the modern city. It's the site of China's largest nuclear weapons-grade plutonium production facility, so nobody really lingers here, but the locals sure are friendly.

Orientation

The city is separated into three chunks, split by Nán Hé and Jiǎng Hé. The train station and one of the two bus stations sits on the east side of a peninsula formed by the rivers' confluence. Another bus station is southwest, across a bridge over Nán Hé (any bus from the train station will go there). The main road is Shumen Lu, running through the heart of the city.

Sights

HUANGZE TEMPLE 皇泽寺

China's only female emperor (during the Tang dynasty), Wu Zetian, was born in Guǎngyuán, and she is feted among the temples, pavilions and 1000-odd statues lining the modest cliffs at this temple (Huángzé Sì; admission Y15), on the west bank of the Jiǎng Hé.

Sleeping

Few cheap options (figure Y25 or so for a bed in a common room) exist, and these are all in the vicinity of the train station.

Bāshù Bīnguǎn (巴蜀宾馆; ☎ 288 7555; 46 Nanjie; 南街46号; s/d Y50-150) A block west of Shumen Lu, this is about the only cheap option downtown; luckily, it's decent. Every lodging option downtown is an overpriced two- or three-star option.

Getting There & Away

All trains running between Chéngdū and Xī'ān stop here and are your best option for the latter. To Chéngdū both bus stations have loads of buses, including expresses (Y80, three to four hours). From the bus station opposite the train station there are also buses to Jiǔzhàigōu (Y91, 10 to 12 hours).

ZHĀOHUÀ 昭化

Horses and carts clattering down slabstone streets, little old men shuffling along slurping their swamp-water tea or puffing on pipes, Ming and Qing architecture everywhere. By all appearances a Chinese movie set, but nope, tiny Zhāohuà is the real deal, another village that time forgot to take with it. The main – and pretty much only – street **Tāi Shǒu Jiē** stretches between famed village gates, fragments of which (they claim) date from the Three Kingdoms era. There's but one tiny inn to stay in, but **Yí Xīn Yuán** (Y10-100) oozes history.

To get there buses (Y9, one hour) run from Guǎngyuán's southern bus station (not the one at the train station); they leave as they fill up, so you may have a wait. Don't start your trip here too late, as return buses taper off in the mid-afternoon.

ÉMÉI SHĀN 峨眉山

☎ 0833 / elevation 3099m

A cool, misty retreat from the Sīchuān basin's sweltering heat, Éméi Shān, 130km southwest of Chéngdū, is one of the Middle Kingdom's four famous Buddhist mountains (the others are Pǔtúoshān, Wútái Shān and Jiùhuà Shān). Here you'll find lush mountain scenery, plantations of tea trees, scads of temples, macaques demanding tribute for safe passage, and the chance to see a sunrise so splendid that you're considered blessed to see it. On the rare afternoon there is also a phenomenon known as Buddha's Aureole where rainbow rings,

produced by refraction of water particles, attach themselves to a person's shadow in a cloud bank below the summit. Devout Buddhists, thinking this was a call from yonder, used to jump off the Cliff of Self-Sacrifice in ecstasy.

Èméi Shān has little of its original temple-work left (from 100 odd temples dating from the advent of Buddhism in China). Glittering Jinding Temple (Jinding Sì), with its brass tiling engraved with Tibetan script, was completely gutted by fire. Other temples suffered the same, and all were nicked to a various degree by war with the Japanese and Red Guard looting.

The waves of pilgrims, tourists and hawkers during peak season quickly eliminate solitude on the mountain but they do add to the atmosphere. The crowds hover largely around the monasteries; away from them, the path is not lined so much with stalls as with the fir, pine and cedar trees that clothe the slopes. Lofty crags, cloud-kissing precipices, butterflies and azaleas together form a nature reserve, and the mountain proudly joins Lèshān and Jiǔzhàigōu on Unesco's list of World Heritage sites.

Tickets

Tickets for Èméi Shān (Y120) include having your mug shot scanned onto the ticket which is then laminated – a ready-made souvenir. Entry to Declare Nation Temple and Crouching Tiger Monastery at the foot of the mountain do not require this ticket and have their own admission charge (see p772).

Internet Access 网吧

Two large internet cafés are a five-minute walk east of Declare Nation Temple (see p772); the Teddy Bear Hotel (see p773).

Climate

The best time to visit Èméi Shān is between May and October. Visiting in winter will present some trekking problems – iron soles with spikes can be hired to deal with encrusted ice and snow on the trails. Snowfall generally starts around November on the upper slopes. Try to avoid visiting during national holidays when the number of visitors to the mountain reaches epic proportions.

Temperate zones start at 1000m. Cloud cover and mist are prevalent all year round at Èméi Shān and generally interfere with views

of the sunrise. If you're very lucky, you'll be able to see Gònggā Shān (Gongga Mountain) to the west; if you're not so lucky, you'll have to settle for the less appealing Telecom tower and the meteorological station. Or, perhaps not even your hand in front of your face. Some average temperatures in degrees Celsius are:

Location	Jan	Apr	Jul	Oct
Èméi town	7	21	26	17
summit	6	3	12	-1

What to Bring

Definitely not your entire pack. Nevertheless, Èméi Shān is a tall *and steep* one at 3099m, so the weather is uncertain and it's best to prepare for sudden changes without weighing yourself down. The Teddy Bear Hotel (p773), stores bags for free (other places may levy a small charge).

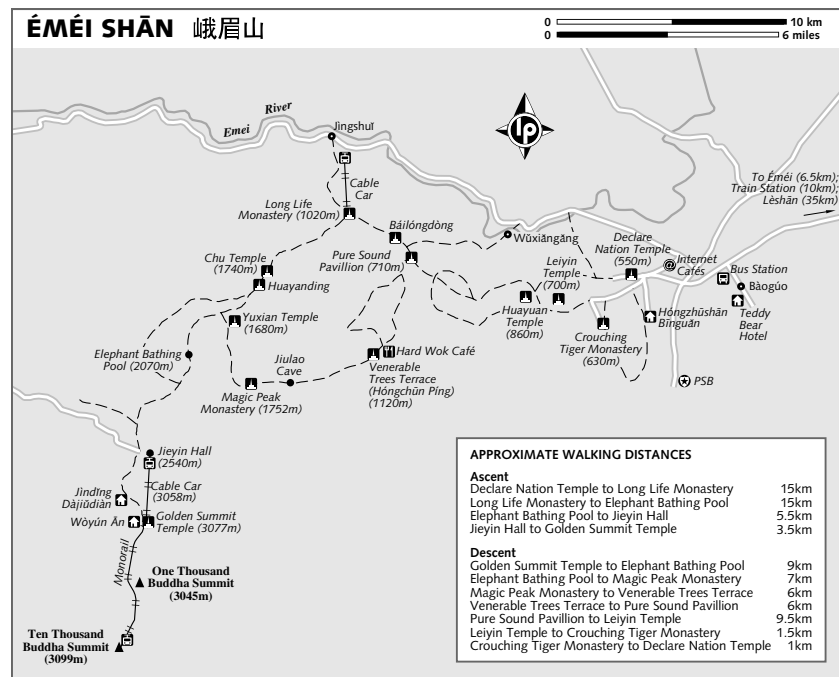
Monasteries have no heating or insulation, but blankets are provided and some even have (godsend) electric blankets. You can also hire heavy overcoats at the top. Heavy rain can be a problem, as even a light mist can make the slate steps slippery and extremely treacherous. A good pair of rough-soled shoes or boots is a must. Flimsy plastic rainwear is sold on the mountain.

A fixed-length umbrella would be most useful – for the rain and as a walking stick and perhaps a warning to the brigand monkeys. The Teddy Bear Hotel (p773) lends walking sticks out for free. A torch (flashlight) is important if you're spending the night or planning to hike at dawn. Food stalls are ubiquitous; nevertheless, extra munchies wouldn't hurt. Finally, don't forget toilet paper.

Travellers have become sick from contaminated water supplies on the mountain; it's wise to drink only the bottled water available at stands along the way.

Routes

The most popular route up/down the mountain is to ascend via Long Life Monastery, Chu Temple (Chū Sì), Elephant Bathing Pool and on to the summit. On the way down, take the path off towards Magic Peak Monastery after you reach Elephant Bathing Pool. This path will also lead you past Venerable Trees Terrace (Hóngchūn Píng) and Pure Sound Pavilion. The majority of hikers agree that the descent is superior in sights and views.



Buses go up the mountain from the bus station in Bàogúo village, near the Teddy Bear Hotel. Bus routes and prices are posted at the Bàogúo bus station and at the stops en route. A ride to the top costs Y30, to Wǔxiāngāng costs Y10 and a return trip with a number of stops is Y60. Buses run half-hourly from approximately 6am to 5pm but you don't want to cut it too close on the way down – if you miss the last bus, it's a 15km walk down from Long Life Monastery.

One popular option is to take a bus to Wǔxiāngāng and begin hiking from here. Alternatively stay on till Jingshui, from where you can get a cable car (up/down/return Y40/30/60, 6am to 6pm) up to Long Life Monastery. From the top of the cable car you can join the route to the summit. Buses run as far up the mountain as Jieyin Hall (Jieyin Dián; two hours) from where it's a steep two-hour hike or five-minute cable car ride (one way/return Y40/50) to the top.

For an epic one-day trek, most hotels can book you on a bus leaving at 3.30am (!), popular with Chinese tourists to 'cheat' and see the sunrise sweatlessly. BUT expect an immense

traffic jam at the entrance gate followed by an enormous queue of tourists. Few actually make it in time.

These buses begin to head down from Jieyin Hall around mid-morning, stopping at various temples along the way and finally bringing you back to Bàogúo at around 5pm. The round trip costs about Y60 and will probably leave your head spinning.

Duration

Time? Well, you'll be told wildly different times by everyone you meet. While you don't require any particular hiking skills, it's a tough climb. It's possible to make it to the summit from Long Life Monastery and back down to Declare Nation Temple in two days but you must be willing to spend at least 10 hours hiking each day and hope for good weather. The altitude may play havoc with your breathing and ascending too quickly will only increase this. All up, it's wise to leave yourself three days for the trek.

The approximate distances on the map will give you an idea of what is involved; time yourself on the first kilometre or two and then average out your own probable duration.

Sights

DECLARE NATION TEMPLE 报国寺

Constructed in the 16th century, **Declare Nation Temple** (Bàoguó Sì; admission Y8) features rare plants and a 3.5m-high porcelain Buddha that was made in 1415; it's housed near the Sutra Library.

CROUCHING TIGER MONASTERY 伏虎寺

The renovated **Crouching Tiger Monastery** (Fúhǔ Sì; admission Y6) is hidden deep within the forest. Inside is a 7m-high copper pagoda inscribed with Buddhist images and texts.

PURE SOUND PAVILION 清音阁

Named after the sound effects produced by rapid waters coursing around rock formations, this **temple** (Qīngyīn Gé) is built on an outcrop in the middle of a fast-flowing stream.

The small pavilions here are great for appreciating the natural music. It's possible to swim here although the water is only likely to be warm enough during the summer months.

LONG LIFE MONASTERY 万年寺

Reconstructed in the 9th century, **Long Life Monastery** (Wǎnnián Sì; admission Y10) is the oldest surviving Ēméi temple. It's dedicated to the man on the white elephant, the Bodhisattva Puxian, who is the protector of the mountain. This 8.5m-high **statue** is dated from AD 980, cast in copper and bronze and weighs an estimated 62,000kg. If you can manage to rub the elephant's hind leg, good luck will be cast upon you. The statue is housed in Brick Hall, a domed building with small stupas on

it and the only building left unharmed in a 1945 fire.

MAGIC PEAK MONASTERY 仙峰寺

Somewhat off the beaten track, this **monastery** (Xiānfēng Sì) is backed by rugged cliffs, surrounded by fantastic scenery and oozing with character. The nearby **Jiulao Cave** is inhabited by oversized bats.

ELEPHANT BATHING POOL 洗象池

According to legend, **Elephant Bathing Pool** (Xìxiàng Chí) is the spot where Puxian flew his elephant in for a big scrub, but today there's not much of a pool to speak of. Being almost at the crossroads of both major trails, the temple here is something of a hang-out and often crowded with pilgrims.

GOLDEN SUMMIT TEMPLE 金顶寺

This magnificent but clearly recently renovated **temple** (Jīndǐng Sì) at the Golden Summit (Jīn Dǐng; 3077m) is as far as most hikers make it. Covered with glazed tiles and surrounded by white marble balustrades, the temple now occupies 1695 sq metres. The original temple had a bronze-coated roof, which is how it got the name Jīn Dǐng (which can also mean 'Gold Top').

It's constantly overrun with tourists, pilgrims and monks, and you will be continuously bumped and jostled. Sadly, the sun rarely forces its way through the mists up here.

From the Golden Summit it was once possible to hike to **Ten Thousand Buddha Summit** (Wǎnfó Dǐng), but pilgrims now take a mono-rail (a one-hour return ticket costs Y50).

MONKEY ETIQUETTE

The monkeys have got it all figured out. If you come across a monkey 'tollgate', the standard procedure is to thrust open palms towards the outlaw to show you have no food. The Chinese find the monkeys an integral part of the Ēméi trip and many like to tease them.

The monkey forms an important part of Chinese mythology, and there is a saying in Chinese, 'With one monkey in the way, not even 10,000 men can pass' – which may be deeper than you think!

Some of these chimps are big, and staying cool when they look like they might make a leap at you is easier said than done. There is much debate as to whether it's better to give them something to eat or to fight them off.

One thing is certain, if you do throw them something, don't be too stingy. They get annoyed very quickly if they think they are being undersold. More than one traveller has told the tragic tale of having their Lonely Planet book being ripped to shreds in front of their eyes by an extortive simian.

Sleeping & Eating ON THE MOUNTAIN

The old monasteries offer food, shelter, and sights all rolled into one. While some travellers complain about the spartan and somewhat damp conditions, others love what may be as many as a thousand years of character.

A few of the monasteries at key junctions have posted prices but at others you may well have to bargain with the monks. You can expect to pay between Y20 and Y40 for a bed in a dorm room (the cheapest beds are reserved for pilgrims), with plumbing and electricity provided in those at the higher end of the scale. The following should give you an idea as to where to head for the cheapest beds, but expect to pay more in the high season.

Venerable Trees Terrace (洪椿坪; Hóngchūn Píng; dm Y20-30, d Y160) is a good spot, with newer rooms, countless monkeys and fresh landscaping; Patrick Yang (☎ 137 0813 1210; patrickyanglong@yahoo.com.cn), a friendly and helpful local guide (he works with foreign adventure travel companies), acts as 'foreigner liaison' here (and at Declare Nation Temple). Other travellers like **Elephant Bathing Pool** (dm from Y20).

Declare Nation Temple (dm from Y20), **Pure Sound Pavilion** (dm Y15-20, d Y150), **Long Life Monastery** (dm Y10-40), **Crouching Tiger Monastery** (dm from Y50), **Golden Summit Temple** (dm Y15-40), **Magic Peak Monastery** (though some have found the monks unfriendly hosts), and **Leiyin Temple** (Léiyīn Sì) have monastery guesthouses. There's also a host of smaller lodgings at Chu Temple, Jieyin Hall, Yuxian Temple (Yùxiān Sì), Báilóngdòng (White Dragon Cave) and Huayuan Temple (Huáyuán Sì), among others. The smaller places will accept you if the main monasteries are full, often during peak season. Failing those, if night is descending, you can kip virtually anywhere – a teahouse, a restaurant. Be prepared to backtrack or advance under cover of darkness.

There are also guesthouses and hotels on Ēméi Shān. Many close in the off season (and may give preference to locals over foreigners). On average you can expect to pay between Y150 and Y300 for a room. Most of these guesthouses are clumped behind Golden Summit Temple, to the west.

Jinding Dajūdiàn (☎ 509 8088, 509 8077; s/d/tr Y380/480/600) This three-star hotel is located at the base of the cable car and offers the ultimate luxury, 24-hour hot showers.

Vegetarian meals are included with the price of a bed at many of the monasteries.

Just up from Venerable Trees Terrace, **Hard Wok Café** is run by a friendly ex-army cook and his wife; find the best coffee on the mountain and fairly decent pancakes (wow!).

Small food stalls near the monastery grounds sell biscuits, instant noodles, peanuts and drinks – not to mention a wide variety of fungus. Be wary of teahouses or restaurants serving *shénshuǐ* (divine water), or any type of tea or food said to possess mystical healing qualities. Miracles are not guaranteed but the price of at least Y10 for the cup of water or tea is.

BÀOGUÓ VILLAGE

Hotels are everywhere on the road leading to the mountain; most are nondescript and overpriced. Have a wander and check out a few options as prices and room conditions fluctuate.

Teddy Bear Hotel (☎ 559 0135, 138-9068 1961; www.teddybear.com.cn; dm Y20-30, s/d Y60-150) This 'backpacker central' kind of place has spotless rooms and sparkling shared bathrooms. Other perks include a free laundry, left-luggage service and a massage when you make it back down the mountain. The café inside is a great place to unwind and swap tall mountain tales.

Hóngzhūshān Bīnguǎn (☎ 552 5888; d Y350) You might want to splurge on a room here. Doubles in building No 7 are the best deal and, while they may not appear particularly special, the tranquil setting of lush forests and the view on the edge of a pond makes it feel like money well spent.

The street leading up to Declare Nation Temple is lined with restaurants including *huòguō* and *shāokǎo* stalls which begin to appear as the evening approaches.

Getting There & Away

Ēméi town lies 6.5km east of Ēméi Shān and is the main transport hub for travel to and from the mountain. Buses from Chéngdū's Xinnanmen bus station run every 20 minutes to Ēméi town (Y33, two hours, 6.40am to 7pm).

BUS

There is no direct public bus between Bàoguó village and Ēméi town. If you don't want to catch a taxi (Y20) then take bus 1 bus from opposite the long-distance bus station (Y0.50).

Get off at the first stop, cross the road (past the statue) and catch bus 5 (Y1) to Bàogúo village.

Heading back to Ēméi town, buses leave every 10 minutes from outside Bàogúo's long-distance bus station (Y1, 20 minutes, 7.30am to 7pm). You can also catch a direct bus to Chéngdū (Y36, two hours, hourly, 6.30am to 6pm), Lèshān (Y11, one hour, hourly, 6am to 5pm) and Chóngqìng (Y40, seven hours, 8.30am) from here.

TRAIN

Ēméi train station is on the Chéngdū–Kūnmíng line and lies 3.5km from the centre of Ēméi town. Bus 4 (Y0.50) runs between the train station and the long-distance bus station. Ēméi town has trains to Chéngdū, Kūnmíng and Wūshìhè. A new high-speed train to Chéngdū should be running by the time you read this. The Teddy Bear Hotel can help you out with train times (they change frequently) and booking tickets.

LÈSHĀN 乐山

☎ 0833 / pop 155,930

The somnolent-looking but inspiring Grand Buddha, now the world's largest Buddha, with a fingernail taller than your average human. There's your main draw to this small riverside city of meandering, tree-draped alleys. Prospering from increasing droves of Chinese tourists (and Chéngdū commuters due to new expressways), Lèshān has revamped many of its old quarters, but it isn't all that apparent for most travellers. The town is relaxed and makes for a good day trip from the capital or a wind-down after tackling Ēméi Shān.

Information

Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng; Renmin Nanlu)

Changes money and travellers cheques and offers cash advances on credit cards. There is also an ATM here.

China Post (Yóujiú; Yutang Jie) Next door is China Telecom where you can make international phone calls.

Internet cafés (wǎngbā; Baita Jie; per hr Y2) These are scattered throughout the downtown (shown on the map).

Mr Yang (☎ 211 2046, 130-3645 6184; richardyang min@yahoo.com.cn; Yang's Restaurant, 2F 128 Baita Jie) Has long been the guru of travel information in Lèshān and can organise almost anything (a visit to a local doctor, a local family, nearby villages, calligraphy lessons). One or two travellers have given lukewarm reviews, but the vast majority of feedback has been positive. (That said, the company he is affiliated with in Chóngqìng for Yangzi River

cruise tickets has not been so favourably reviewed.) So have a chat with this friendly and interesting character; if you're suspicious, do some homework and see.

People's Hospital (Rénmín Yiyuàn; ☎ 211 9310, out of hr emergencies ☎ 211 9328; 76 Baita Jie) Has a couple of English-speaking doctors.

PSB (Gōngānjú; 236 Chunhua Lu; ☎ 9am–noon & 2–6pm Mon–Fri) Two-day visa extensions are typical.

Sights

GRAND BUDDHA 大佛

Utter the words 'Dàfó' and locals beam and gesture animatedly. Yup, the serenely seated **Grand Buddha**, carved into a cliff face overlooking the confluence of Dadu River (Dàdù Hé) and Min River (Mín Hé), is the pride and joy of the city, a spiritual uncle. Qualifying as the largest Buddha in the world, here's the bottom line: he's 71m high, his ears are 7m long, his insteps 8.5m broad, and you could picnic on the nail of his big toe – the toe itself is 8.5m long. Holy smokes!

A Buddhist monk called Haitong started the whole thing in AD 713, hoping that the Buddha would calm the swift currents and protect boatmen from lethal currents in river hollows. Well, the big guy 'matured' slowly, and was finally completed 90 years after Haitong's death. Surplus rocks from the sculpting filled the river hollow and did the trick, but locals insist it's really the calming effect of the Buddha.

Inside the body, hidden from view, is a water-drainage system put into place to prevent weathering, although the stone statue has had its fair share of it. Soil erosion is an ongoing problem. A building once sheltered the giant statue, but it was destroyed during a Ming dynasty war. This idea has seen a re-surge; some scientists want to sheath it in a high-tech plastic bubble to protect it!

It's worth looking at the Grand Buddha from several angles and you need to get closer to him to really appreciate his magnitude. You can go to the top, opposite the head, and then descend a short stairway to the feet for a Lilliputian perspective.

THOUSAND BUDDHA CLIFFS 夹江千佛岩

About 30km north of Lèshān, 2.5km west of the train station at Jiājiāng, are the **Thousand Buddha Cliffs** (Jiājiāng Qiānfóyán; admission Y35; ☎ 8am–5pm). For once, the name is not an exaggeration: over 2400 Buddhas dot the cliffs, dating from as early as the Eastern Han dynasty.

The statues show a few signs of wear and tear but, considering their age, are in fairly good condition.

Set in a rather pretty location along a riverbank and on the edge of the countryside, this site takes something of an effort to reach. Catch one of the many buses from Lèshān's long-distance bus station down the bumpy road to Jiājiāng (Y5, one hour). From Jiājiāng bus station, take a pedicab (Y10) or taxi (Y15) to the site. The last bus returning to Lèshān leaves Jiājiāng at 6pm.

OTHER SIGHTS

The boardwalk along Binhe Lu follows Dadu River from its confluence with Min River up past Jiāzhōu Bīnguān. Popular for strolling in

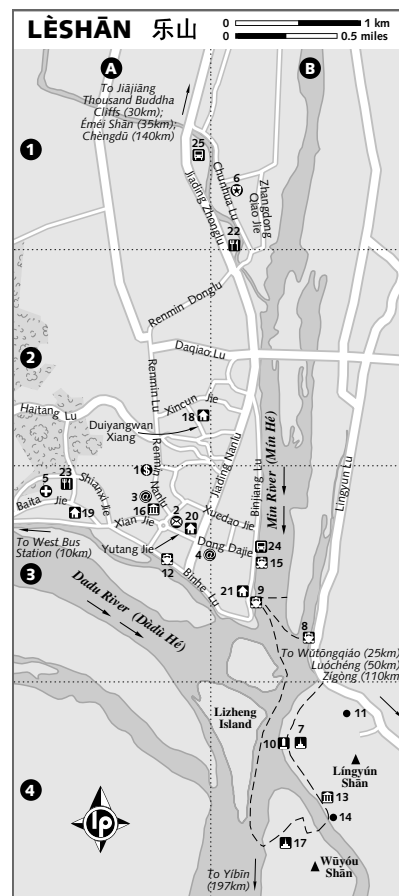
the evenings, if you follow it as far as Jiāzhōu Bīnguān, you'll see fan dancers, ballroom dancers and even tango lessons underway in a large square near the intersection with Baita Jie.

Travellers have recommended day trips to villages outside Lèshān, including **Luòchéng**, 50km southeast (famed for its old 'boathouse' architecture), and **Wútóngqiáo**, 25km south. Check with Mr Yang.

Tours

Tour boats pass by for panoramic views of the Grand Buddha (hovering in front for about 10 minutes), which reveal two guardians in the cliff side, not visible from land. You currently have a choice of three types of boat from the dockside along Binjiang Lu. Large tour boats (Y50, 7.30am to 7.30pm) and smaller speedboats (Y50, 7.30am to 7.30pm) leave regularly throughout the day from the dock near the central bus station.

The third option is to take the bargain Y3 ferry that leaves from a small dock not far



INFORMATION

Bank of China 中国银行	1	A3
China Post 邮电局	2	A3
Internet Café 网吧	3	A3
Internet Café 网吧	4	A3
Mr Yang 杨先生	(see 23)	
People's Hospital 医院	5	A3
PSB 公安局	6	B1

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Dafo Temple 大佛寺	7	B4
Ferry Dock 渡轮码头	8	B3
Ferry Dock 渡轮码头	9	B3
Grand Buddha 大佛	10	B4
Lingbao Pagoda 灵宝塔	11	B4
Local Ferry Dock 渡轮码头	12	A3
Mahaoya Tombs Museum 麻浩崖博物馆	13	B4
Oriental Buddha Park 东方佛都公园	14	B4
Tour Boats & Speedboats 小旅游船及售票处	15	B3
Workers' Cultural Palace 劳动人民文化宫	16	A3
Wuyou Temple 乌尤寺	17	B4

SLEEPING

Duiyangwan Bīnguān 兑阳湾宾馆	18	A2
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Post & Telecommunication Hotel 邮电宾馆	20	A3
Taoyuan Bīnguān 桃源宾馆	21	B3

EATING

Hotpot Restaurant 火锅店	22	B1
Yang's Restaurant 杨家餐厅	23	A3

TRANSPORT

Central Bus Station 往成都的中巴车	24	B3
Long-Distance Bus Station 长途汽车站	25	A1

from the Táoyuán Bīnguǎn next to the Sleeping Buddha Tea Pavilion. This cheap option doesn't stop in front of the Buddha but you will still get a good view – you'll just have to be extra quick with your camera. The only drawback here is the infrequent departures (every 90 minutes 7am to 5.30pm April to September; every 90 minutes 8am to 5pm October to March).

A fun option is the local ferry (Y1) to Lizheng Island, in the middle of the two rivers' confluence. While this doesn't take you to the Buddha itself, it gives you unrivalled views. The ferry leaves regularly throughout the day from Lizheng Gate (look for a stone archway), not far from the Jiāzhōu Bīnguǎn.

The final destination for the boats leaving from the main docks is **Wuyou Temple** (Wūyóu Sì; admission Y8; ☎ 8am–6pm). Like the Grand Buddha, this monastery dates from the Tang dynasty with Ming and Qing renovations. It commands panoramic views and is a museum piece containing calligraphy, painting and artefacts, many with English captions.

Wuyou Temple has a hall of 1000 terracotta *arhat* (Buddhist celestial beings, similar to angels) displaying an incredible variety of postures and facial expressions – no two are alike. The *arhat* are housed in the **Luohan Hall** which dates back to 1909. Inside is also a fantastic statue of **Avalokiteshvara**, the Sanskrit name of the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin in Chinese).

If you get off the boat at Wuyou Temple, a visit through the temple will take you across Wūyóu Shān and down to a small bridge which crosses over to **Lingyún Shān** (Towering Cloud Hill). Here you can visit **Oriental Buddha Park** (Dōngfāng Fódù Gōngyuán; admission Y37), a newly assembled collection of 3000 Buddha statues and figurines from all around Asia. The park's centrepiece is a 170m-long reclining Buddha, said to be the world's longest. The park seems more of a hasty effort to cash in on Buddha-mania.

Next door is the **Mahaoya Tombs Museum** (Máhàoyámù Bówùguǎn; admission Y5), which has a modest collection of tombs and burial artefacts dating from the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220).

Continuing past the museum and up Lingyún Shān brings you to the entrance gate of **Dafo Temple** (Dǎfó Sì; admission Y70). This is where you can get right up close to the Grand Buddha, with narrow staircases running head

to toe. Avoid visiting on public holidays or weekends, when traffic on the staircase comes to a complete standstill.

To return to Lèshān, you can either catch another boat from the ferry dock near the entrance to the Buddha or take bus 13, which leaves from the same place and will drop you back at Lèshān's dock.

This can take less than 1½ hours from the Lèshān dock, but that's pushing things a lot.

Sleeping

Táoyuán Bīnguǎn (☎ 210 1718; dm Y50, d Y198) It's in a perfect location almost directly opposite Lèshān's docks, but the rooms are approaching worn out. Still, the dorms are fine for a night and the staff – apparently consisting of all high-schoolers – is kind of entertaining.

Duiyangwān Bīnguǎn (☎ 501 0345, 336 7582; Middle Section, Duiyangwan Xiang; 兑阳湾巷中部; s/d Y100/168; ☎) This might not be the cheapest place in town but the staff are hands-down the nicest and most helpful. Rooms honestly vary in quality but most are fine – they may stick you in a two-room suite for nothing extra in low season.

Post & Telecommunication Hotel (Yóudiàn Bīnguǎn; ☎ 213 5450; 32 Yutang Jie; 玉堂街32号; d/tr Y198/268 incl breakfast; ☎) Basic but clean and damp-free (a good sign in this environment) rooms here. Huge discounts are common and the staff of late have been super.

Jiāzhōu Bīnguǎn (☎ 213 9888; fax 213 3233; 19 Baita Lu; 白塔街19号; s/d Y450/480; ☎) This is the city's original foreigner-friendly midrange place and therefore your best bet for staff experienced with foreign guests. A recent facelift hasn't resulted in increased prices because some rooms didn't seem to be touched.

Eating

There are lots of small restaurants hidden away on Lèshān's side streets. A good place to start your search is along the small roads near the dock, in particular Xuedao Jie, which is buzzing with culinary delights. You'll find a selection of noodle and dumpling eateries and an entire alley lined with cheap hotpot restaurants. Alternatively, there's a popular **hotpot restaurant** (huòguō cāntīng; ☎ 11am–9pm) just north of the intersection of Jiading Zhonglu and Renmin Donglu.

Another good place to wander is Binhe Lu, where there are restaurants and a handful of teahouses that serve up simple dishes.

Yang's Restaurant (Yàngjiā Cāntīng; 2F 128 Baita Jie; dishes Y15–25; ☎ 6–9pm) Run by Mr Yang the travel guru, this restaurant is in the living room of his home. His wife is the chef and serves good local food.

Getting There & Away

Expressways linking Lèshān to Chéngdū and Chóngqing; another is being built to Yībīn.

BUS

There are three bus stations in Lèshān. The main one for travellers is the Lèshān long-distance bus station, annoyingly located in the western reaches of the city though coming in you may be dropped at any of them. Another is in the northern reaches of town.

For Chéngdū, the third one, the bus station next to the Lèshān docks is the most convenient. Buses leave for Chéngdū's Xinnanmen bus station every hour (Y31, two hours, 7.30am to 6.30pm). There are also frequent departures to Ēméi town from here (Y7, 7am to 6pm). For all other destinations you'll have to go to the long-distance bus stations.

See box below for bus info.

TRAIN

No matter that ticket sellers swear blind there is a station here, there simply is no train service to Lèshān. It still means Ēméi Shān, or more likely Jiājiāng, both about an hour away by bus. (A new high-speed train is running from Chéngdū to Ēméi Shān, but the bus is still faster.)

Getting Around

Bus 9 runs from the pier to the western bus station. Nos 1 and 8 run the length of Jiading Lu and connect the pier area with the northern long-distance bus station. Buses run from 6am to 6pm, at roughly 20-minute intervals. Bus 13 runs from Lèshān dock to Wuyou Temple.

Pedicab rides cost Y2 to Y5. Taxis start at a flat rate of Y3 for the first 3km.

Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be any bicycle hire in Lèshān – or many bicycles at all for that matter. But you probably wouldn't want to take them up and down the stairs at the Grand Buddha anyway.

WESTERN SICHUĀN & THE ROAD TO TIBET

To the north and west of Chéngdū is where green tea becomes butter tea, Confucianism yields to Buddhism and gumdrop hills leap into jagged snowy peaks. Much of the area kisses the sky at between 4000m and 5000m high.

To Tibetans and Tibetan-related peoples (Qiang), this area is part of the province of Kham which covers the eastern third of the Tibetan plateau. For travellers, it is Tibet sans the 'official' provincial border and all its hassles.

The Sichuān–Tibet Hwy, begun in 1950 and finished in 1954, is one of the world's highest, roughest, most dangerous and most beautiful roads. It splits into northern and southern routes 70km west of Kāngding. As yet, there isn't much in the way of tourist facilities. For more information on Kham visit www.khamaid.org.

Dangers & Annoyances

Towns in these areas experience 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. Because of rapid weather changes, the tracks around Gōnggā Shān can be treacherous.

LÈSHĀN BUS TIMETABLES

Buses from Lèshān's western (and some from the northern) long-distance bus station:

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Chéngdū	Y33	2hr	every 20 min	7am–7.30pm
Chóngqing	Y88	6hr	hourly	7am–5pm
Ēméi	Y7	40min	every 15 min	7am–6pm
Kāngding	Y72–89	8hr	daily	9.30am
Yībīn	Y49–52		5 daily	7am–3.10pm
Zigōng	Y24–30		half-hourly	9am–5.10pm

If you're planning to attempt to cross into Tibet from Bātáng or Dégé, you may want to reconsider. The PSB keep a close eye on foreigners, and as truck drivers are severely punished for carrying foreigners across the border, they're unlikely to give you a lift. Some travellers have managed to bribe their way in but at costs that make flying from Chéngdū seem cheap. However, if you're arriving from Tibet into Sichuān, nobody seems to give a damn.

The US State Department in 2006 was reporting incidents of travellers being physically assaulted by authorities after they were caught.

Be forewarned: at the time of writing it was not possible to change money or travellers cheques (except in Kāngdìng for these two) or to get advances on credit cards in Sichuān's northwest. Bring your Renminbi with you.

KĀNGDÌNG (DARDO) 康定

☎ 0836 / pop 82,000 / elevation 2616m

Once a one-horse kind of town, Kāngdìng since the mid-1990s has become a bustling – for these parts – tourist town, though now more Chinese than Tibetan. Ensnared in a steep river valley at the confluence of the swift Zheduo and Yala Rivers (known as the Dar and Tse in Tibetan) and towered over by mighty Gōnggā Shān (7556m), Kāngdìng is famous throughout China for a popular love song that the town's surrounding scenery inspired. If you're en route to western Sichuān, chances are you'll end up overnighing here.

The town has long been a trade centre between Chinese and Tibetan cultures, with the exchange of wool, herbs and bricks of tea from Yā'ān wrapped in yak hide. It also served as an important staging post on the road to Lhasa, as indeed it does today. Kāngdìng was historically the capital of the local Tibetan kingdom of Chakla (or Chala) and later, from 1939 to 1951, the capital of the short-lived province of Xikang, when it was controlled by the opium-dealing warlord Liu Wenhui.

Information

Agricultural Bank of China (Zhōngguó Nóngyè

Yínháng; Xi Dajie; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Can change US dollars and UK pounds. It has begun to change travellers cheques for some travellers – not all the time for some reason – but still does not offer cash advances on credit cards. There is no ATM in town.

Internet cafés (wǎngbā; per hr Y2-3; ☎ 8am-midnight)

One is found one block east of Yanhe Donglu on Dongda Xiaojie, another along Guangming Lu. Still another is closer

to the bus station on Yanhe Xilu; you can get online at Sally's Knapsack Inn (see opposite).

PSB (Gōngānjú; ☎ 281 1415; Dongda Xiaojie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm) Three- to five-day service but if you sweet-talk *politely*, perhaps the same day.

Yala Snow Mountain Outdoor Shop (☎ 1333-079 5696, 1309-626 0537) Helpful Lin Yueh Luan speaks decent English and some Tibetan, and is knowledgeable about the area. He can arrange full-day tours (Y60) and horses (Y60 per day). North of the town square.

Sights

There are several lamaseries in and around Kāngdìng. Just behind Black Tent Guesthouse, **Anjue Temple** (Ānjué Sì; Ngachu Gompa in Tibetan) dates back to 1652 and was built under the direction of the fifth Dalai Lama. These days it's fairly quiet with several monks and a few old prayer wheels.

Nanwu Temple (Nánwù Sì) belongs to the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) sect of Tibetan Buddhism and is the most active lamasery in the area with around 80 lamas in residence. Set not far south of the downtown area, it affords good views of Kāngdìng and the valley. Walk south along the main road, following its bend to the left for 2km. Cross the bridge at the southern end of town and continue on 300m. Next to a walled Han Chinese cemetery is a dirt path that follows a stream uphill to the lamasery.

You can also head up **Pāomā Shān** for excellent views of Kāngdìng, the surrounding mountains and valleys and – if you're lucky – Gōnggā Shān. The ascent takes you past oodles of prayer flags, several Buddhist temples and up to a white *chörten* (stupa). Take particular care when wandering around Pāomā Shān and try to avoid hiking on your own. A British tourist was murdered here in the spring of 2000 and one or two muggings have been reported.

To reach the hill, bear left at the fork in the road just south of the bus station and walk about 10 minutes until you reach a lamasery on the left; a stairway leads up the hill from here. A second, more direct route, heads up the hill further south, beginning above the staircase on Dongda Xiaojie.

In the south of town is **Jingang Temple** (Jīngāng Sì), a 400-year-old monastery that was still under renovation but looking better. A taxi from the bus station will cost you Y5.

About 5km north of Kāngdìng are the **Erdao Bridge Hot Springs** (Èrdào Wēnquán; admission Y10), where you can have a half-hour bath in slightly egg-smelling, warm, sulphurous

water. Take your own towel. You can reach the hot springs by taxi for about Y8.

In town, the **market** on Dongda Xiaojie is worth a look.

Festivals & Events

Kāngdìng's biggest annual festival, the **Walking Around the Mountain Festival** (Zhūànshānjié), takes place on Pāomā Shān on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month to commemorate the birthday of the Historical Buddha, Sakyamuni. White-and-blue Tibetan tents cover the hillside and there's wrestling, horse racing and visitors from all over western Sichuān. There's also a street fair that lasts for 10 days, making this a good time to visit Kāngdìng.

Sleeping

Kāngdìng has more than enough hotels and new ones are being built all the time; it's definitely a buyer's market.

Black Tent Guesthouse (Gōnggāshān Lúshè; ☎ 886 2107; 28 Yanhe Xilu; 沿河西路28号; dm/d Y20/50) By far the most popular place, here atmospheric dorm rooms with wood floors are cosy; showers and toilets are clean but there's only one of each. A nice teahouse is great for relaxing, and the (shorthanded) staff is busy-busy but as helpful as possible.

Sally's Knapsack Inn (Bēibào Kèzhàn; ☎ 883 8377, 130-6007 5296; dm Y20) Next to Jingang Temple is this laid-back hostel and café with colourful carved wooden beds. A taxi from the bus station will cost Y5. It was undergoing renovation at the time of writing so let us know how it goes.

Chāngchéng Bīnguǎn (☎ 882 2956; Xinshi Qianjie; 新市前街; d Y50-120) Not far from the bus station, this hotel is one of a zillion offering decent cheap but good rooms. No frills to the n-th degree but OK.

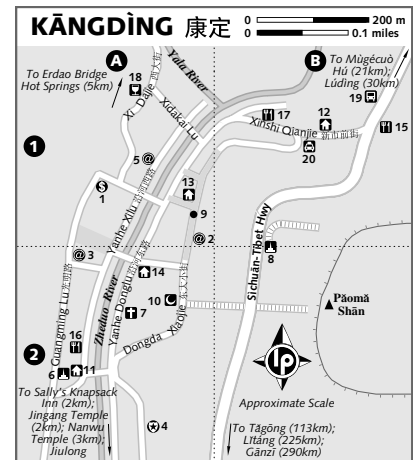
Kálākā Dàjiùdiàn (☎ 282 8688; fax 282 8777; 5 Yanhe Donglu; 沿河东路5号; d Y190) One of the more popular and better-run hotels, the rooms are basically furnished but clean and you're perfectly located. The hotel has connections with the Erdao Bridge Hot Springs (it can organise tours there for Y35). The café here has approximations of Western food.

Love Song Hotel (Qínggē Dàjiùdiàn; ☎ 281 3333; fax 281 3111; 156 Dongda Xiaojie; 东大小街156号; d Y580) This flashy hotel seems out of place in Kāngdìng; it even has a cinema attached to it. The rack rates are a bit much, though the rooms are fine, but a substantial discount would make the rooms/services worth it.

Eating

Hotpot is everywhere, as in most Sichuān tourist towns.

Nine Bowls Vegetable of Country (Jiǔwǎn Nóngjiā Xiàng; ☎ 287 5199; Yanhe Xilu; dishes from Y5; ☎ 11am-9pm) You can't miss this cubbyhole place – the sign next door says 'Chongqing Strange Taste



INFORMATION

Agricultural Bank of China 中国农业银行	1	A1
Internet Café 网吧	2	A1
Internet Café 网吧	3	A2
PSB 公安局	4	A2
Telephone Office (Internet Service) 中国电信(上网)	5	A1

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Anjue Temple 安觉寺	6	A2
Catholic Church 天主教堂	7	A2
Lamasery	8	B2
Market 市场	9	A1
Mosque 清真寺	10	A2

SLEEPING

Black Tent Guesthouse 西藏雨帽帐篷	11	A2
Chāngchéng Bīnguǎn 长城宾馆	12	B1
Kálākā Dàjiùdiàn 卡拉卡大酒店	13	A1
Love Song Hotel 情歌大酒店	14	A2

EATING

Droma Yudia-Khampa Tibetan Eatery	15	B1
Nine Bowls Vegetable of Country 九碗农家乡	16	A2
Sichuan Stalls 小吃店	17	B1

DRINKING

Kangba Dancehall 康巴大舞台	18	A1
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TRANSPORT

Bus Station 汽车站	19	B1
Taxis to Lúding & Mùgécúo 往泸定和木格措的出租汽车	20	B1

Fish! The exceedingly friendly staff is overseen by an equally hospitable manager who speaks decent English (it also has an English menu).

Try the whipped potatoes with pickled vegies (*túdotmi*); sounds gross but guaranteed you'll wolf down two bowls after a day of hiking. It also has a couple of only-here specialties they'll hip you to.

Droma Yudia-Khampa Tibetan Eatery (☎ 282 3463; Xinshi Qianjie; dishes from ¥10; ☎ 9am-9pm) A newer place with a large, warm dining room and comfy seating, it's got a huge menu of local, Nepali, and Western food – even breakfast (though they seem to rise late around here). Welcoming staff, as well.

Near the bus station and market are *bāozī* (steamed stuffed buns) places, great for snacks to take on bus journeys. In the evening, numerous covered stalls set up camp at the northern end of town with arguably the widest selection of skewered meat, vegetables and fish in Sichuān.

Drinking

Tibetan Dance Halls are the place to go for a night out in Kāngdìng and they make for a very entertaining evening. Traditional Tibetan and Chinese songs, including the famous Kāngdìng Love Song, are performed to ear-splitting techno beats and a very appreciative audience. Try the **Kangba Dancehall** (Kāngbā Dāwútái; ☎ 669 3255; Xidakai Lu; drinks from ¥20), where you can get up and dance once the performances are finished.

Getting There & Away

An airport is being built on the way to Tāgōng; it's slated for completion in 2009.

BUS

Improved roads have made Kāngdìng far more accessible. The completion of the Èrláng Shān tunnel has cut the ride to Chéngdū down to a comfortable eight hours. The bus station is in the northeast of town. See the Kāngdìng Bus Timetables box below.

TAXI

Taxis congregate on Xinshi Qianjie, not far from the Chángchéng Bīnguǎn. Trips to Lúding cost around ¥20.

AROUND KĀNGDÌNG

There are several mountain lakes and hot springs in the vicinity of Kāngdìng. Lying 21km to the north of town up the Yala Valley, **Mùgécuò Hú** is one of the highest lakes in northwestern Sichuān, at 3700m. Locals also boast that it's one of the most beautiful. Trails around the lake lead to other smaller lakes such as the **Red Sea** (Hóng Hǎi). Also worth checking out is **Seven Colour Lake** (Qīsè Hǎi), which lies a few kilometres before Mùgécuò. It's best not to wander around these parts alone or to stray too far off the path. The area of 'Wild Men's Lake', as Mùgécuò means in Tibetan, is home to wolves and other wild beasts.

There are no buses running to Mùgécuò but idle taxi drivers will be more than pleased to shuttle you there and back for ¥150 to ¥200 (1½ hours).

Mùgécuò Hú can quite easily be done as a day trip from Kāngdìng, but if you decide you want to stay out there, both **Qīsèhǎi Bīnguǎn** and **Mùgécuò Bīnguǎn** have beds that you might be able to sleep in for as little as ¥30.

LÚDING 泸定

☎ 0836 / elevation 1310m

Lúding is a small, bustling town about halfway between Kāngdìng and Móxī. As a minor connection point for buses between western Sichuān and Chéngdū, Lèshān and Móxī, you may find yourself here.

Sights

Lúding is famous throughout China as the site of what is often regarded as the most glorious moment of the Long March. It took place on the **Lúding Bridge** (泸定桥; Lúding Qiáo; admission ¥5), a 100m-long chain suspension bridge over Dadu River (Dàdù Hé). Then again, Jung Chang wrote that it never happened in her warts-and-all biography *Mao: The Unknown Story*.

In any case, it's a cool story. On 29 May 1935 the communist troops approached Lúding Bridge only to discover that Kuomintang troops had beaten them to it, removed the planks from the bridge and had it covered with firepower. In response, 20 communist troops crossed the bridge hand-over-hand armed with grenades and then proceeded to overcome the Kuomintang troops on the other side. This action allowed the Long March to continue before the main body of the Kuomintang forces could catch up with them.

The bridge is five minutes' walk from the bus station. Just follow the river into town and you'll find it. The original bridge was first constructed in 1705 and was an important link in the Sichuān-Tibet road. Memorabilia – including artefacts left behind (or donated) by Long Marchers – are on display.

You can also get a gander at some of Mao's calligraphy on a shelter near the Buddhist Temple on the hillside above town.

Sleeping & Eating

The hotel situation in Lúding is good unless you're on a budget; for cheaper digs head for Móxī or Kāngdìng.

Chèzhàn Lǚguǎn (车站旅馆; Bus Station Hostel; ☎ 139-9048 9606; dm ¥20, d/tr ¥30/60) It seems a redundancy in small town China – that is, the bus station has the best lodging – but once again this is your only cheap option; at least it's decent.

More upmarket accommodation options can be found in the new area of town across the river from the bus station. For a good bet try the **Lúding Qiáo Bīnguǎn** (泸定桥宾馆;

☎ 312 888; d ¥480) where you can often get 50% discounts on rooms. It's the building with the large green dome on the roof.

Clustered around the bus station are a number of nondescript restaurants as well as a teahouse where you can while away your time until the next bus pulls into town.

Getting There & Away

From Lúding there are daily buses to Chéngdū (¥92-98, six hours, 6.30am, 10am and 1pm) and Shímíán (¥20, three hours, 6am and noon). Minibuses run regularly to Kāndìng (¥20) and Móxī (¥20).

A second route between Èméi Shān and Lúding, without doubling back to Chéngdū, runs via Wūshíhé to the south. There is usually one morning bus at 6am from Lúding to Wūshíhé (¥20) but if it doesn't appear, jump on the bus to Shímíán from where there is frequent onward transport. Once you reach Wūshíhé you'll need to hop on a train to Èméi town. The train departs Wūshíhé in the afternoon, meaning you shouldn't have to stay overnight here. If you're headed south to Pānzhihuā or Kūnmíng, be advised that you can only buy hard-seat tickets in Wūshíhé and very few onward trains stop here.

MÓXÍ 磨西

☎ 0836

Nestled in the mountains around 50km southwest of Lúding, this peaceful village's main attraction is Hǎilùogōu Glacier Park (see p782). However, with lots of character, Móxī itself is a fun place to explore.

Sights

Móxī's older, traditional wooden buildings are at the bottom of the village. Also at this end is a multicoloured **Catholic church** (天主教堂; admission ¥3) where Mao camped out during the Long March. It's open to the public and you will be given an obligatory tour by the old men that look after the place. From here, the village climbs its way up a hill. If you follow the dirt road up, about 200m past the main crossroads, on the right is **Guānyīnggǔ Gōmpa** (观音古寺), a 400-year-old Bōn (Tibetan Buddhist sect) temple that is run by some delightful old women. In the courtyard is a mammoth, gnarled tree around which the temple has been built. Across the road from the temple is a small **pagoda** (塔) from where you can get a view of the surrounding scenery.

KĀNGDÌNG BUS TIMETABLES

Buses from Kāngdìng:

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency	Departs
Bātáng	¥138	2 days	daily	6.45am
Chéngdū	¥101-122	8hr	hourly	6am-4pm
Dānbā	¥36	4hr	daily	8am
Dégé	¥166	24hr	daily	7.30am
Gānzī	¥106	12hr	daily	6.15am
Lèshān	¥72-89	8hr	daily	7am
Lítáng	¥80	8hr	daily	7am
Tāgōng	¥33	4hr	daily	6am
Xiāngchéng	¥130	14hr	daily	7.15am

Sleeping & Eating

Móxi is loaded with good, cheap accommodation; this is but a thumbnail sketch.

Bingchuān Fàndiàn (冰川饭店; dm Y20, d with bathroom Y50) Opposite the entrance to the church, this used to be one of those primitive-but-charming places you never forget. Renovations go on and on, but it's still cheap and great. And in front of the most amazing glacier vistas you'll see.

Hǎiluó Fàndiàn (海螺饭店; ☎ 326 6297; d Y60-80; 🚻) Up the road from the Bingchuān Fàndiàn, this place has solid rooms for the price. Can't beat the magnificent views from the rooftop terrace.

There are a number of restaurants, barbeque stalls and hotpot places along the main road and the road leading to the glacier park entrance. Check prices before ordering.

Móxi's shops and fruit stands are well stocked if you need to buy some supplies for a trip to Hǎiluógōu.

Getting There & Away

Most visitors to Móxi arrive on a tour bus and the public transport system is erratic, if it runs at all. Most locals scoot around on motorbikes or catch a ride to Lúding (Y20) in one of the minibuses that ply between the two towns. These leave from the crossroads at the top end of town.

There is supposedly a 7am bus to Lúding (Y15, two hours) but don't count on it. Ditto Chéngdū (8.30am, eight hours, Y95). The owner of the Bingchuān Fàndiàn will be able to help you out with transport. Change at Lúding for Chéngdū and Kāngdīng. If you're headed to Shímíán, get off the bus at Mǎozìpíng, on the other side of the bright-orange Rainbow Bridge. From here you can flag down a southbound bus.

To reach Móxi, get off your bus in Lúding from where you can grab a minibus to Móxi (Y20). Travelling from the south via Shímíán, get off at Mǎozìpíng and flag down a minicab to Móxi from there. If you're coming from Yǎ'ān, get the driver to let you off at Gāngǔdì (干谷地), from where you can get a taxi (Y20, one hour).

HǎILUÓGŌU GLACIER PARK 海螺沟冰川公园

Hǎiluógōu Glacier slides, literally, off the eastern slopes of Gònggā Shān to form the lowest glacier in Asia. **No 1 Glacier** (一号冰川; Yihào

Bingchuān), the main glacier, is 14km long and covers an area of 16 sq km. It's relatively young as glaciers go: around 1600 years. The top of Hǎiluógōu can offer incredible vistas of Gònggā Shān and surrounding peaks, all above 6000m, but how much you actually see is entirely up to Mother Nature. Constantly framed with a backdrop of snowy peaks, the surrounding forests are also beautiful, with their ecosystems changing as you ascend the mountain.

The entrance to **Hǎiluógōu Glacier Park** (Hǎiluógōu Bingchuān Gōngyuán; admission Y140) lies in Móxi and the park was once a popular choice for trekking and camping. It was once possible to ascend the mountain by foot or pony trek but these days there is not a neigh to be heard for miles. The road running from the park entrance to Camp No 3, via Camps No 1 and 2, has been paved over and most people travel to **Belvedere** (Guānjǐngtái; 观景台), 3km above Camp No 3, by minibus. From Belvedere the tour groups tend to continue their ascent to the base of No 1 Glacier via **cable car** (Y160; 🚠 8.30am-4pm).

It is still possible to trek from Belvedere and it's a one- to two-hour walk up to No 1 Glacier. While not a tough climb, the walk is made more difficult as the path has been largely neglected and so at times is hard to follow. On a clear day, however, there are some beautiful views to be had and the trail passes through some lovely forest. En route to the base is the **Waterfall Viewing Platform** (冰川观景台; Bingchuān Guānjǐngtái) at 3000m. From here you can see the main glacier tongue, plus **No 2 Glacier** (二号冰川; Èrhào Bingchuān) and **Golden Peak** (金银峰; Jīnyīnfēng) at 6368m.

The entrance fee to the park includes a guide, compulsory for all tourists going out on the glacier and handy for keeping you away from deep crevices and melting points. Guides meet you at the base of No 1 Glacier and take you on a 30-minute tour of the glacier after which you are free to go off and explore.

The park has become incredibly commercial. If you're looking for a real getaway into the wilderness, then sadly this is no longer it. But if your main interest is seeing and even walking across a glacier, then the park is still worth a visit. If you do plan to trek, come prepared with warm clothes and sunglasses. You'll also need to bring food and water, as you might not find much to buy en route

until you reach Camp No 3 and its pricey restaurants. On maps of the park marked trails may be less than accurate and some may have disappeared.

The rainy season for this area spans July and August, although the locals say they get 200 days of rain a year. The best time to visit is between late September and November, when skies are generally clear. Autumn colours are particularly beautiful at this time, though it can be cold up at Camp No 3.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation options in the park tend to fall into one category: old and overpriced.

Camp No 1 (一号营地; Yihào Yíngdì; dm Y150), at 1940m, still offers budget dorm beds but conditions are damp and dirty.

Camp No 2 (二号营地; Èrhào Yíngdì; dm Y150) sits at 2620m and has cramped, expensive dorm rooms although the price does include a dip into the hot springs.

Camp No 3 (三号营地; Sānhào Yíngdì) at 2940m is the highest camp and offers two resort-style hotels. The huge **Jinshān Fàndiàn** (金山饭店; Golden Mountain Hotel; ☎ 326 6433; d Y150) and the new **Jinshān Dàjiǔdiàn** (金山大酒店; Golden Mountain Grand Hotel; ☎ 326 6383; d Y480) sit side by side and offer the best – and most expensive – accommodation within the park.

The park authorities frown upon camping and in any case there isn't a great deal in the way of flat ground on the way up.

The camps sell some food and drinks although, out of season, you can only count on this at Camp No 3. Mineral water, soft drinks, beer and instant noodles are usually available at high prices.

Getting There & Away

The entrance to the park is in Móxi. Turn left at the main crossroads at the top of the hill and carry on to the ticket office, about 400m up the road. Móxi itself can be reached by minibus from Lúding (see opposite for details). Buses start running up the mountain from the park entrance gate at 7.30am and leave as soon as they have more than one passenger.

Minibuses (Y50 return, one hour) start running up the mountain from the park entrance gate at 7.30am and leave as soon as they have more than one passenger. The last bus leaves Belvedere around 7pm and stops at all three camps on the way down.

SICHUĀN–TIBET HWY (NORTHERN ROUTE)

This is the less heavily travelled route to Tibet for good reason. Some 300km longer than the southern route, it crosses Chola Mountain, the highest pass this side of Lhasa. If possible, the disrepair of roads here exceeds those on the southern route and offers a real test of the mettle of any mortal who dares set upon them.

The highlights are many, however. The highway also crosses through the increasingly popular and sublimely lovely Tǎgōng Grasslands (below). For a nice detour, head up to the splendid little town of Dānbā to check out its fabulous Qiang watchtowers.

This highway leads ultimately to the border town of Dégé, with its internationally revered printing lamasery. It also takes you to the north where it is possible to work your way up to Qīnghǎi province via Sèrshu.

Come prepared with warm clothing. Remember that bus services can be erratic – this is no place to be if you're in a hurry. It's also not possible to change money or travellers cheques so load up before you come.

Tǎgōng Grasslands 塔公草原

About 110km northwest of Kāngdīng lie the **Tǎgōng Grasslands** (Tǎgōng Cǎoyuán). The chocolate-drop-shaped hillocks dotting expanses of fields make for a challenging but relaxing few days of strike-off-on-your-own trekking. An annual horse-racing festival (*saimāhui*) features thousands of local Tibetan herdsman and Tibetan opera.

The small village of **Tǎgōng** offers a fantastic taste of Sichuān's Tibetan Wild West. In the village, **Tǎgōng Temple** (Tǎgōng Sì; Y10) blends Han Chinese and Tibetan styles, and dates back to the Qing dynasty. Travellers have lined up horse treks with local guesthouses; most just hang out and wander the countryside longer than they'd planned.

The little town has 28 spartan guesthouses now! Top of the heap is the great **Snowland Guesthouse** (Xuěchéng Lǚshè; 雪城旅社; ☎ 286 6098; dm Y20) right next to Tǎgōng temple. It's got wooden everything and rigid but comfy beds; best are the thick blankets. The shower and facilities are clean.

Adjacent to this is the ineffable **Sally's Kham Restaurant** (☎ 139-9045 4672; tagongsally@yahoo.com). This place has Tibetan, Chinese and Western food (decently done), internet access, CD

burning, bakery, travel information, bicycle and sleeping bag rental, and much more. Oh, and Sally, a most welcoming host.

One morning bus to Tāgōng village (on its way to Dào fǔ) runs daily from Kāngdīng (Y23, four hours, 6am) and drops you outside the lamasery. More run this way but not for Tāgōng-bound folks; you could also negotiate a share taxi fairly easily. During the horse festival buses are likely to be more frequent. If you're heading to Gānzī, you can pick up the same bus the next day at about 10am as it passes through town. To Dānbā you'll likely have to take a minivan to Bāměi (Y10, one hour), then another to Dānbā (Y25, two to three hours).

Returning to Kāngdīng, afternoon buses can be flagged down as they pass through Tāgōng village. You can also catch a minibus on the main street that will take you to Yājīāng from where there are buses to Chéngdū or Lítáng.

Dānbā

☎ 0836 / pop 58,200 / elevation 1800m

Dānbā stretches almost impossibly along a valley of the Dadu River (Dādù Hé), the town seemingly chiselled right into sheer riverine escarpments. The cliffs gradually back off and melt into imposing hills, and here you'll find a heavy Tibetan and Qiang populace in picturesque villages. Rising heavenward around the hamlets are the archaeological wonders of the area – dozens and dozens of ancient stone Qiang watchtowers gracefully aging as they still guard their locals, even after centuries. Not for nothing was this sublime little village rated in 2005 as the 'Best Village in China' by none other than Chinese *National Geographic*.

Technically not on the Sichuān–Tibet Hwy, Dānbā is nonetheless a good place to take a brief detour. Inherent loveliness, sure, but the elevation is also much lower, so you can get a break from icy winds, intense sun and altitude giddiness.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The narrow town meanders from east to west along the river; the only main road is Sanchahe Lu, paralleling the river. The bus station is in the far west end, the recommended lodging in the far east end. Upward (literally) from here you'll find in the maze of alleys the **post office** (yóujú; 邮局) and **PSB** (Gōngānjú; 公安局).

Continuing on you'll eventually run into the town's sole 'sight', a pedestrian street of shops; follow this to the end and on the second floor of one of the last buildings on the left you'll find an **internet café** (wǎngbā; 网吧).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

A half-dozen Tibetan villages dot the surrounding countryside. The best-known operate largely as touristy operations – though lovely and engaging – and actually charge an admission (Y30 or so generally). Most well-known are **Zhōng Lù Zàngzhài Diàoqún Gǔyízhǐ** (中路藏寨碉群古遗址), 6km east of town, and **Jiǎjū Zàngzhài** (甲居藏寨), 7km to the northwest. Transport is via taxis (whose drivers will find you) and – surprise, surprise – it's generally fairly cheap, depending on how many places you wish to visit.

Yet all one really has to do is trek out into the surrounding countryside, clamber up some hills and do some solo exploring. If you can arrange it, visit in autumn (September to November), when the scenery, a riot of colours, is downright inspirational.

A can't-miss good trip is to head east out of town along Sanchahe Lu. Approximately 5km away is a scattering of those legendary watchtowers at **Suōpō** (梭坡). A viewing platform is between kilometre markers 147 and 148. You can theoretically cross the river well before this and get an up close gander at them, but you'll be charged admission.

Easier and cheaper is to backtrack to kilometre marker 147 (almost exactly) and head up a dirt road to the top, passing more towers and lovely Tibetan villages (populated by wondrous folk). It's about 90 minutes if you don't poke about and are in good shape. *Do not shortcut*; one residual of the tower fortifications is ridiculously well-designed defensive stone walls full of flesh-ripping brambles.

SLEEPING & EATING

Any hotel near the bus station will be ecstatic to take you. Posted rates are laughably high.

Zhāxī Zhuōkāng (扎西卓康; ☎ 352 1806; 35 Sanchahe Nanlu; 35 三岔河南路35号; s/d from Y50) The exceedingly friendly managers of this refurbished place have a hotel with a hostel complex, and that's a good thing. Spotless, airy rooms (all redone recently) should include dorm beds by the time you read this – they were literally pounding away to make

them on the day of our visit. Zilch English but they communicate admirably nonetheless. It's on the eastern end of town, about a 15 minute hike from the bus station.

Curiously, the town has a dearth of eateries of any kind. The few restaurants that you find – strictly Sichuān food – are at least cheap and good.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses (but not that many) run to Kāngdīng (Y36 to Y42, four hours, 8.30am), Tāgōng (Y30), Lúhuò, Gānzī, and, for northern Sichuān or back to Chéngdū via Wòlóng, northeast to Mǎ'ěrkāng (Y40, four hours, 7am). Many times if passenger loads are low staff will pass you off to private minivan drivers, who may then troll maddeningly for more passengers. If you're heading for Kāngdīng you can negotiate with clusters of these drivers at the east end of town; to head towards Tāgōng, go to the west end.

GĀNZĪ 甘孜

☎ 0836 / pop 61,400 / elevation 3394m

The lively market town of Gānzī sits in a valley at 3400m, surrounded by the sleeping giants of Chola Mountain. Some 385km northwest of Kāngdīng, Gānzī is the capital of the Gānzī (Garzê) Autonomous Prefecture and is mostly populated by Tibetans and Khambas.

Gānzī sees a growing number of foreigners sojourning here as an intermediate stop between Sērshu and Kāngdīng or on their way west to Dégé. It is a friendly place and it's easy to spend several days here exploring the beautiful surrounding countryside, which is scattered with Tibetan villages and monasteries. Photo opportunities abound and it's impossible to take a bad picture here.

INFORMATION

Dorjee Tsewang (☎ 139-9049 6777) If you're looking for a local guide, Dorjee Tsewang in the neighbouring town of Rongpatse can arrange hiking and horse-riding treks (or anything else). He speaks fluent English.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Situated north of the town's Tibetan quarter, **Ganzhi Temple** (甘孜寺; Gānzī Sì; Garzê Gumpa in Tibetan; admission Y15) is a 540-year-old lamasery. Home to over 500 monks, this is the region's largest monastery and it glimmers with blinding quantities of gold. Encased on the walls of the main hall are hundreds of small golden

Sakyamunis. In a smaller hall just west of the main hall is an awe-inspiring statue of Jampa (Maitreya or Future Buddha), dressed in a giant silk robe. The monks are very friendly and will invite you in to look around.

To find the lamasery, take a left out of the bus station and head north for about 10 minutes until you reach the Tibetan neighbourhood. From there wind your way uphill, around the clay and wooden houses.

There are also a number of lamaseries in neighbouring towns that you might want to visit. **Beri Gumpa** is about a half-hour drive west, on the road to Dégé. Also off this road, one hour from Gānzī, is **Dagei Gumpa**. About 15km from here on a steep slope above the Yalong River sits **Hadhi Nunnerly**, home to sixty or so nuns.

To reach Beri Gumpa and Dagei Gumpa, catch the morning bus to Dégé or one of the sporadic local buses heading west. A taxi costs around Y20.

Back in Gānzī, turn right out of the bus station and walk through the Tibetan housing until you reach a bridge festooned with prayer flags. There are endless possibilities for walks on the other side of the bridge.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most hotels and guesthouses in Gānzī seem to be accepting foreigners now. For dirt cheap guesthouses turn left out of the bus station, walk to the corner, turn left, and 50m ahead on the right side take your pick of two decent cheapies (Y15 beds).

Chéngxīn Bīnguǎn (诚信宾馆; ☎ 752 5289; Dajin Jie; 打金街; s/d without bathroom Y60/80, with bathroom Y180) Opposite the bus station, this place has very clean rooms and great staff.

Jīnmáoniú Jiǔdiàn (金牛牛酒店; ☎ 752 2353; Dajin Jie; 打进街; dm Y30, d Y120-180) Attached to Gānzī's bus station, this is the most centrally located midrange option, with weary but OK rooms in an older building and smarter new doubles in the main complex.

The food in Gānzī is virtually all Sichuān basics (but good). Around the bus station are several dumpling and *bāozǐ* stalls.

If you head west, up the hill at the main intersection you'll find eateries pumping out fresh Tibetan flatbread.

Gyalten Rinpoche Guesthouse (dm Y35) Several kilometres west of Dagei Gumpa. Set against white-capped mountains with no neighbours to be seen for miles, this is a truly relaxing

place to rest for a day or two, especially at nearby hot springs. Simple meals are available and you would be wise to bring a sleeping bag with you. To get there, you can ask a driver to let you off close enough to walk, or negotiate a ride from Dagei Gompa (if any drivers are around). From Dagei Gompa, just walk west along the road (less than 100m) and look for a pond; beyond this, a sign in English directs you up a dirt track a few kilometres to the guesthouse.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to Gānzī (Y106, 10 to 12 hours) leave Kāngding daily at 6.15am. A bus to Kāngding leaves Gānzī every morning at 6.30am. Buses to Dégé (Y60, eight to ten hours) run every two to three days if demand warrants it; it usually doesn't, so most of the time you hope for a seat on the daily bus which passes through from the south, usually at 8.30am or so.

Private minivans to Dégé are available for hire (Y450), not a bad deal if there's a group of you.

You can head north from Gānzī to Xīning in Qīnghǎi province via Sērshu (daily, Y94, nine hours). These buses come from Kāngding and stop in the morning around 8am; hope for a seat.

MANIGANGO 马尼干戈

☎ 0836

Manigango lies halfway between Gānzī and Dégé and is the jumping-off point for Dzogchen Gompa and Yihun Lhatso. Manigango itself is a dusty one-street town that looks unmistakably like the movie set for a Tibetan Western. It's a glorious multicoloured scene with Tibetans on horseback, monks in crimson robes on motorbikes and tractors piled precariously high with pilgrims rattling down the road. It's worth stopping off just for the atmosphere. A horse-racing festival is usually held here in the summer.

The town is known in Chinese as Yùlóng or Mǎnigāngē, but it's most commonly referred to by its Tibetan name Manigango.

Sights

DZOGCHEN GOMPA 竹庆佛学院

This important Nyingmapa monastery (Zhùqīng Fóxuéyuàn), 50km north of Manigango, has a stunning location at the foot of a glacial valley. The recently reconstructed monastery was founded in 1684 and is the

home of the Dzogchen school, the most popular form of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Several high Nyingmapa lamas, now exiled abroad, originate from nearby valleys.

The site includes the small town, 1.5km off the road, which has a few shops, *chörten* and a chapel with huge prayer wheels. Up the small gorge is the main monastery and 1km further is the *shedra* (monastic college).

Buses to Yùshù and Sērshu run daily past Dzogchen but in practice it's easier to hitch. If you do plan to hitch make sure you set out in the morning, as there is little traffic on the roads come the afternoon. If you want to hire a car and driver then it will cost Y250 for the return journey. Getting here you have to cross over the Muri La Pass (4,633m) so make sure you have some warm clothes, especially if you're hitching in the back of a truck.

YIHUN LHATSO 新路海

Thirteen kilometres southwest of Manigango is **Yihun Lhatso** (Xīnlù Hǎi; admission Y20), a stunning holy alpine lake to rival any found in Jiūzhàigōu. The lake is bordered by *chörten* and dozens of rock carvings, and the shoreline is sprinkled in places with pure white sand. It's possible to walk an hour or two up the left (east) side of the lakeshore for glacier views. The lake has many great places to camp though you need to guard against the mosquitoes. To get here you'll have to hitch on Dégé-bound traffic to the turn-off where there's a bridge and a 1km trail to the lake.

Activities

The countryside surrounding Manigango is crying out to be explored and one good way to do it is on horseback. The folks at the Mǎnigāngē Shísùdiàn (see next section) can help you organise a horse and guide for trekking in the neighbouring areas. Prices usually run at Y200 per day (for horse and guide) but you can probably negotiate. If you plan to go off camping for several days you will be expected to provide meals for your guide as well. Make sure you have all the equipment and food you need as there's hardly anything available to buy in Manigango let alone once you've left town.

Sleeping & Eating

Manigango seems to have the biggest population of many dogs in southwest China and they all come out to play at night. Manigango

was also undergoing a construction boom last check, and upgrades were looming (hopefully not in prices!)

Mǎnigāngē Shísùdiàn (马尼干戈食宿店; dm Y10-20) This is where all the buses stop and has comfortable basic rooms. Ask for the toilets however and they'll point you half a mile up the road – make sure you bring a torch! The staff can help with travel information and bus timetables.

Yùlóng Shénhǎi Bīnguǎn (玉龙神海宾馆; dm Y15-30) Next door to the Mǎnigāngē Shísùdiàn, this hotel is more modern and has its own toilet – bonus! Look for the large red-and-white sign.

The restaurant at the Mǎnigāngē Shísùdiàn serves particularly tasty food and is very cheap. There is a good *niúrǔmiàn* (beef noodle) restaurant next door to the petrol station.

The college at Dzogchen Gompa offers beds for Y15 per night though you need a sleeping bag and your own food. There are a couple of well-stocked shops in the village below.

Getting There & Away

A daily bus passes through Manigango at 11am for Dégé (Y35, three to four hours). Coming from Dégé, a bus stops in Manigango at 11am and heads on to Gānzī (Y25, five to seven hours) and Lúhuò (Y50, five hours) where it overnights before heading on to Kāngding (Y130, overnight via Lúhuò) the following morning. A 9am bus leaves daily for Sērshu (Y77).

DÉGÉ 德格

☎ 0836 / pop 58,520 / elevation 3270m

Resting in a valley with Chola Mountain to the east and the Tibetan border to the west, Dégé (Dégé), home of the legendary Gesar, an altruistic king of Ling, is steeped in tradition and still sees little of the outside world. Things are naturally changing but it still remains time-locked for the most part. Dégé was renowned for its apothecary monks who developed traditional medicine, but now people come for its famed printing lamasery.

Getting to Dégé is a gruelling haul and it is not uncommon for buses to overturn on the icy, hairpin roads. Altitude sickness is also a very real possibility.

En route you'll see the towering snowy peaks of Chola Mountain stretching up 6168m, and the Xinhua Glacier which comes down almost to the road at 4100m. Chola

Mountain itself was first scaled in 1988 and you might begin to wonder if your bus driver is attempting the same, as the bus grumbles and inches its way uphill to the top of the peaks. At the Tro La (Chola) Pass of nearly 6000m, Tibetans on board will throw coloured prayer papers out the window and chant something that you can only hope will carry your bus to safety.

Sights

BAKONG SCRIPTURE PRINTING LAMASERY 德格印经院

At the heart of Dégé and perhaps the heart of the Tibetan world in many respects is this **lamasery** (Dégé Yīnjīngyuàn; admission Y25; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-6.30pm), storehouse for Tibetan culture. Pilgrims circumambulate outside, performing many more than the 1000 circuits required in the process of cultural development.

The printing house has existed on this site for over 270 years and houses over 270,000 engraved blocks of Tibetan scriptures (and paintings) from the five Tibetan Buddhist sects, including Bön. Texts include ancient works on astronomy, geography, music, medicine and Buddhist classics. A history of Indian Buddhism, comprising 555 woodblock plates, is the only surviving copy in the world (written in Hindi, Sanskrit and Tibetan).

Built in the Qing dynasty by the 42nd prefect of Dégé, the lamasery is revered as one of the three most important Tibetan lamaseries (along with Sakya Monastery and Lhasa's Potala Palace) – not surprising since the material stored in Dégé makes up an estimated 70% of Tibet's literary heritage.

Within the lamasery hundreds of workers hand-produce over 2500 prints each day. Upstairs, an older crowd of printers produce larger prints of Tibetan gods on paper or coloured cloth that later find their way to hills and temples as prayer flags. If you catch them with a free moment, they'll print you one of your choice for Y10.

Storage chambers are lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves, a constant thwack emanates from paper-cutting and binding rooms. Protecting the monastery from fire and earthquake is a guardian goddess, a green Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin).

The entrance fee to the lamasery includes a tour guide who is excellent at communicating through pictures if your Chinese isn't up to scratch. The lamasery is closed holidays.

There are three other lamaseries in town, including a large one just behind the printing house, which is over 1000 years old.

To reach the printing house, turn left out of the bus station and right over the bridge. Continue up this road to the southeast of town and it will bring you to the lamasery's front door.

Sleeping

True or not, you will likely be told that the following place is your only option. That said, a few have had luck getting cheap beds in other hotels – just depends on the day and the mood of the PSB.

Dégé Binguān (德格宾馆; ☎ 822 2157; dm Y20; d Y180) Here's where you'll likely be told to go. The dorm rooms are worse than the roads coming in but the doubles are priced laughably high; worse, you may be directed across the street to the expensive wing (Y280).

One of those where you may have luck is **Wūzi Zhāodàisuǒ** (物资招待所; dm Y25). Located directly opposite the bus station, you'll recognise it from the multi-coloured bunting hanging outside.

Getting There & Away

Buses to Dégé (Y60, eight to ten hours) run from Gānzī every two to three days if you're lucky but most of the time you hope for a seat on the daily buses which pass through from the south, usually at 8.30am or so.

Private minivans to Gānzī and other places are available for hire (Y450).

Marginally more comfortable buses leave from Kāngdīng for Dégé daily at 7.15am (Y166, 24 hours), stopping overnight in Lúhuò. The return bus stops in Manigango (Y35, three to four hours), Gānzī (Y60, eight to 10 hours) and Lúhuò (Y86, 10 to 12 hours) on the way.

SÊRSBU 石渠

There are two places commonly called Sêrsbu (or Sersbul): the traditional monastery town to the west (Sêrsbu Dzong) and the modern county town of Sêrsbu (Shíqu Xiàn), 30km to the east, which has most of the hotels and transport connections.

While you'll probably stop in Shíqu Xiàn en route between Manigango and Yùshù in Qīnghǎi. The huge monastery of Sêrsbu Dzong and its intensely Tibetan village, full of wild-haired nomads (there's not a Han

Chinese in sight here), is by far the more interesting place and well worth a stopover.

Sêrsbu Gomba houses 1200 monks and has two assembly halls, a Maitreya chapel and several other modern chapels and a *shedra*, with a *kora* (circular pilgrimage trail) encircling the lot. The road westwards from here towards Qīnghǎi is classic yak and nomad country, passing several long *mani* (prayer) walls and dozens of black yak hair tents in summer.

Sleeping

In Sêrsbu Dzong there's good accommodation at the **monastery guesthouse** (sèxū sī gāngjīng fāndiàn; 色须寺刚京饭店; dm Y10-20, tw Y40-50 per bed), though the restaurants in town offer better food.

In Shíqu Xiàn there are several decent places, including the **Zhāxikǎ Fāndiàn** (扎溪卡饭店; dm Y40, tw Y120) on the central crossroads and the monastery-run **Bumgon Choeyeling Monastery Guesthouse** (Mēngyī Sī Jiūyù Guifù Lǚdiàn; 蒙宜寺九欲归富旅店; dm Y20), down the town's main side street.

Getting There & Away

Shíqu Xiàn has a 7am bus to Gānzī (Y94, eight hours), via Manigango (Y77), from the bus station in the east of town. To get to Sêrsbu Dzong take the 8am bus to Yùshù (Y30) from the bus stand in the far west of town.

From Sêrsbu Dzong, you'll have to catch a through bus, passing through at 9am for Yùshù (Y20, four hours), or about 11am for Shíqu Xiàn (Y10, one hour). Coming from Yùshù, it's possible to get off the bus in Sêrsbu Dzong, have a look around and then hitch or hire a minivan on to Shíqu Xiàn the same day.

SICHUĀN–TIBET HWY (SOUTHERN ROUTE)

A journey along this 2140km route takes you through vast, open landscapes with majestic peaks vaulting skyward. The plateau areas are dotted with castellated Tibetan homes and an infinite number of contentedly munching yaks.

With roads and transport improving (ha!) oh-so-gradually and restrictions for foreign visitors lifted, the Kāngdīng–Litáng–Xiāngchéng–Shāngri-la (Zhōngdiàn) route has become a popular back-door trail into Yúnnán.

As with the rest of northwest Sichuān, warm clothing is a must. Some travellers ex-

perience difficulties with the high altitudes here; be on the lookout for side effects (see p982) and if you're feeling unwell, head to somewhere lower. There are no money-changing facilities here.

Litáng 理塘

☎ 0836 / pop 51,300 / elevation 4014m

Litáng is famed as the birthplace of the 7th and 10th Dalai Lamas and the area around the town has strong connections to the epic warrior Gesar of Ling.

However, you won't notice this at first. Litáng lies at a wheeze-inducing altitude of 4014m, but the thin air isn't the only thing taking your breath away. Your rear is pounded mercilessly by the awful roads, yet you may not even notice, so intoxicated are you by the visual majesty – ice-capped peaks every which way and epic grasslands. On arrival, you'll know you're in Kham, China's 'Develop the West' campaign having hardly dented the Tibetan culture here. Yaks, sheep skins, yak-butter tea, nomads, *khampas* (people from Kham, in Tibet), all set in a town that time has for the nonce left unbothered.

Litáng has a fantastically relaxed and friendly atmosphere. While there may not be much in the way of sights, you can easily fill your days hanging out with the local people under a blazing sun and starry night skies or exploring the spectacular walks into the surrounding hills. Advice on where to go (ie where isn't currently being used as grazing pastures or for sky burials; see Sky Burial, p790) should be sought from locals. Be sure to allow yourself time to acclimatise to the altitude before you set out.

If you do find yourself suffering from altitude sickness and can't get out of town, there is a local treatment consisting of medicated pills and re-hydration drinks. The woman running Crane Guesthouse (see right) may be able to help you out; however, this shouldn't be considered a remedy and you should still descend to a lower altitude as soon as possible.

INFORMATION

China Post (Yóujú; ☎ 9am-11.30am & 2-5.30pm) On the main north-south street. Next door is a place to use internet phone (IP) cards.

Internet café (wǎngbā; per hr Y5) On the third floor in a building diagonally across from the High City Hotel.

Public showers (Yuǎnxìyù Zhōngxīn; 园洗浴中心; Y8) Can be found south of the main crossroads.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

At the northern end of town is the large **Litáng Chōde Gomba** (理塘长青春科尔寺; Litáng Chángqīng Chūnkē Ērsi), a Tibetan lamasery, built for the third Dalai Lama. Inside is a statue of Sakyamuni that is believed to have been carried from Lhasa by foot. Tibetan homes lead up to the lamasery and you are likely to encounter friendly monks en route who may offer to give you a tour.

On the eastern edge of Litáng is **Qūdēnggāngbù**, a newly erected *chörten* which active worshippers seem to be perpetually circling as they recite mantras and spin prayer wheels. Smaller *chörten* fill the courtyard, which itself is edged with a corridor of prayer wheels.

There are **hot springs** (wēnquán; admission Y6-7) at the western edge of town, 4km from the centre. A taxi costs Y7 one way.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The annual Litáng Horse Festival is known as one of the biggest and most colourful in Tibet and every five years an even more spectacular event is staged. The festival usually starts on 1 August and lasts for 10 days, but it's worth checking at the hostels and travel agencies in Kāngdīng or Chéngdū before you head here. The festival includes horse racing, stunt demonstrations on horseback, dance competitions and an arts-and-crafts festival and trade fair.

SLEEPING & EATING

Litáng has decent food and (now) tons of lodging, making it a fine place to stay for a day or more. Many hotels have no hot water and electricity everywhere can be unreliable. Cheapo hostels (Y10-15 per bed, no showers) are found around the bus station.

Crane Guesthouse (Xiānhé Bīnguǎn; 仙鹤宾馆; ☎ 532 3850; dm Y25) Cosy two- and three-bed dorms are a good deal here with electric blankets and heaters; a shower costs Y5. The two Tibetan sisters who run the place are quite helpful. Turn left out of the bus station and head about 350m east into town; it's on the right-hand side of the road.

Good Luck Guesthouse (Jíxiáng Bīnguǎn; 吉祥宾馆; ☎ 532 3688; d Y60, with toilet Y120) Another option with larger, clean rooms. The reception is accessed from the back.

High City Hotel (Gāochéng Bīnguǎn; 高城宾馆; d/tr Y100/120) The best you're gonna get is this government-run hotel; the spacious rooms come with a heater, TV, squat toilet and, they say,

SKY BURIAL

The white cloth is removed from the body while the *tomden* (a religious master of ceremonies) sharpens his large knife. He circles a small Buddhist monument, reciting mantras all the while, and slices into the body lying before him on the stone slab. The flesh is cut into large chunks and the bones and brain are smashed and mixed with barley flour.

The smell of flesh draws a large number of vultures that circle impatiently above. Eventually the Tomden steps away and the huge birds descend into a feeding frenzy, tearing at the body and carrying it in pieces up to the heavens.

This is sky burial (*tiānzàng*), an ancient Buddhist-Tibetan burial tradition that performs both a spiritual and practical function. According to Buddhist beliefs, the body is merely a vehicle to carry you through this life; once a body dies, the spirit leaves it and the body is no longer of use. Giving one's body as food for the vultures is a final act of generosity to the living world and provides a link in the cycle of life. Vultures themselves are revered and believed to be a manifestation of the flesh-eating God Dakinis.

Practically, this form of burial provides an ecologically sound way to dispose of bodies in a terrain where wood is scarce and the ground is often frozen solid.

The Chinese banned sky burials in the 1960s and '70s. It wasn't until the '80s, as Tibetans regained limited religious rights, that the practice was once again legalised. However, most Han Chinese still regard sky burials as a primitive practice. The fact that one Buddhist sect has been known to keep the tops of the skulls to use as enlarged sacred teacups has often been touted as proof of Tibetan savagery.

In Lhasa, tourists require official permission to attend a sky burial; in the more remote areas of Sichuān, however, you may well be told where and when the burials are to take place. Nevertheless, local Tibetans have been unsurprisingly offended by travellers who have turned these funerals into tourist outings. Common decency applies – if you aren't invited, don't go, and whatever you do, do not attempt to capture the moment on camera.

hot water. The lobby has a killer karaoke unit, loaded and ready at all times.

Lítáng has countless small restaurants, the most popular of which can be found on the south side of the main road a couple of hundred metres west of the Crane Hotel. Of these, **Lianmeixian Restaurant** (廉美县 餐厅; Liánměixiàn Cāntīng; dishes ¥8; ☎ 10am–8pm) has an English speaker.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lítáng's bus station is chaotic and has unhelpful staff. At the time of writing daily buses were leaving Lítáng for Kāngdīng (Y80, eight hours, 6am or 7am) and Bātáng (Y59, six hours, 7.30am). One or two buses pass through Lítáng each day from Kāngdīng en route to Dàochéng and Xiāngchéng (Y60, five hours, 7am).

It looks easy to head north to Gānzǐ via Xīnlóng from here, but though roadwork continues, at the time of writing, it was still a no-go for public transport.

Lítáng to Shangri-la (Zhōngdiàn)

This is a back-door route to Yúnnán that takes you through 400km of spectacular scenery via

Xiāngchéng to Shangri-la, (p726) also known as Zhōngdiàn.

Buses from Kāngdīng and Lítáng head for Xiāngchéng (see p780 and left respectively), where you'll have to spend the night. From Xiāngchéng you can catch a bus to Shangri-la in Yúnnán province between 7am and 8am. Going the other way, buses from Xiāngchéng head back to Lítáng at around the same time. Try to buy your onward ticket on arrival in Xiāngchéng as the ticket office is not always manned before the first buses leave in the morning. Be forewarned: the road between Xiāngchéng and Shangri-la is sometimes closed in the dead of winter (or even in spring and autumn) due to heavy snow. You'd be wise to check before heading out from Lítáng.

Xiāngchéng is a small border town that is quickly expanding with the usual tiled buildings and blaring horns. A hike up to the Tibetan temple (Y10) offers views over the valley and what's left of the town's traditional square stone houses. This lamasery itself is being completely rebuilt by hand and is worth a visit to watch carvers and painters at work.

The lamasery is at the opposite end of town from the bus station. To find it, follow the dirt track up on the left as you reach the edge of town.

Bamu Tibetan Guesthouse (☎ 582 6835; dm/d ¥20–25/200) is your home for the night. Beds in clean, warm dorm rooms are a good deal. The ornate fronting of the hotel contrasts shockingly with the muddy bus station nearby.

More substantial hotels are being built in the newer part of town; just exit the bus station and walk towards the white tile.

Bātáng 八塘

☎ 0836 / elevation 2589m

Lying 32km from the Tibetan border and 5½ bumpy hours down a dirt track from Lítáng, low-lying Bātáng is the closest town to Tibet that is open to foreigners. An easy-going and friendly place with lots of streetside barbecue grills and outdoor seating, the town itself is quite modern but the surrounding suburbs of ochre Tibetan houses are lovely. Bātáng is much lower than surrounding areas; when it's still the end of winter in Lítáng it's already spring in Bātáng.

Many travellers try to sneak into Tibet from Bātáng, so, unsurprisingly, the local PSB is a little suspicious of foreigners.

SIGHTS

The Gelugpa sect **Chöde Gaden Pendeling Monastery** in the southwest of town is well worth a visit. The monks (over 500) are friendly and active (they had just finished building a sand mandala during our visit). There are three rooms behind the main hall: a protector chapel, giant statue of Jampa and a 10,000 Buddha room. Up some stairs via a separate entrance is a room for the Panchen Lama, lined with photos of exiled local lamas who now reside in India. Most images here are new but one upstairs statue of Sakyamuni is claimed to be 2000 years old. An old Chinese hospital is now used as monk accommodation. Stop in the kitchen for butter tea before leaving.

There are some fine walks around town. Head north to a lovely Tibetan hillside village and then west to a riverside *chörten* and a few inevitable pilgrims. Alternatively, head south from the town centre over a bridge and then east to a hilltop covered in prayer flags and offering views of the town.

SLEEPING & EATING

Jinhui Binguān (金汇宾馆; ☎ 562 2700; dm ¥10–15, d ¥70, tr without bathroom ¥60) This is the old standby in Bātáng and though its plumbing can have its bad days, all in all it holds up OK, especially for the price. Rooms in the back are quieter and face a Tibetan village. From the bus station continue into town and take the first right after the hard-to-miss golden eagle; it's a block down on the left.

Bāwū Binguān (巴武宾馆; ☎ 562 2882; dm ¥15–25, s/d without bathroom ¥60/40, d with bathroom ¥120) Some have written in that this hotel may have but a modicum of charm, yet its comfy doubles and clean (ish) hot showers are a good bet.

Government Hotel (迎宾楼; Yíngbīn Lóu; ☎ 562 1566; d ¥266) Once the only 'top'-end place in town, this now has some rivals. Check out a few and bargain like mad (getting a comfy room for ¥120 to ¥160 is usually possible). This is still a good bet, and discounts down to ¥180 are not unheard of.

There are plenty of Sichuanese restaurants around town. Local supermarkets stock everything from chocolate to French red wine.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are daily buses to Lítáng (Y59, six hours, 7am), Kāngdīng (Y138, two days via Lítáng) and Chéngdū (Y231, two days via Yājīang). The road to Lítáng is under major construction until God knows when, so expect serious delays. The bus station is a 10-minute walk from the town centre.

Headed west, there are buses at 2pm (Y44, four hours) and afternoon minibuses (Y50) to Markham, 138km away inside Tibet. Foreigners will have problems buying tickets to Markham as the town is officially closed.

From Kāngdīng, a bus leaves for Bātáng (Y138) each morning at 6.45am, overnighting in Lítáng. Buses from Lítáng to Bātáng (Y59) leave daily at 7.30am.

NORTHERN SICHUĀN

Plopping aboard a pony for a trek around Sōngpān and hiking in the stunning – this is not hyperbole – nature preserve of Jiūzhāigōu are how most travellers experience the carpets of alpine forest, swaths of grasslands, primevally icy lakes and breathtaking (literally and figuratively) mountains of Northern Sichuān. None will ever forget it.

Northern Sichuān is home to the Ābà, Tibetan and Qiāng Autonomous Prefectures. In the extreme northwest, the region around Zōigè and Lǎngmùsì is the territory of the Goloks, nomads who speak their own dialect of Tibetan, distinct from the local Amdo dialect. While these Tibetan destinations are less visited, you can incorporate them into an alternative route into Gānsù.

Most of northern Sichuān is between 2000m and 4000m in altitude so make sure you take warm clothing. The grassland plateau in the northwest averages more than 4000m and even in summer, temperatures can dip to 15°C at night. The rainy season lasts from June to August.

Beyond the Sōngpān–Jiūzhàigōu route, roads in the region aren't always in the best condition. (Buses aren't much better.) Roads are particularly hazardous in summer when heavy rains prompt frequent landslides. You might want to think about planning this trip for the spring or autumn, when the weather is likely to be better.

The beauty comes at a cost: one thing you are bound to see in the north are the countless logging trucks that shuttle up and down the Minjiang Valley (near Huánglóng), stripping the area of its forest. Some sources estimate that up to 40% of the region's forests have been logged in the last half decade, causing erosion, landslides and increased levels of silt heading downstream, eventually flowing into the Yangzi River (Cháng Jiāng).

One more time, bear in mind that there is nowhere to change money in this region, so bring sufficient Renminbi.

SŌNGPĀN 松潘

☎ 0837 / pop 71,650

This one-horse town actually has quite a few horses, as it draws loads of travellers coming for its horse treks and/or as a stopover point on the road to Jiūzhàigōu. While the bustling downtown is filled with modern tourist shops selling Tibetan wares, old wooden buildings still line some of the side streets and residential areas. Tour groups eschew the place – their tour buses barrelling through on the way to Jiūzhàigōu – so it is fairly relaxed.

On another note, be sure to bring a torch (flashlight) with you to Sōngpān, which is often plagued with faulty electricity. Infrastructure upgrades result in a lack of water from time to time as well.

Information

China Post (Yóujú; Shunjiang Lu; ☎ 9am–11.30am & 2–5.30pm) is on the main street about halfway between the north and south gates.

Along Shunjiang Lu, the Agricultural Bank of China has put in an ATM that is foreign-card friendly; others have had no problem but it didn't work for us. It cannot yet change travellers cheques, though you might, in a pinch, beg a cash exchange.

Not far from the Min River (Mín Hé) and teahouses are a couple of China Telecom shops where you can make cheap international calls with internet phone (IP) cards.

Emma's Kitchen (p794) has good internet access.

Quite literally the week we visited the Sōngpān **PSB** (Gōngānjú; Shunjiang Lu) had started renewing visas, often – gasp! – in a half-hour and – double gasp! – even on Saturday (if you're lucky). So be nice to them!

Sights

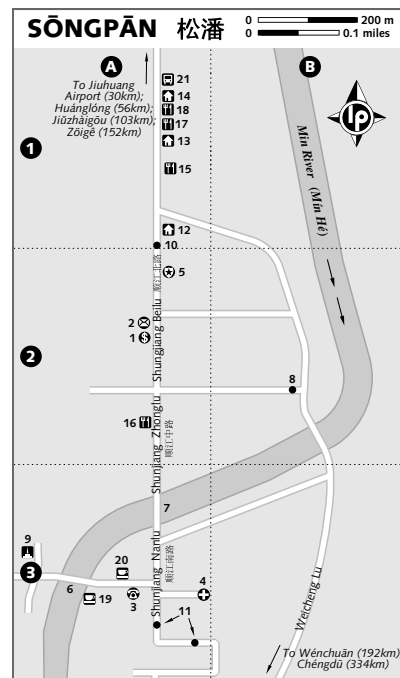
The ancient **gates** from Sōngpān's days as a walled city are still intact and a couple of old covered wooden bridges span the Min River. On the far western side of the river is **Guānyin Gé**. Walking up to it will take you through a village-like setting and the small temple offers views over Sōngpān.

Activities

Several kilometres outside Sōngpān lie idyllic mountain forest and emerald-green lakes. One of the most popular ways to experience this is by joining up with a horse trek from Sōngpān. Guides can take you out through pristine, peaceful valleys and forests, all aboard a not-so-big, very tame horse. Many people rate this experience as one of the highlights of their travels in Sichuān.

Treks are organised by **Shun Jiang Horse Treks** (Shùnjiāng Lǚóu Mǎdù; ☎ 723 1201), located about 30m south of the bus station on your left. The guys here have been catering horse treks to backpackers for years. The vast majority of travellers are utterly happy, but now and again we get reports of lackadaisical if not disinterested (and occasionally gruff) guides. Check with travellers who have recently taken a trip; there will be loads of them. On offer are anything from one- to 12-day treks and trips can be tailored to suit you.

One of the most popular treks is the four-day trip to **Ice Mountain** (雪玉顶; Xuěyùdǐng)



a spectacular trip through as yet unspoilt scenery.

If you're feeling particularly adventurous (and particularly flush) you can make the trip north to Zōigè on horseback, a trek that takes around 12 days. Bear in mind that you will have to cover the cost of the horses on their return journey to Sōngpān which can make it quite an expensive way to travel.

Rates are very reasonable (from Y100 per day per person); you get a horse, three meals a day, tents, bedding, warm jackets and raincoats. The guides take care of everything: you won't touch a tent pole or a cooking pot unless you want to. The only additional charge is entrance to the different sites (Y20 to Y110 each), but you'll be warned of these before you set out.

As food consists mainly of green vegetables, potatoes and bread, you may want to take along some extra snacks for variety.

Sleeping

Note that all the midrange hotels have boarded up here; if it's cosiness you want a couple of overpriced ones are fairly far south of town or, better, head north to Chuānzhūsi,

INFORMATION

Agricultural Bank of China 中国农业银行	1	A2
China Post 邮局	2	A2
China Telecom 中国电信	3	A3
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PSB 公安局	5	A2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Covered Bridge 古松桥	6	A3
Covered Bridge 古松桥	7	A3
East Gate 东门	8	B2
Guānyin Gé 观音阁	9	A3
North Gate 北门	10	A1
Shun Jiang Horse Treks 顺江旅游马队	(see 13)	
South Gate 南门	11	A3

SLEEPING

Ice Mountain Hostel 雪玉顶旅馆	12	A1
Shun Jiang Guesthouse 顺江自助旅馆	13	A1
Sōngzhōu Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn 松州交通宾馆	14	A1

EATING

Emma's Kitchen 小欧洲西餐厅	15	A1
Muslim Restaurant 穆斯林餐厅	16	A2
Song in the Mountain	17	A1
Yùlán Fànguǎn 玉兰饭馆	18	A1

DRINKING

Gúchéng Cháyuán 古城茶园	19	A3
Teahouses 茶馆	20	A3

TRANSPORT

Bus Station 客运站	21	A1
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launching point for Huánglóng Glacier. Dorm beds and cheap private rooms are no problem to find here. Figure Y50 for a comfortable double room with private bathroom in low season. Our favourite are those above the Yùlán Fànguǎn restaurant (seep794), which has Y50 doubles and, as a bonus, heat lamps in the clean bathrooms, a nice treat after a couple of days freezing in a tent.

Shun Jiang Guesthouse (Shùnjiāng Zìzhù Lǚguǎn; ☎ 723 1201, 723 1064; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; dm Y20) Run by the Shun Jiang Horse Trek company, this simple but clean guesthouse is right above their office, which means you can literally roll out of bed and into the saddle.

Ice Mountain Hostel (Xuěyùdǐng Lǚguǎn; ☎ 880 9609; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; dm Y20) Clean rooms and bathrooms and a nice owner at this new hostel (more like a homestay); the proprietress' son and playmates will undoubtedly introduce themselves to you!

Sōngzhōu Jiāotōng Bīnguǎn (☎ 723 1818, 723 1258; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; dm Y25–40, d/tr Y180/150) Attached to the bus station, this newish hotel has an enormous number of rooms to choose from. Most find it just fine, while others knock the reverberation from its cavernous interiors.

Truth be told, the rooms with private bathroom are a bit much for the rack rate, especially when staff insist on haggling (no one else in town does that much anymore).

Eating

Sōngpān has an excellent assortment of breads for sale, made and sold fresh all day at small stalls along Shunjiang Zhonglu – big crusty loaves, dumplings, Tibetan flatbread and sweet breads.

There are also a huge number of restaurants along Shunjiang Zhonglu including hotpot and noodle shops. Many have English signs and menus.

Yùlán Fānguǎn (Shunjiang Beilu; dishes from Y8; ☎ 8am–8pm) This is Sōngpān's original hang-out for foreign travellers and remains popular today, with excellent food and good ambience. The friendly owners just put in some nice rooms upstairs.

Emma's Kitchen (Xiǎo Ōuzhōu Xīcāntīng; ☎ 880 2958; mains from Y10; ☎ 6.30am–late) Great food and atmosphere and some therapeutic sofas (which feel even more comfortable when you return from your horse trek) make this a popular place. Emma is *very* helpful – trust us, she'll find you – and can sort out almost anything from laundry to travel information.

Song in the Mountain (☎ 723 3916; mains from Y10; ☎ 7am–11.30pm) This small restaurant is run by the daughter of Fis Took Yang, 'the good guide with the bad eye' at the Shun Jiang Horse Trek. It's right next door to the office and serves up some decent food.

South of the intersection on Shunjiang Zhonglu is a recently refurbished **Muslim restaurant** (Mùsīlín Cāntīng; dishes from Y10) with fantastic food. Prices are a bit high and there's no English menu, but you can easily pick out what you want in the kitchen. The *yúxiāng qiézi* (fish-flavoured eggplant) is particularly good.

Drinking

Along the Min River, on the southern edge of town, are a number of teahouses where you can enjoy views of the covered wooden bridge, Guānyīn Gé and wooden houses. Try the **Gǔchéng Cháyuán** (Old Town Tea Garden; ☎ 723 3745), on the left before you cross over the bridge.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Jiuhuang Airport (九黄机场; Jiùhuáng Jīchǎng) is near Chuānzhǔsī, a small town

almost halfway between Sōngpān and Jiùzhàigōu. There are no buses to Sōngpān so you'll either have to catch a taxi (around Y80) or go to Jiùzhàigōu first and catch the early morning bus to Sōngpān the following day. Note that the airport was being upgraded and there may be buses here after the reopening.

BUS

Sōngpān's bus station is at the northern end of town. There are daily departures to Chéngdū (Y74, eight hours, three daily, 6am to 7am), Jiùzhàigōu (Y28, two to three hours, 7am, 11am, 1pm), Hóngyuán (Y44, five hours, 7am) and Zōigē (Y56, six hours, 7am). You might also be able to grab a seat on a Chéngdū-bound bus from Jiùzhàigōu or Zōigē that passes through Sōngpān between 8.30am and 10am every day. There are no scheduled buses to Huánglóng from here; you'll have to first head for Chuānzhǔsī or, as most people do, hire a taxi (Y200 if you're a good negotiator). For Lángmùsī you will need to change at Zōigē.

From Chéngdū's Chadianzi bus station there are three daily departures to Sōngpān (Y74, eight hours, 6.30am, 7am and 7.30am) and from Jiùzhàigōu there is a morning departure to Sōngpān at 7.20am.

HUANGLONG NATIONAL PARK

黄龙景区

The name describes the tail of a yellow dragon slithering through a valley, helping the King of the Xia kingdom, Xiayu, create the Min River here at **Huánglóng** (Huánglóng Jīngqū; Yellow Dragon Valley; www.huanglong.com; admission Y200; ☎ 7am–6pm). A national park, it is indeed laced with a golden-hued calcium carbonate which, in the right light, certainly could lead one to conjure an altruistic mythical beast.

All the colours of the rainbow are here, actually, the landscape studded with waterfalls and terraced, coloured limestone ponds of blue, yellow, white and green. Consequently, it has earned the nickname Wūcǎichí (Five-coloured Pool). To see the pools in their full rainbow glory, the best time of year to visit is September and October.

The most spectacular ponds are behind **Huanglong Temple** (黄龙寺; Huánglóng Sì), deep in the valley and 7.5km from the road. (The temple was built to honour the dragon.) A round trip along a footpath takes about four hours, with the trail returning through dense

(and dark) forest. While some people rave about the valley's beauty and love the peace and quiet here, others find it disappointing and prefer an extra day at Jiùzhàigōu. If you do visit, there are no vendors, so bring some water and supplies.

A great time to visit is during the annual **Temple Fair** (庙会; Miào Huì). Held here around the middle of the sixth lunar month (usually July), it attracts large numbers of traders from the Qiang minority.

No lodging is allowed in the park anymore, and outside you've got one super-pricey option. Chuānzhǔsī has almost all places to stay.

Around 56km from Sōngpān, Huánglóng is almost always included on the itinerary of the seven-day Jiùzhàigōu tours that run out of Chéngdū, as well as on the horse-trekking tours out of Sōngpān. Unfortunately, unless you've signed up on a tour, the valley can be difficult to reach. Currently, there is one bus a day from Jiùzhàigōu (Y41, three hours, 7.10am) but this would leave you hung up, as the bus returns the next day with nary a cheap pillow for your head.

However, as Jiuhuang Airport has been expanded, more buses may at least operate between the airport and the national park (though you'd still have to shell out Y700 just to save money on a bus!).

JIUZHAIYOU NATURE RESERVE

九寨沟自然保护区

☎ 0837 / pop 62,000

Just inside Sichuan's northern border lies **Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve** (Jiùzhàigōu Zìrán Bǎohùqū; Nine Village Gully; www.jiuzhaigouvalley.com; adult/student Y220/170; ☎ 7am–6pm), a national park and UN World Biosphere Reserve. To get things out of the way right away: you will hear grumping about the heart-locking ticket cost and tutting of the 'too-many-tourists' syndrome. True enough, but say, 'Pish!' and go anyway – it's a national treasure and you'll never forget a visit to this place.

Jiùzhàigōu, meaning 'Nine Village Gully' refers to the nine Baima Tibetan villages that can be found in the valley. The area is lightly sprinkled with Bön prayer flags, *chörten* and prayer wheels that spin anticlockwise, powered by the current of the rivers. According to legend, Jiùzhàigōu was created when a jealous devil caused the goddess Wunosemo to drop her magic mirror, a present from her lover the warlord God Dage. The mirror dropped to the

ground and shattered into 118 shimmering turquoise lakes.

Those pools of eye candy are what lie within your dreams after you leave, along with the snow-cruled mountain peaks, and forests and meadows, home to protected takins, golden monkeys and pandas.

The park is pristine, but resort-style hotels leading up to the park entrance have 20,000 beds; over 1.5 million people per year come here. (And both of these were true before the airport opened.) The original residents have been forced to move in order to 'protect' the park (those here actually work within the park's confines to keep up appearances). And as you're technically not allowed to strike off into the backcountry, it can be a bit disheartening as the efficient shuttle buses whiz by with an alarming regularity.

All true. Then again, considering all this, it's still a remarkable gem, and worth a splurge of yuán and time.

Orientation & Information

Buses from Chéngdū and Sōngpān will drop you outside the park reception centre and ticket office, just north of the park entrance. If you can produce something remotely resembling a student card you'll be given a discount. The price includes entrance to all areas of the park but does not include the bus (Y90) that ferries tourists around inside the park.

There is an ATM at the park entrance that accepts major credit cards.

Sights

The first official site inside the park is the Tibetan **Zaru Temple** (Zārú Sì; Zaru Gomba in Tibetan). The bus is unlikely to take you there, but it's only a short walk down the first fork off the main road.

If you continue on the main road, you'll follow **Zechawa River** (Zéchāwā Hé) as it runs past **Heye Stockade** (Héyè Cūn) to **Huòhuā Hú** (Sparkling Lake). This is the first in a series of lakes filled by the **Shuzheng Waterfall** (Shùzhēng Pùbù). Keep your eyes open for trees growing unexpectedly out of the middle of the river, lakes and waterfalls. This is caused by fertile pockets of calcium in the waterways which create impromptu flowerpots.

A walking trail begins north of Sparkling Lake and runs along the eastern edge of the river as far as **Shuzheng Stockade** (Shùzhēng Zhài). Here it crosses back over, leading you

to a number of water-powered prayer wheels. The trail then continues up to the Shuzheng Waterfall.

South from here, just past **Promising Bright Bay Waterfall** (Nuòrìlǎng Pùbù), the road branches in two, with the eastern road leading to **Long Lake** (Cháng Hǎi) and **Five-coloured Pool** and the western road to **Swan Lake** (Tiānè Hǎi). If you're looking to stretch your legs and clear your lungs, you'd be better off heading along the western route where there are a

number of scattered sights and a quiet forest trail leading from **Mirror Lake** (Jǐnghǎi) to **Panda Lake** (Xióngmāo Hǎi). Views from this trail are particularly good, especially of **Pearl Shoal Waterfall** (Zhēnzhūtiān Pùbù). If you continue past Panda Lake, you will leave the majority of the traffic behind.

The eastern route is almost better done by bus as the narrow road sees a great deal of traffic from one end to the other. Nevertheless, the two lakes at the far end are both well worth a visit.

From the park entrance to Promising Bright Bay Waterfall is about 14km. It's a further 17.5km along the western road to the primary forest and 18km down the eastern road to Long Lake.

Tours

During summer, various companies in Chéngdū operate tours to Jiùzhàigōu and the surrounding area. Most of the trips are advertised for a certain day, but the bus will only go if full. If you are unlucky you may have to spend days waiting, so don't pay first.

A standard tour includes Huánglóng and Jiùzhàigōu, lasts seven days and starts from Y400 per person. Hotels, food and entry fees are not included in the price. Chéngdū travel agencies in the Dragon Town Youth Hostel and Jinjiāng Bīnguǎn (see p760 for these places) and CITS (p757) both offer tours.

A word of warning: several tour operators in Chéngdū have been blacklisted by travellers for lousy service and/or rudeness. Ask around among travellers to pinpoint a reliable agency.

Sleeping & Eating

Everywhere you look are upper-mid and top-end hotels but only a few budget ones. Expect a huge hike in prices during high season (July and August) and all national holidays. Rates quoted below are for the off season, at which time you can often still get great discounts. Staying inside the park is not allowed, but naturally some people manage to stay with locals anyway; if you do don't expect them to feed or entertain you.

YouU Hostel (悠游度假连锁酒店; Yōuyóu Dūjiǎ Liánsuǒ Jiùdiàn; Kangba Noble Manor; 康巴林卡风情村; ☎ 776 3111; www.youuhotel.com; dm/d Y40/100; ☑) Just prior to publication, a godsend: a new (read, untested) hostel opened near Jiuzhaigou's entrance. The YouU lies 2.5km north of the

park entrance. Facing the park entrance, head right (uphill) till you see the English sign for the Kangba Noble Manor, cross the bridge and backtrack a bit, following the signs.

Jiùtóng Bīnguǎn (☎ 773 9879; fax 773 9877; dm Y30, d Y100) Next to the bus station is the long-time standby, still going strong. Concrete floors and spartan, but just fine (staff know how to deal with you, too – they'll dash off to find an English speaker, most likely).

Lántiān Bīnguǎn (☎ 877 8888; d Y120-398, tr Y100-200) The haggling switches are always in the on position here, which is good. Above average detailing and appointments make it a good bet.

Héyè Yǐngbīnguǎn (☎ 773 5555; fax 773 5688; d Y290) Just north of the park entrance, this hotel has lovely rooms with fancy marble bathrooms.

Sheraton Jiuzhaigou Resort (☎ 773 9988; fax 773 9666; www.sheraton.com/jiuzhaigou; d Y1200) One of the biggest hotels on the block and also one of the poshest. Rooms are elegant and the service is impeccable.

There isn't a huge choice of restaurants in Jiùzhàigōu as most tourists tend to eat in their hotels. Several restaurants near the Lántiān Bīnguǎn serve up simple Chinese dishes.

Alternatively there is a good **Tibetan Restaurant** (阿布魯孜; Àbù Lúzi; ☎ 889 7603, 844 8309; dishes from Y25; ☎ noon-9pm) that serves very good Chinese and Tibetan food. It's not cheap, but it's a nice place to treat yourself. The restaurant is not very conveniently located and you'll have to get a taxi here (Y10). It's next to Chángqīng Fāndiàn (长青饭店).

Inside the park eating options are even more limited (and expensive), especially if you visit during the off season.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Flights currently operate from Chéngdū (Y700, 40 minutes). A 2006 expansion will allow direct flights from Běijīng, Chóngqīng, Xī'ān, and one or two others.

Buses for Jiùzhàigōu (Y45, 1½hr) wait at the airport for arrivals and leave when full. This means that you might have to wait around for a while, as most of your fellow passengers will be hopping off the plane and straight onto a tour bus.

Returning to the airport is much easier as a scheduled bus leaves from near the Lántiān Bīnguǎn.

Occasionally buses leave from the airport to Huánglóng (Y22, one hour) but only if there are enough people.

BUS

To Chéngdū can be done in 11 to 13 relatively painless hours. From Chéngdū's Chadianzi bus station there are four daily buses to Jiùzhàigōu (Y92 to Y103, 7.20am, 8am, 8.40am and 2pm); Xinnanmen station also has one (Y92, 8am). If you're coming from Gānsù via Zōigē, you will have to go through Sōngpān. From Sōngpān to Jiùzhàigōu (Y28, three hours, three times daily), the road goes up and over some gorgeous scenery.

From Jiùzhàigōu to Sōngpān (Y28, two to three hours) there is a daily bus that leaves the park itself at 7.20am; otherwise, flag down buses which start from Nánping but don't stop at this station (bus station staff will let you know when!).

You could also take a leap over to Guǎngyuán (Y91, 10 to 12 hours), gateway to eastern Sichuan and on the rail line to Xī'ān.

Between October and April, snow often cuts off access to Jiùzhàigōu for weeks on end. Even at the best of times, transport is not plentiful. Hitching to Jiùzhàigōu on tour buses has supposedly happened, but it's a rare occurrence indeed.

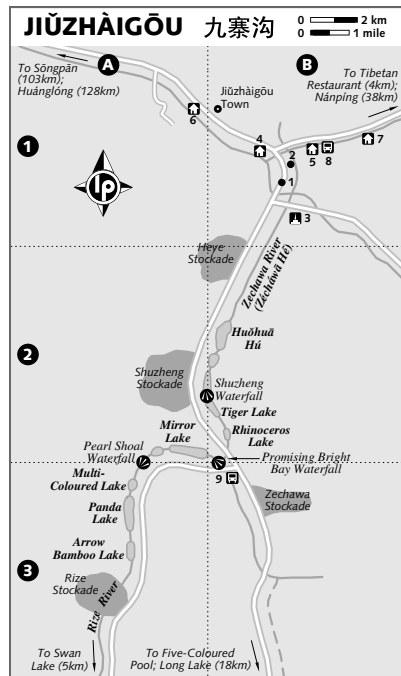
Getting Around

There is a bus service within the park that zips between the sights (Y90) stopping at Nuorilang bus station in the heart of the park. Unfortunately, these buses are often commandeered by tour groups who hop off at each sight, take their obligatory photos and hop back on 15 minutes later to race to the next. This can become rather tedious.

Buses run from about 7am until just before the park shuts at 6pm. If you're wandering around in the afternoon, it's best to make sure you're within an easy walking distance of your base as buses seem to travel more by the whim of their tour group than by any sort of schedule or route.

NORTHWEST ROUTE TO GĀNSÙ

This journey through the extreme northwest of Sichuan has emerged as a popular backdoor route into Gānsù province for many travellers. Even if you're not headed north beyond the Sichuan border, this area offers an opportunity to explore more remote Tibetan



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towns and villages. At an average altitude of 3500m to 4000m, travel through this grass-land bog is not recommended for those in a hurry – bus transport is slow and sporadic. If you plan to explore any of the towns or lamaseries on the way, you'll need a minimum of five days, more if you make a side trip to Jiūzhàigōu.

In the winter months, roads often become impassable and temperatures plummet way past the tolerance levels of most mortals. While still cold, early autumn sees little rain and many clear and sunny skies. If you are travelling in the autumn or winter, it's best to buy your onward tickets as soon as possible as, during these colder months, the nomadic Goloks stay closer to main roads and towns and do much of their travel by bus.

The first leg of this route is from Chéngdū to Sōngpān (see p794 for more). Most travellers take a side trip from Sōngpān to Jiūzhàigōu at this point. From Sōngpān you can travel 168km northwest to your next overnight stop in Zōigē, and from there it's worth heading to Lǎngmùsì, just inside the Sichuān border, for a day or two before crossing into Gānsù.

Zōigē 若尔盖

☎ 0839 / pop 59,000

A dusty concrete town set amid the grasslands, Zōigē doesn't have much pull for travellers other than as a resting point en route to Lǎngmùsì and north to Gānsù province. It is easy enough to spend a day here sipping tea in the sun and at the northeastern edge of town is a **gompa** (寺院, siyuàn) with pleasant, peaceful grounds. While the town's Chinese name is Ruò'ěrgài, it is most commonly referred to by its Tibetan name, Zōigē.

SLEEPING & EATING

Don't expect much in terms of washing facilities or hot water in Zōigē. The option here is the best for sleep. Others are a bit more grim.

Liángjù Bīnguǎn (量具宾馆; ☎ 229 8360; dm Y25) This is the best option in town. Beds are a bit more expensive but it's quiet, clean and cheerful. And the central heating works! Head right as you come out of the western bus station, take the first left onto the main street and then walk up about 15 minutes. This white-and-yellow hotel will be on your left-hand side.

Between Liángjù Bīnguǎn and the south-western end of the main street are a number of small restaurants including hotpot and noodle shops.

Across from the ever-popular pool tables in the centre of town, **Gābāfǎngzhào Cháguǎn** (嘎巴仿照茶馆) is a teahouse where you can sit outside on the balcony, eat fresh bread and sip delicious eight-treasure tea.

There are also some small restaurants situated right next to the western bus station that sell fresh bread and dumplings in the mornings.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Zōigē has two bus stations, one at the western edge of town and the other, on the same road, in the southeast. The western bus station has services to all destinations while the south-eastern only has buses to Sōngpān. If you're heading to Sōngpān and can't get a ticket at the western station, it's worth trying at the southeastern one.

Buses run to Sōngpān (Y56, six hours, 6.30/6am summer/winter). Buses to Lǎngmùsì also run (Y25, 3½ hours, 2.30/2pm summer/winter); you could also await buses passing through from Hóngyuán. (A taxi to Langmusi costs approximately Y300.)

From Langmusi you can get to Hézuò in Gānsù province which is only a few hours from Xiàhé. From Xiàhé you have the option of travelling on to Lánzhōu or taking the more unusual option of heading to Xīníng in Qīnghǎi province, via Tóng rén.