

# Plateaued

Tibet's little-known Kham is a river-bound region where everyday life takes on the air of mythology. Crisscrossing the grasslands and mountain ranges, **Rachna Sachasinh** finds nomadic traditions holding their own against the inflow of modernity. PHOTOGRAPHED BY **ARIEL ESTULIN**

A pilgrim performs *koras* at Dege Parkhang Sutra-Printing House. OPPOSITE: Columns of colorful prayer flags flutter above alpine grasslands in Kham.



If you are wondering where Kham is, you are not alone. The answer depends on who you ask. A Han Chinese will tell you Kham is part of Sichuan Province in western China. In the 1950s, Mao Zedong's armies invaded Tibet, claiming to take back land that rightfully belonged to China. As a result, Tibet—including the Tibet Autonomous Region, Amdo and Kham—are recognized as Chinese territories. Tibetans, however, think otherwise, and they'll happily set the record straight. Kham, they'll say, is the cultural heartland of the Tibetan Plateau. Straddled by Amdo to the east and the Lhasa region to the west, Kham's lore is rooted in the former Kingdom of Dege, the most powerful and influential of Kham's five independent chiefdoms. The Middle Kingdom's sovereignty notwithstanding, the Khampa insist they are Tibetans not Chinese.

I first heard of Kham from Jamin York whose company, Himalaya Journey, leads mountaineering and cultural trips in Tibet. At the time, my idea of a Tibetan journey was wrapped up in a movie montage: climbing the steps at Potala Palace, monk-watching in Lhasa's Jokhang Square, going to Everest Base Camp, and of course completing a *kora*, or circumambulation, around Mount Kailash. Jamin listened patiently. "In Lhasa, you will see a glimmer—no doubt a beautiful one—of Tibet. At EBC, you'll see other foreigners," he said gently, but "if getting to know Tibet and Tibetans is what you're after, go to Kham."

## In Kham,

a historic region in southeastern Tibet, timing is everything. To survive Kham's spirit world, you've got to be tuned in. Fortunately, an indigenous nomad and guide, possesses a supersonic spiritual antenna. Early one morning, he dashes into the monk-run cafeteria at Dzogchen Monastery—the seat of Tibetan Buddhism's Nyingma sect—and rushes me through breakfast. Beijing had finally approved the staging of a *cham* masked dance, a sacred ritual honoring the legendary 12th-century warrior-king Gesar, he tells me. To witness it, we had to get on the road. Now!

My travel companions and I abandon our green tea and steaming bowls of congee and corkscrew up and down the 4,560-meter-high Tor La pass in a minibus until we arrive somewhere near Manigango, a crossroads in the Kham boonies. Crowds mosey about a muddy field haphazardly set up with hawkers. Shifty hucksters run pick-up games of cards and dice. Gonkho pushes us into a tent, and we're immediately swallowed in the throng of Tibetans dressed in traditional swag: men wearing voluminous *chuba* (wool coats with trailing armholes), women with knee-length braids in brocade jackets and stunning turquoise and gold jewels. Plumes of juniper smoke rise from crackling bonfires. Masked dancers in gilded robes move trance-like, thrusting razor-sharp spears into the air. On an elevated stage, lamas in saffron, crested hats beat giant gongs and drums and blow long ceremonial trumpets called *dung-chen*. Two garish jesters work the crowd, who quietly finger wooden beads and twirl prayer wheels. Youngsters fidget, running in and out of the mayhem with teetering spools of cotton candy and sticks of charred yak jerky. Are we on time, or did we time travel? It's difficult to tell.



Dancers in hand-carved masks pay homage to folk hero King Gesar. OPPOSITE: A new building at Dzongsar Monastery riffs on Chinese and Tibetan styles; Yihun Lhatso lake is fringed by a glacial stream piled with 600-year-old *mani* stones.

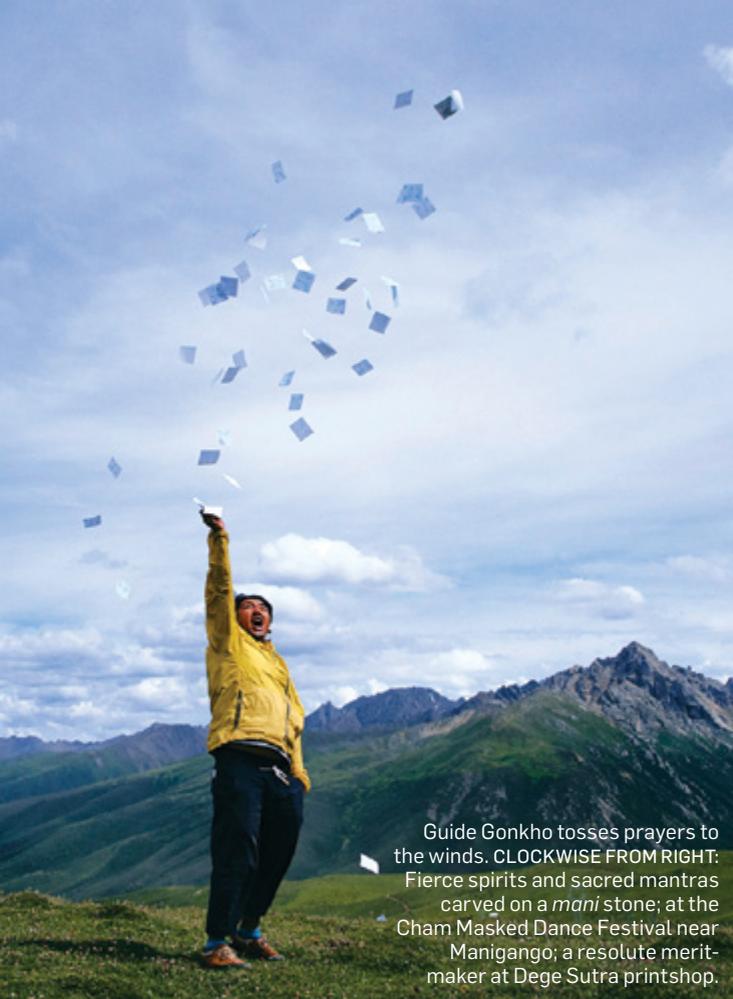


Jamin arrived in Tibet in the early aughts and fell hard for life on the Plateau. Despite his clean-cut, all-American good-naturedness, Jamin turned out to be a rogue explorer and he crisscrossed the Plateau several times—with and without permission. In Kham, he found all he loves about Tibet: rugged mountain ranges, rolling alpine grasslands speckled with black nomad tents, yaks and horses; quaint pastoral villages and centuries-old monasteries bound in Tibetan Buddhism's peculiar mix of tantric and animistic traditions.

So I signed up for Himalaya Journey's Kham Adventure, and in July, York, Gonkho and a ragtag bunch of Aussies, Canadians, an Alabaman and I toured the region for two weeks. Beginning in Kangding, we traveled north to Tagong, Drango, Ganzi, Dzogchen, Dzongsar and Dege. Technically, we never left China, but practically we wandered into a foregone era.

**KHAM'S IMPASSABLE** Himalayan peaks and deep valley trenches isolate its communities from each other and the world. But, all that is changing. Known locally as Chushi Gangdruk, or "the land of four rivers and six mountain ranges," Kham is cleaved by the Yangtze, Mekong, Yalong and Salween rivers whose vigorous waters yield extraordinary hydropower and irrigate much of Asia's rice and grain fields. Well aware of the region's strategic assets, China is amping up infrastructure development and Han Chinese are

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Guide Gonkho tosses prayers to the winds. CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Fierce spirits and sacred mantras carved on a *mani* stone; at the Cham Masked Dance Festival near Manigango; a resolute merit-maker at Dege Sutra printshop.



immigrating in, forcing Kham into the present and setting it on a collision course with the future.

After a quick meetup in Chengdu, western China's urban hub, we drive three hours west over the first peaks of the Hengduan Range and roll into Kangding—known as Dartsedo in Tibetan—the gateway to Kham. Sitting at the confluence of Zheduo and Yala rivers and surrounded by more than a dozen 6,000-meter-plus peaks, Kangding attracts a fair number of aspiring mountaineers. For our non-alpinist bunch, however, this lively trading town is a perfect spot to adjust to the high altitude.

Kham's reputation as the "ethnic corridor" of Tibet becomes evident when we stroll the town's river promenade and come across locals and newly arrived Han Chinese buying and selling tea and clothing, and conversing in Mandarin and a handful of Kham dialects. At twilight, street lanterns cast a pretty glow, and I come across Tibetan women folk-dancing in a courtyard strung with fairy lights and prayer flags, while old women walk *koras* around giant prayer wheels nearby. After the Tibetans wind down, they're replaced by a gaggle of young Chinese women doing Zumba.

A millennium ago, Kangding was a crossroads on the ancient Tea Horse Road, the patchwork of caravan routes extending from western China to Lhasa. Hauling tea on their backs, Chinese laborers scaled dizzying mountain passes to trade for salt and horses in Lhasa. Roads back then were treacherous, and villagers rarely ventured out,

eking out fragile livelihoods in remote valleys. As recent as 2000, Jamin tells us, Kham's roads were serpentine trails of rock and dust. Today, paved highways bank river valleys and kilometers-long tunnels bore through volcanic mountains, cutting travel times, road rage and nausea. "Whatever you may think of the Chinese, their road engineering is a modern miracle," Jamin says.

**ONE HUNDRED KILOMETERS** west of Kangding, Tagong—Lhagang in Tibetan—looks like the set of an old Western primed for a high-noon shootout. Nomads with flowing black braids and wide-brimmed cowboy hats ride into town on sputtering motorbikes and stock up on camping and wilderness gear. Outside a hardware shop, a few men with gnarled expressions stare contemplatively, prayer beads in hand.

Anchored by the 7th-century Lhagang Monastery and the towering 5,800-meter spires of Zhare Lhatse, Tagong is the starting point for pilgrims heading to Lhasa. We spin prayer wheels at the monastery wall, then continue northwest towards Rangakha—it means five goat heads—a pastoral region dotted with classic stone farmhouses. New electric towers march across hillsides strung with prayer flags and 600-year-old *mani* stones etched with Tibetan Buddhism ubiquitous mantra: *Om mani padme hum*. Nearby, just-painted billboards broadcast state propaganda: *Pay Attention. Don't gossip*.

In a tiny roadside hamlet, 63-year-old Shamba Yargye has no qualms questioning the current state of affairs. "Twenty or thirty years ago, we had four seasons. Now it's either too wet, too dry or too hot," he says. "The road has changed our lives. Young people want bigger houses and more things. New ways, new people." Shamba Yargye is not familiar with the terms *global warming* or *consumerism*, but clearly understands the ramifications of modernity.

"New ways" are evident further up the road at King of Yak, a start-up micro-brewery on the outskirts of Rangakha. On tap: a hoppy ale with a sweet grass-and-honey finish. I am more excited about it than I think I should be. The atmospheric slice of hipster sensibility is an unexpected respite from days of imbibing green tea and Nescafé. On Midcentury furniture surrounded by vintage odds and bits, we tuck into bowls of *thukpa*—Tibetan vegetable soup with thick wheat noodles—followed by a pint or two. A middle-age monk marches in, book in hand, and orders a cappuccino. Kham, I begin to realize, is a place of incongruities where disparate times, people and ideas run into each other seamlessly.

**JAMIN AND GONKHO** are deft storytellers, entertaining us with tales of misadventures and close calls as we travel north into the former Kingdom of Dege, which in its heyday was Kham's most powerful and culturally influential. Some stories are more serious. Monasteries number close to 800 and monks in the tens of thousands—a staggering percentage of the roughly 2.5 million Tibetans who live here, Gonkho tells us. During the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party razed

practically every monastery and nunnery on the Plateau, forcing many monastics to return to their home villages or escape to India. When Deng Xiaoping came to power, he allowed the religious centers to reopen, and monks and exiles gradually returned. These days, Beijing maintains tight controls on lamaseries, going as far as installing surveillance cameras and planting bugs. For good reason: Kham is known as a hotbed of dissent, much of it fomenting inside sacred walls.

Our journey coincides with the birthday of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, and across Tibet, where the government considers His Holiness a *persona non grata*, the state police are on high alert. Checkpoints pop up on the road to Drongo and Ganzi. The monastic communities here boast centuries-old allegiance to the Dalai Lama. Up until now, the monks we encounter are lighthearted and congenial. Leading up to the day of His Holiness's birthday, however, senior abbots are alternatively recalcitrant and forthcoming. One particularly defiant monk refuses to be browbeaten by authorities. In the prayer hall, he has put up photographs of the Dalai Lama and the 11th Panchen Lama, who hasn't been seen since 1995 when he was put in so-called "protective custody" by the Chinese at age six, and a recording of the Dalai Lama giving a talk plays softly as we speak—all of which is, of course, verboten. "I will suffer the consequences," the monk says fiercely through tears, "but I will not back down."



In northern Ganzi prefecture, the ratio of people to yaks flips, and grasslands and pockets of nomad tents fill the landscape. Herds of doe-eyed yaks cloaked in rangy black wool graze brilliant, wildflower-studded, jade-hued meadows that unfurl across the valley floor and climb up steep, jagged, glacier-capped peaks. Occasionally, thunderheads roll in and out, tamping the tranquility. The Khampa, I realize, have inherited all the qualities of the Himalayas: timeless, tempestuous and undeniably stunning.

In Tibet, “nomadic life goes back nearly 4,000 years,” Gonkho says. He would know; before teaming up with Jamin, Gonkho was chasing his family’s herd up and down Amdo’s vast grasslands. Nowadays, the government requires all children past the age of six to attend school, forcing many families to split time between the village and the grasslands. Luckily for us, it’s the start of school holidays, and we get to see nomads on the move to set up camp for the summer.

Nomads are genial by nature, and a pair of brothers pitched up near holy Yilhun Lha Tso Lake, just north of Manigango, invites us inside their tent for a chat and a cup of salty yak-butter tea—a sour/tart, greasy, soup-like brew that my companions drink heartily and I discreetly push aside. Outside, a cool wind rustles prayer flags and pushes dark clouds across the clear blue sky; inside, an iron stove fueled with yak dung keeps us warm and cozy. The family matriarch tends to cauldrons of yak milk simmering on the stove, and a solar-powered yogurt-maker separates yak curds and whey.

“It’s my responsibility to keep this way of life alive,” the older brother explains. Noticing me eyeing a steel safe among piles of bedding and dried yak dung, he says, “That is for the caterpillar fungus.” Found only on the Plateau, this peculiar worm-like fungus that shoots straight up from the ground is prized in traditional Chinese medicine to stimulate virility and as a cure-all for everything from tuberculosis to hepatitis. Caterpillar fungus, it turns out, paid for the family’s motorbikes parked outside the tent.

**THWACK, SWISH, RUSTLE...** the soundtrack of the Dege Parkhang Sutra-Printing House is hypnotic and meditative. Built in 1729, the UNESCO-recognized printing house is the largest, and one of only three remaining centers where traditional hand-carved

wooden blocks are used to print long, rectangular, monastic scripture books.

Inside small chambers lining an interior courtyard, groups of old men hand-cut reams of parchment paper made from local wildflowers that repel insects. Upstairs in the printing hall, men work in pairs to produce the day’s quota, applying ink to paper with yak-hair brushes and flat, wooden paddles. Another man ferries the wooden blocks back and forth to the stacks, occasionally stopping to pour tea for his co-workers. The entire process is swift, efficient and as old as time.

Meandering corridors stocked with more than 250,000 wooden blocks, I come across Phuntsok Tsering, a 64-year-old bespectacled master carver chiseling away at a freshly oiled birch block. He was one of the first to come to work here when it reopened after the three-decade-long shutdown during the Cultural Revolution. “I am proud to be here and to have this chance to accumulate merit,” he tells me.

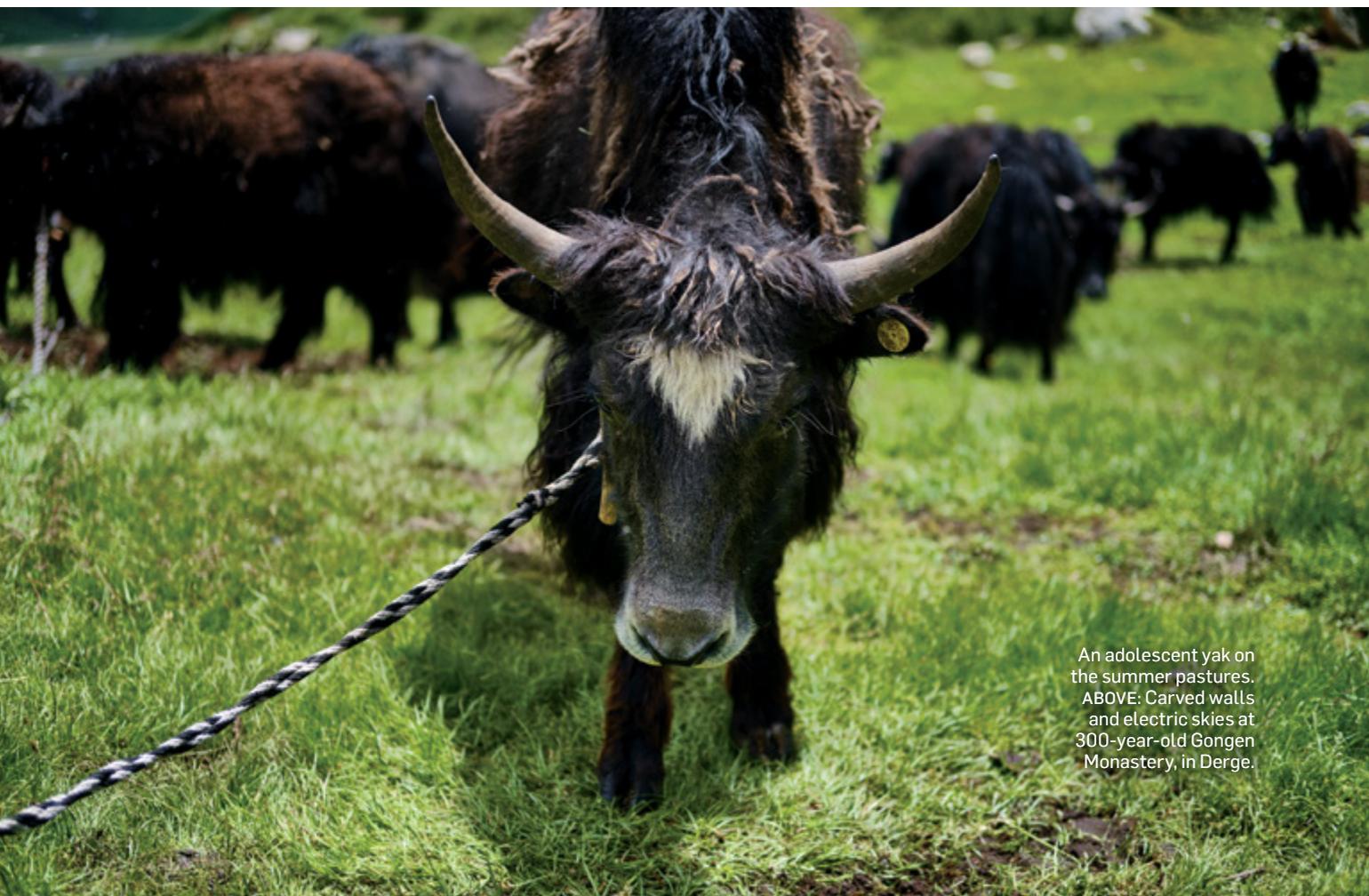
Making merit, folk-dancing, singing and picnicking: these age-old pastimes are still at the heart of Kham culture, explains Dawa Drolma, a filmmaker who gave up her job at the Smithsonian Institute to return to Dzongsar Valley, her hometown. Comprising 21 villages with a collective population of 6,300, Dzongsar Valley is home to more than 2,000 artisans practicing 15 genres of crafts. “I came back to help my community, but I need my community as much as it needs me,” she laughs. A new road and an airport are planned in the area. “The economy will be good and our way of life will change. Is it a good thing or a bad thing? I can’t really say.”

Effervescent and enterprising, Dawa Drolma works alongside her father and brother running Khyenle, an artisan studio that’s been in the family for generations, and a bed-and-breakfast where guests are encouraged to experience local life. Hands-on workshops alongside young apprentices include bronze sand-casting, lacquer and clay sculpture, carpentry and wood-painting. Farmwives will teach you Tibetan culinary know-how: yak yogurt, *tsampa* (barley-flour and yak-butter dough), *thukpa* (wheat-noodle soup), *momos* (dumplings stuffed with yak meat and fermented vegetables). Wellness enthusiasts, meanwhile, can head into town and explore Dzongsar Tibetan Hospital, where Dawa Drolma’s maternal family runs an apothecary stocked with traditional Tibetan herbal medicine.

Making merit, folk-dancing, singing  
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Ngor Tso Lake, framed by Ngodong Ri's jagged peaks, is a favorite nomad summer camp.



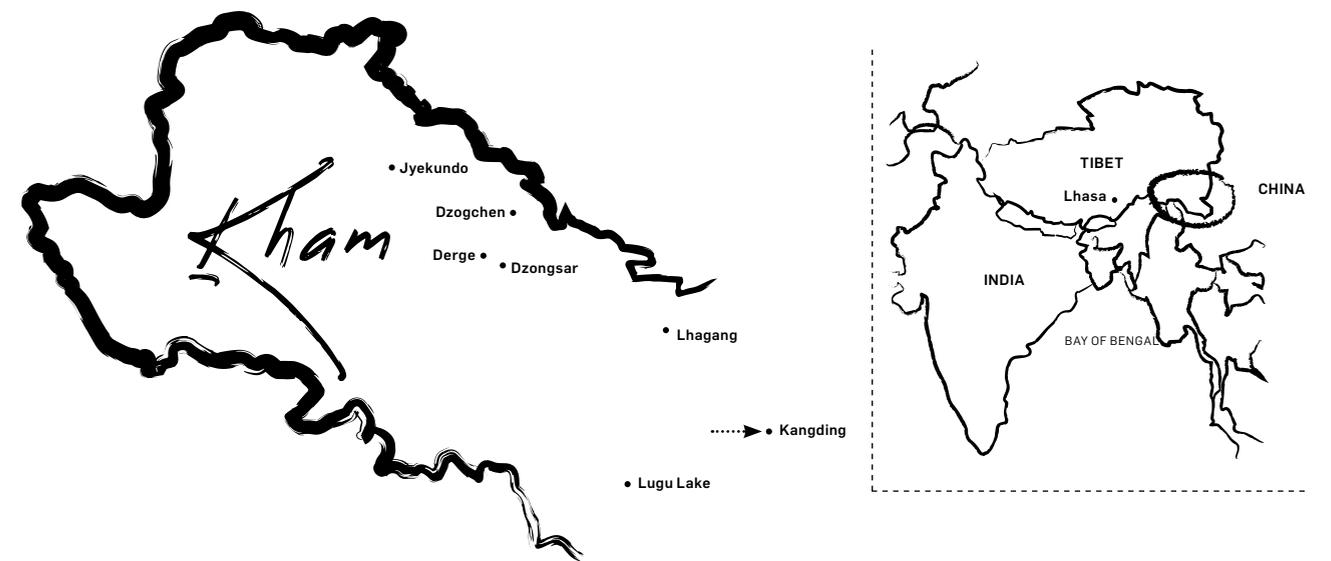
An adolescent yak on the summer pastures. ABOVE: Carved walls and electric skies at 300-year-old Gongen Monastery, in Derge.

You can take a formal class or simply jump into the daily routine, like I do. One evening, I follow Tse Wang Tso, Khyenle's chef, to the greenhouse and pick armfuls of veggies. In rainy season, Tse Wang Tso tells me, we would have gone to the mountains to pick wild mushrooms; for now, we make do with dried ones from last season. Back in the kitchen, I help her knead a fluffy batch of *dro*, a wheat dough. We chop the vegetables and the raw *dro* in big chunks and toss them into a simmering pot of *thukpa*, the main course for our evening meal. Nearby, Dawa Drolma tutors a neighbor's son. Artisans stroll in to fetch cups of tea. A young novice monk regales us with anecdotes of his strict teacher and the finer points of Sakya Sect—a popular branch of Tibetan Buddhism—philosophy. For the first time on this journey, I feel fully immersed in the rhythm of life on the Plateau, an actor in the diorama.

In Dzongsar, Gonkho's spiritual antennae springs into action again. He leads us to the 7th-century Dzongsar Monastery just in time to hear the monks chant together. Juniper and incense fill the *gompa*, or prayer hall, built originally as a temple of Bon, an animistic faith that predates Buddhism in these parts. Dzongsar has suffered many upheavals. It's been torn down and rebuilt. Yet, the

monks carry on with unwavering compassion and resilience, an inspiration to Kham and her people. From the terrace, I look out over Dzongsar Valley. Sunlight grazes the tips of barley fields and sets rust-tiled rooftops ablaze. In the distance, I watch a group of young monks play a heated game of basketball, a blur of crimson robes trailing from one end of the court to the other.

Early one morning, Jamin and Gonkho take us for a hike up the valley, where Kham runs into the Tibet Autonomous Zone. On the banks of a fast-moving tributary of the Yangtze River, we come across a road crew clearing tracks, a prelude of what's to come. We climb higher, following yak trails into the forested hillsides. Around midday, we walk into a pristine alpine meadow. Waiting for us is Dawa Drolma's brother, who raced here on his motorbike to bring us piping-hot *balep korkun*, a traditional flatbread stuffed with yak meat and curried potatoes. Nearby, a group of gregarious Kham men dressed in traditional finery enjoy their own meal while taking reels of photos with meter-long selfie sticks and cameras with giant lenses. In one generation, China has managed to push Kham from the middle ages to the middle class, but the Khampa will never give up picnics and grasslands. ☺



## The lesser-seen side of Tibet

As Jamin told me, while other parts of the region may offer the movie-reel vision of Tibet, it's Kham that takes a visitor straight to its heart.

### GETTING THERE

Fly into Chengdu International Airport, a major hub with direct flights to and from all major Southeast Asian cities. Travel to Kham requires no official permits besides the standard tourist visa to China. Check your embassy's website for details. Although licensed guides are not required, it is highly recommended that travelers hire a driver and guide.

### TOUR

**Himalaya Journey** The go-to fixers for the likes of BBC and Discovery Channel, this socially responsible outfit offers guided expeditions fit for both hardcore alpinists and cultural enthusiasts. [himalayajourney.com](http://himalayajourney.com); *Kham Adventure* US\$2,999 per person, includes lodging at three- to five-star hotels, all meals and overland transportation, excludes airfare.

### STAY, EAT+DRINK

**Khyenle Guesthouse & Art Center** In picturesque and artsy Dzongsar Valley, the traditional Tibetan-style stone farmhouse pairs rustic pastoral life with good food and cozy creature comforts. A new wing with spacious suites is set to open in early 2020. [khyenle.com](http://khyenle.com); doubles from RMB650.

**Khampa Nomad Eco Lodge & Arts Center** The off-grid, four-room teak eco lodge sits in the Drokpa grasslands on the outskirts of Tagong. Artistic, minimalist rooms are endowed with authentic Kham generosity

and spirit, and stunning views. Offers excellent homecooked meals (Tibetan and global) and the valley's only steam sauna, a perfect way to end a long day of trekking. [definitelynomadic.com](http://definitelynomadic.com); doubles from RMB650.

**King of Yaks** Tibetan Khampa Norbu and Czech Maxim Nesazal run the world's highest craft brewery, 3,550 meters up in a former stone paddock, and use local barley and mountain water. It's not on Google Maps, so look for a colorful sign pinned to a tree trunk. *Xinduqiao Township, north of Tagong/Lhagang on Highway G318.* — R.S.