



Sichuān

POPULATION: 84 MILLION

Includes »

Chéngdū	705
Éméi Shān	719
Lèshān	722
Lángzhōng	726
Kāngdìng (Dardo)	731
Sichuān–Tibet Highway (Northern Route)	736
Sichuān–Tibet Highway (Southern Route)	742
Sōngpān	745
Jiǔzhàigōu National Park	748

Best Places to Eat

- » Tibetan Restaurant (p738)
- » Yùlín Chuànchuàn Xiāng (p711)
- » Khampa Cafe & Arts Centre (p737)
- » Ābù Lǚzī (p751)
- » Tibetan Culture Dew (p733)

Best Places to Stay

- » Zhuo Ma's (p750)
- » Dala Gong Guesthouse (p739)
- » Sim's Cozy Garden Hostel (p709)
- » Lǐ Family Courtyard (p726)
- » Jya Drolma and Gayla's Guesthouse (p736)

Why Go?

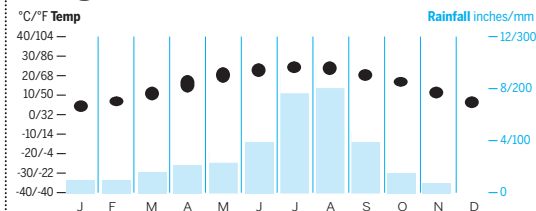
Like the seemingly magical theatre performances of *biànliǎn*, or 'face-changing', that originate here, Sichuān (四川) is a land of many guises. Capital Chéngdū is quick to show off its slick, shiny, modern-China face, but you don't have to venture far to see a more traditional Sichuān pose. The countryside around Chéngdū is scattered with alleyway-riddled ancient villages and lost-in-time tea-houses, while mist-shrouded mountains creak with old wooden monasteries. Central Sichuān is also home to the most famous face in all of China, that of the giant panda.

Head north, though, and you find a Chinese province posing as a region of alpine valleys and forested hills dotted with blue-green lakes and wonderful hiking trails.

And go west to witness Sichuān's fabulous impression of Tibet. This is Kham, one of old Tibet's three traditional provinces; a vast landscape of high-plateau grasslands and snowcapped mountains where Tibetan culture still thrives.

When to Go

Chéngdū



March–May
Prime time for Chéngdū: not too humid; no summer rains yet; peach blossoms.

July & August
Great time to visit the Tibetan areas; weather's warm and horse festivals abound.

June–October
Head north, to brimming lakes, warm camping and stunning autumn forests.

Sìchuān Highlights

- 1 Get eye to eye with China's cuddliest national icon at Chéngdū's **Giant Panda Breeding Research Base** (p705)
- 2 Sleep in a monastery on the beautiful forested slopes of **Éméi Shān** (p719)
- 3 Join the new ecotourism program and be one of the first to go camping inside the stunning **Jiūzhàigōu National Park** (p748)
- 4 Horse trek in the woods and mountains around the laid-back village of **Sōngpān** (p745)
- 5 Commune with Tibetan nomads on the gorgeous high-plateau grasslands around **Tāgōng** (p736)
- 6 Feel Lilliputian at **Lèshān** (p722) as you stand beside the toenails of the world's largest Buddha statue
- 7 Visit ancient salt mines, dinosaur fossils and some of the best teahouses in China at the unusual riverside city of **Zìgòng** (p727)
- 8 Stay in a Ming-dynasty courtyard and wander the alleyways in the ancient town of **Lángzhōng** (p726)





History

Sichuan's early history was turbulent. The region was the site of various breakaway kingdoms, ever skirmishing with central authority, but it was finally wrestled into control and established as the capital of the Qin empire in the 3rd century BC. 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).

During the Warring States period (475–221 BC), local governor and famed engineer Li Bing managed to harness the flood-prone Min River (岷江; Mǐn Jiāng) on the Chuānxī plain with his revolutionary weir system; the Dūjiāngyàn Irrigation Project (p717) still supplies Chéngdū with water, and still protects locals from floods, 2200 years after it was constructed! It's one reason why this part of China is known for being so fertile.

Another more recent factor was the efforts of Zhao Ziyang, governor of Sichuan in 1975 and the province's first Communist Party secretary. After the tragic mistakes made during the Great Leap Forward (p922), when an estimated one-tenth of Sichuan's population starved to death, Ziyang became the driving force behind agricultural and economic reforms that put Sichuan back on the map. His '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 it became the national model. This fertile land continues to produce more than 10% of the nation's grain, soybeans, pork and other crops.

Tragedy struck the region on 12 May 2008, when a devastating earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale hit the province's central region. According to some sources, it killed more than 88,000 people, many of them schoolchildren, and left millions more injured or homeless. For more on the rebuilding effort, see the boxed text, p711.

Language

Sichuanese is a Mandarin dialect, but the pronunciation is different enough that it's often difficult for those who speak standard Chinese to understand. One word visitors should know: instead of the oft-heard *méiyǒu* ('no'; literally 'don't have'), the Sichuanese say *méide*.

In addition to Mandarin, Sichuan's other major languages belong to the Tibeto-

PRICE INDICATORS

The following price indicators are used in this chapter:

Sleeping

\$	less than Y200
\$\$	Y200 to Y600
\$\$\$	more than Y600

Eating

\$	less than Y30
\$\$	Y30 to Y50
\$\$\$	more than Y50

Burman family and are spoken by Tibetans and the Yi.

i Getting There & Around

AIR Chéngdū's airport is the largest in southwest China. Other smaller airports in Sichuan that are useful for tourists include Jiūzhàigǒu, in the north, and Kāngdìng, in the west.

BUS Speedy expressways in eastern and southern Sichuan make short trips from Chéngdū of many destinations.

Heading north of Chéngdū or anywhere west of Kāngdìng is a different story altogether. Road and weather conditions deteriorate rapidly and landslides that block the way are common. The scenery, though, can be spectacular.

You can travel to Gānsù province by bus, via Zōigé; to Qīnghǎi via Sěrsu or Àbà; and to Yúnnán via Xiāngchéng or Pánzhīhuà (Jīnjīāng).

Bus routes west into Tibet have historically been off limits to foreigners. You can often buy tickets, but once over the border, you'll probably get thrown off the bus, fined and sent back the way you came.

TRAIN Chéngdū is the main railway hub in China's southwest, with trains to pretty much anywhere, including Lhasa, provided you've arranged a travel permit in advance.

CENTRAL SICHUAN

The province's laid-back capital city, Chéngdū, is where most travellers start their Sichuan explorations, and it makes a great base for trips out to the region's top sights. This area is dotted with centuries-old towns and villages, Lángzhōng being the largest and best preserved, while lush, forested mountains make for great hiking, especially at Èméi Shān. Nearby Lèshān

houses the world's largest Buddha statue, and then, of course, there are the pandas; practically impossible to see in the wild, they are made accessible here by some excellent wildlife reserves.

Chéngdū

成都

📍028 / POP 4.1 MILLION / ELEV 500M

On the face of it, Chéngdū has little appeal: it's flat, with no distinguishing natural features; the weather's grey and drizzly for much of the year; and the traffic's appalling. Yet somehow everyone comes away satisfied. Perhaps it's the wonderful teahouses found in the city's many parks and temples. Maybe it's the fabulous food, or the decent nightlife scene. It could simply be the pandas, of course. Who knows? Chances are, though, you'll be able to find out for yourself. Chéngdū is the transport hub for the whole of this region, so most travellers pass through this modern, fast-growing, yet surprisingly relaxed city at least once during their forays into China's southwest.

History

Chéngdū 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.

Two walls were constructed in the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) to create two adjacent city sections, both lying north of Brocade River (锦江; Jīn Jiāng). Sadly, nothing remains of either after they were levelled in 1644 by rebel Zhang Xianzhong, who occupied the city, razed it to the ground, murdered most of its residents and then founded his own kingdom.

There's also nothing left of the once vast imperial palace, built in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) on the site where Tianfu Sq and the Mao statue now stand. It covered 380,000 sq metres, more than half the size of Běijīng's Forbidden City, and one-fifth of Chéngdū's total area at the time, but was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, the last of its magnificent gates finally disappearing in 1979.

These days the city is split by the Brocade River, a reminder of the city's silk brocade industry, which thrived during the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220); from Chéngdū,

the Southern Silk Road guided caravans to the known world.

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.

👁 Sights

Giant Panda Breeding Research Base

WILDLIFE RESERVE

(大熊猫繁殖研究中心; Dàxióngmāo Fánzhí Yánjiū Zhōngxīn; www.panda.org.cn; admission Y58; ☀8am–6pm) One of Chéngdū's most popular tourist attractions, this reserve, 18km north of the city centre, is the easiest way to catch a glimpse of Sichuan's most famous residents outside of a zoo. The enclosures here are large and kept in good condition.

Home to nearly 50 giant and red pandas, the base focuses on getting these sexually reluctant creatures to breed; March to May is the 'falling in love period', wink wink. If you visit in autumn or winter, you may see tiny newborns in the nursery.

There's a corny but informative 15-minute film about panda mating habits and an old-fashioned museum has detailed exhibits on panda evolution, habits, habitats and conservation efforts, all with English captions.

Try to visit the base in the morning, when the pandas are most active. Feeding takes place around 9.30am, although you'll see them eating in the late afternoon too. During the middle of the day they spend most of their time sleeping, particularly during the height of midsummer, when they sometimes disappear into their living quarters (air-conditioned, apparently).

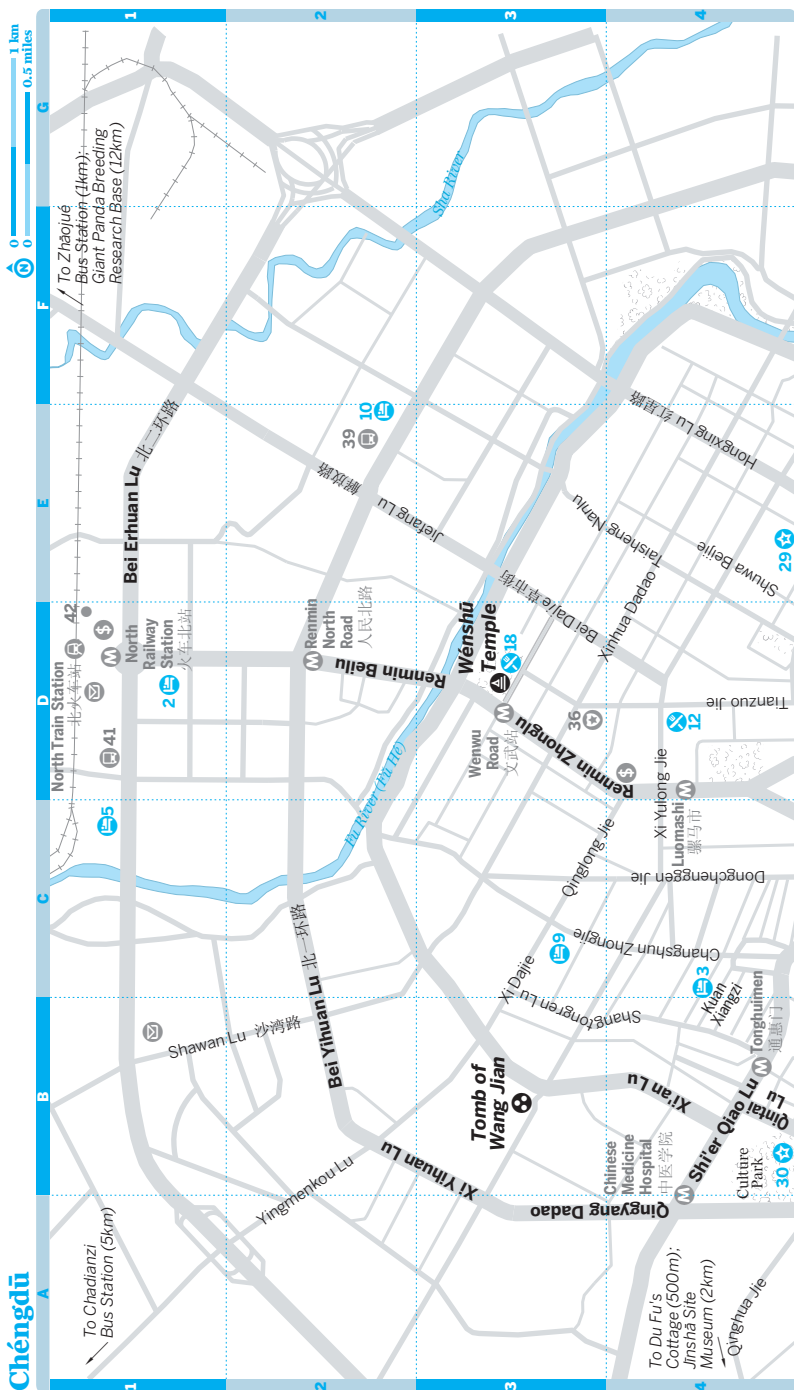
Tourist bus 902 (Y2, one hour, frequent services 8am to 4pm) runs here from outside Traffic Inn, and goes past Sim's Cozy Garden Hostel en route. Last bus back is 6pm. All decent youth hostels run trips here, too, which cost more but get you to the base earlier.

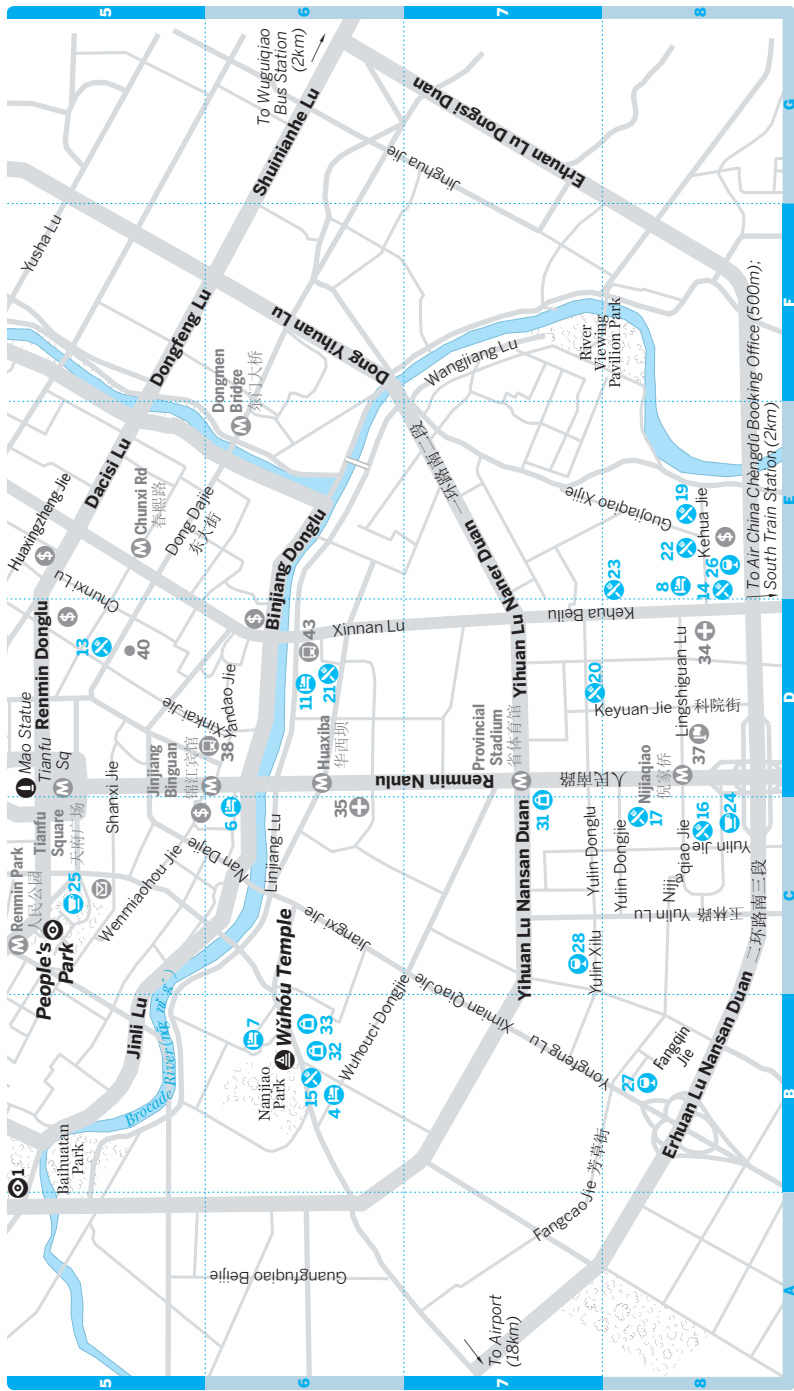
Wénshū Temple

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(文殊院; Wénshū Yuàn; Renmin Zhonglu; admission Y5; ☀6am–9pm) This Tang-dynasty monastery is dedicated to Wenshu (Manjushri), the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, and is Chéngdū's largest and best-preserved Buddhist temple. The air is redolent with incense, there's a low murmur of chanting, and despite frequent crowds of worshippers, there's still a sense of serenity and solitude. The temple's excellent **vegetarian restaurant** (文殊院素餐厅; Wénshūyuàn

Chéngdū





Chéngdū

📍 Top Sights

People's Park	C5
Tomb of Wang Jian.....	B3
Wénshū Temple.....	D3
Wúhóu Temple.....	B6

📍 Sights

1 Green Ram Temple	B5
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🛏 Sleeping

2 Chéngdū Grand Hotel	D1
3 Dragon Town Guesthouse.....	C4
4 Holly's Hostel.....	B6
5 Home Inn.....	C1
6 Jīnjiāng Hotel.....	C6
7 Jīnlǐ Hotel.....	B6
8 Kèhuāyuǎn Hotel.....	E8
9 Loft.....	C3
10 Sim's Cozy Garden Hostel.....	E2
Traffic Hotel..... (see 11)	
11 Traffic Inn.....	D6

🍴 Eating

12 Chén Mápó Dòufu.....	D4
13 Chuànchuànxiāng Restaurants.....	D5
Highly Cafe..... (see 11)	
14 Huí Zhī Fèng.....	E8
15 Kampa Tibetan Restaurant	B6
16 Sultan	C8
17 Tiāntiān Fāndiàn.....	C8
18 Vegetarian Restaurant.....	D3
19 Xīnjiāng Hóng Mūdān Mùsīlín Kuàicān.....	E8
20 Yángyáng Cānguǎn	D7
21 Yùlín Chuànchuàn Xiāng.....	D6

22 Yùlín Chuànchuàn Xiāng.....	E8
23 Zìgòng Càiguǎn	E8

☕ Drinking

24 Bookworm	C8
25 Hè Ming Teahouse	C5
Le Cafe Panam(e)..... (see 14)	
26 Leg and Whistle.....	E8
27 New Little Bar.....	B8
28 Old Little Bar.....	C7
Yuèlái Teahouse..... (see 29)	

🎭 Entertainment

29 Jīnjiāng Theatre.....	E4
30 Shǔfēng Yàiyùn Teahouse.....	B4

🛍 Shopping

31 52 Camp.....	C7
32 Outdoor Shops	B6
33 Tibetan Shops	B6

Information

34 Global Doctor Chéngdū Clinic.....	D8
35 No 4 Huáxī Hospital of Sichuan University.....	C6
36 PSB (Foreign Affairs Section).....	D3
37 US Consulate.....	D8

Transport

38 Airport Shuttle Bus	D6
39 Beimen Bus Station	E2
40 China Southern Airlines.....	D5
41 North Bus Station	D1
42 Train Ticket Office.....	D1
43 Xīnnánmén Bus Station.....	D6

Sùyàn Tīng; dishes Y8-48; ☎10.30-8.30pm) has an English menu, some garden seating and an atmospheric **teahouse** next door.

Outside the temple is one of Chéngdū's three rebuilt 'old' neighbourhoods, where the narrow streets are lined with teahouses, snack stalls and shops. Touristy, yes, but still fun for a quick wander.

Jīnshā Site Museum

MUSEUM

(金沙遗址博物馆; Jīnshā Yízhǐ Bówùguǎn; www.jinshasitemuseum.com; cnr Jinsha Yizhi Lu & Qingyang Dadao; admission Y80; ☎8am-6pm) In 2001 archaeologists made a historic discovery in Chéngdū's western suburbs - they unearthed a major site containing ruins of the 3000-year-old Shu kingdom. The site is now home to the excellent Jīnshā Site Museum.

This expansive complex includes one building showing the excavation site itself and another beautifully displaying many of the objects that were excavated from the area. Like the earlier discoveries at Sānxīngdū, the 6000-plus relics found here, which date from 1200 to 600 BC, include both functional and decorative items, from pottery and tools to jade artefacts, stone carvings and ornate gold masks. There's also a large number of elephant tusks that were unearthed here.

Take bus 82 from near Xīnnánmén bus station, passing Wúhóu Temple and Green Ram Temple en route. Or take bus 5 from Renmin Zhonglu. The tourist bus 901, from outside Traffic Inn, also runs here. Subway Line 2, once finished, will also go here.

Tomb of Wang Jian

MAUSOLEUM

(王建墓; Wángjiàn Mù; Yongling Lu; admission ¥20; ☉8am-6pm) The only mausoleum excavated in China so far that features an above-ground tomb chamber, this slightly creepy vault honours Wang Jian (847-918), a general who came to power after the AD 907 collapse of the Tang dynasty and became emperor of the Shu kingdom. The tomb itself is decorated with carvings of 24 musicians all playing different instruments, considered to be the best surviving record of a Tang-dynasty musical troupe, while the statue of Wang Jian at the back of the tomb is thought to be the only existing lifelike sculpture of an ancient Chinese king.

FREE

People's Park

PARK

(人民公园; Rénmín Gōngyuán; ☉6.30am-10pm) Particularly on weekends, People's Park is filled with locals dancing, singing, strolling and practising taichi. There are a number of teahouses here too; Hè Míng Teahouse is particularly popular.

Plopped in the middle of the park's bonsai and perennials (open 9am to 5pm) is the **Monument to the Martyrs of the Railway Protection Movement** (1911). This obelisk memorialises an uprising of the people against corrupt officers who pocketed cash intended for railway construction.

Green Ram Temple

TAOIST TEMPLE

(青羊宫; Qīngyáng Gōng; admission ¥10; ☉8am-6pm) Located in **Culture Park** (Wénhuà Gōngyuán; ☉7am-10pm), this is Chéngdū's oldest and most extensive Taoist temple. According to legend, stroking the bronze goat here can vanquish life's troubles. (The other, less goatlike goat combines features of all the Chinese zodiac animals.) Another highlight is an eight-sided pagoda, built without bolts or pegs.

Du Fu's Cottage

FORMER RESIDENCE

(杜甫草堂; Dǔfú Cǎotáng; 38 Qinghua Lu; admission ¥60; ☉8am-6.30pm) The revered Tang-dynasty poet, Du Fu (712-70) was born in Hé-nán, but lived in Chéngdū, in this thatched cottage, for four of his most prolific years. He wrote more than 200 poems whilst here, including one entitled 'My thatched hut was torn apart by the autumn wind'. The 10-hectare site is now part park, part museum.

Wǔhóu Temple

TEMPLE

(武侯祠; Wǔhóu Cí; admission ¥60; ☉8am-6pm) Located in **Nánjiāo Park** (Nánjiāo Gōngyuán; ☉6am-10pm) and surrounded by gardens with mossy cypresses draped over walk-

ways, this temple honours several figures from the Three Kingdoms period, including Emperor Liu Bei and legendary military strategist Zhuge Liang, who was immortalised in one of the classics of Chinese literature, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sān Guó Yǎnyì*). Just east of the temple is **Jīnlǐ Gǔjiē** (锦里古街) a gentrified 'new-old' district crammed with souvenir junk stalls and local snacks.

River Viewing Pavilion Park

PARK

(望江楼公园; Wàngjiānglóu Gōngyuán; admission ¥20; ☉8am-6pm) Dedicated to celebrated Tang-dynasty female poet Xue Tao, this park is best known for its bamboo; it features over 150 varieties, from bonsai-sized potted plants to towering giants. If you're not interested in the Xue Tao exhibits, enter the park through the western gate (open from 6.30am to 9pm), where no admission is charged and you can still stroll among the bamboo. Buses 35 and 335 come here from the city centre.

Sleeping**Sim's Cozy Garden Hostel**

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

(老沈青年旅舍; Lǎoshěn Qīngnián Lǚshè; ☎8196 7573; www.gogosc.com; 211 Yihuan Lu Bei Siduan; 一环路北四段211号; dm ¥30-40, s without/with bathroom ¥80/120, d ¥160-240; ☉☎@☎) This fabulous place sprawls its way around two lush garden courtyards is certainly the best hostel in Chéngdū, and quite possibly the best of its kind in China. Owners Sim and Maki (he's Singaporean, she's Japanese) are experienced travellers (they're great resources for travel in Sichuan and Tibet) and welcoming hosts who take pride in getting all the details right, from lockable storage boxes in the dorms to DVD players and reading lamps in the doubles. Travellers can hang out in the gardens, the bar or the open-air terrace, and the restaurant serves decent food. The only downside is its relatively isolated location, but there's good bus information, as well as info on pretty much everything else, on the noticeboards. Take bus 28 from Xīnnánmén bus station.

Traffic Inn

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

(交通青年旅舍; Jiāotōng Qīngnián Lǚshè; ☎8545 0470; www.redcliffinn.cn; 6 Linjiang Zhonglu; 临江中路6号; dm ¥20-30, s/d/tr without bathroom ¥60/80/120, with bathroom ¥140/160/210; ☉☎@☎) If Sim's wasn't so damn good, this place would be the best hostel in town. Rooms without private bathrooms are the best, with stripped-wood furniture, tiled

flooring and loads of space. The mosaic-tiled shared shower rooms are spotless, and the excellent **Highfly Cafe** (高飞咖啡; Gāofēi Kāfēi; ☺7am-1am) with patio seating and free pool table is just round the back. Dorms and rooms with private bathrooms are housed in the adjoining **Traffic Hotel** (交通酒店; Jiāotōng Jiǎodiàn; ☎8545 1017), a good-quality Chinese budget hotel. Note: rooms with bathrooms are cheaper if you deal directly with the hotel rather than go through the youth hostel. There's good wi-fi connection in all rooms, staff members are very helpful and the location, close to Xīnnánmén bus station, couldn't be more convenient.

Loft

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

(四号工厂青年旅馆; Sìhào Gōngchǎng Qīngnián Lǚguǎn; ☎8626 5770; www.lofthotel.com; 4 Shangtongren Lu, Xiaotong Xiang; 小通巷上同仁路4号; dm Y40, tw without bathroom Y100, tw & d with bathroom Y180; ☹☺☹) Chic boutique hotel meets youth hostel at this trendy converted printing factory. Cool details include exposed-brick walls and black-tiled bathrooms; laid-back staff members are pretty cool, too. A cafe serves Western food, and the relaxing common areas include a pool table, free internet access and an urban-style courtyard.

Jinli Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(锦里客栈; Jǐnlǐ Kèzhàn; ☎6631 1335; 231 Wuhouci Dajie; 武侯祠大街231号; s/d Y480/560, discounts of around 40%; ☹) If you don't mind the touristy surroundings on the Jinli shopping street near Wúhóu Temple, this upmarket inn set in two courtyard-style buildings is a fun place to stay. Rooms mix traditional Chinese wooden furnishings with modern trappings such as white duvets and TVs.

Jinjiang Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(锦江宾馆; Jīnjiāng Bīnguǎn; ☎8550 6050; www.jjhotel.com; 80 Renmin Nanlu; 人民南路二段80号; r from Y1587, discounts of around 50%; ☹☺☹) Jinjiang was Sichuan's first-ever five-star hotel and, up until the late '70s, its nine-storey block was the tallest building in Chengdū. There are more luxurious hotels in the city these days, but this one retains a certain charm that the bigger international chains lack. Guests are greeted by a string quartet in the lobby and staff members are both courteous and well turned out; especially the red-uniformed bell hops. Rooms are comfortable without being the height of luxury, but if they were good enough for Spanish tenor Plácido Domingo when he stayed here in 2009, they're probably good enough for you.

Holly's Hostel

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

(九龙鼎青年客栈; Jiǔlóngdǐng Qīngnián Kèzhàn; ☎8554 8131; hollyhostelcn@yahoo.com; 246 Wuhouci Dajie; 武侯祠大街246号; dm Y25-35, d without bathroom Y80, d/tw/tr with bathroom Y120/140/180; ☹☺) Rooms at this lovely little hostel tucked down a lane near the Tibetan quarter are a bit bland, but staff are friendly and there's a great roof-terrace cafe serving well-priced Chinese and Western food as well as fresh coffee (from Y10). There's also a free pool table, wi-fi and bikes for rent (per day Y20).

Kèhuāyuǎn Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(刻花苑宾馆; Kèhuāyuǎn Bīnguǎn; ☎8546 2555; 141 Kehua Beilu; 科华北路141号; tw/d Y598/698, discounts of around 50%; ☹☺) Large, smart comfortable rooms come with small but sparkling shower rooms. Staff members are friendly but speak little English. Laptop users can get online for free in all rooms. Cheaper rooms without windows are also available.

Dragon Town Guesthouse

YOUTH HOSTEL \$\$

(龙堂客栈; Lóngtáng Kèzhàn; ☎8664 8408; www.dragontown.com.cn; 26 Kuan Xiangzi; 宽巷子26号; dm Y20-50, d/tw Y200/220; ☹☺☹) It has let itself go in recent years and is starting to look a bit rundown, but the location in the newly reconstructed Kuānzǎi Xiàngzi (宽窄巷子) area is still excellent. The alleys around here are full of trendy restaurants, cafes and boutique shops, and while most of the buildings are no more than five years old, some, including Dragon Town's, date back to the Qing dynasty. The hostel's courtyard with fish pond remains atmospheric but in general a lick of paint wouldn't go astray.

Chéngdū Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(成都大酒店; Chéngdū Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎8317 3888; 29 North Renmin; 人民北路二段29号; d & tw Y400-560, discounts of around 50%; ☹☺) This 23-storey old-school Chinese hotel with decent, internet-enabled rooms makes a comfortable choice if you need to be near the train station.

**Eating**

Cheap, quick snacks known as *xiǎo chī* (little eats) are a way of life here. Another favourite, although harder to find than it used to be, is *shāokāo* (barbecue) – chilli-rubbed grilled skewers of meat, vegies and smoked tofu that used to be sold off street-market stalls but these days are restricted to small hole-in-the-wall restaurants or

REBUILDING QUAKE-STRICKEN COMMUNITIES

At 2.28pm on 12 May 2008, an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale occurred along the Lóngménshān fault in Wénchuān County, 80km northwest of Chéngdū. The results were catastrophic: 88,000 people were killed, 375,000 injured, more than 33 million were affected, with 11 million left homeless and 1.5 million displaced.

The main tremor lasted for almost two minutes, causing the ground to shift about 10m in areas near the epicentre. Buildings were evacuated as far away as Běijīng and Bàngkòk.

Mountains were sliced apart. Rivers changed course. Landslides smothered roads and blocked rivers, creating 'quake' lakes. Whole towns were buried.

Almost 50,000 aftershocks were recorded within the first six months after the quake. Hundreds of thousands of homes that withstood the initial quake collapsed with the aftershocks.

Peter Goff, chairman of Sichuān Quake Relief (www.sichuan-quake-relief.org), said China's immediate reaction was swift and impressive.

'Within 90 minutes of the quake Premier Wen Jiabao was on a plane to Chéngdū to oversee the recovery work,' he said. 'More than 150,000 Chinese troops and medics were mobilised within hours. The government announced that it would spend 1 trillion yuan (US\$147 billion) to rebuild areas devastated by the earthquake over a three-year period, and most families who lost homes were given a grant of around Y20,000 (US\$3000), about one-third the cost of a small rural house.'

Mr Goff said the authorities were quite rightly praised for their initial reaction, but it wasn't long before questions started to be asked.

'They were strongly criticised for the highly contentious issue of shoddy school construction,' he said. 'In numerous areas across the quake zone "tofu" schools topped down while surrounding buildings remained intact, which led to parents accusing local officials and developers of corruption.'

'To appease the parents, some special regulations were brought in. The one-child policy restrictions, for example, were lifted for parents whose child was either killed or severely injured in the disaster. And local officials offered bereaved parents compensation – usually about US\$15,000 (Y100,000) – as long as they promised not to raise the issue again or to engage in any petitioning or protesting. Parents and volunteers who have protested or pushed the matter have been rounded up, detained and threatened by local officials.'

'Another issue that is causing local concern is the matter of farmers being asked to give up their land and move into urban communities to make way for infrastructure redevelopment projects. This is part of a national urban-rural integration plan but it has been speeded up in Sìchuān as a result of the earthquake. Allegations abound of officials and developers offering inadequate compensation and using the quake reconstruction efforts as a pretext to increase their holdings.'

'In terms of infrastructure there's no doubt the area will be better served than ever before when all the reconstruction projects are completed, but there is still a significant number of people who, physically or economically, are unable to rebuild their lives.'

temporary late-evening operations cooked on the back of bicycle-rickshaws.

Another popular Chéngdū speciality is *chuànchuàn xiāng*, the skewers version of the famous Chóngqìng hotpot (*huǒguō*), and just as spicy. *Chuànchuàn xiāng* is a quintessential Chéngdū eating experience and there are restaurants all over the city, including a bunch of pocket-sized ones on Shuwa Jie (暑袜街).

Several monasteries, including Wénshū Temple, Zhāojié Temple and Green Ram Temple, have vegetarian restaurants (dishes Y7 to Y20) that are generally open only for lunch. There's also a vegetarian restaurant at the **Monastery of Divine Light** (Bàoguāng Sì; dishes from Y7; ☺11am-1.30pm) in Xīndū.



Yúlín Chuànchuàn Xiāng HOTPOT \$
(玉林串串香; 2-3 Kehua Jie; 科华街
2-3号; per skewer Y0.12 & Y1; ☺11am-late) This

lively open-fronted branch of the popular Yùlín chain is packed in the evenings with a hungry student crowd from nearby Sìchuān University. Choose your own skewers from a side room then cook them yourself in the boiling, spicy broth on your table. Staff will count up how many skewers you've eaten at the end of your meal. The garlic and chilli dipping sauce is Y3 extra. There's another, slightly smaller branch near Traffic Inn youth hostel.

Yángyáng Cānguǎn

SICHUANESSE \$

(杨杨餐馆; 32 Jinyuan Xiang; 锦苑巷; dishes Y8-40; ☎9am-9pm; 🍴) Good-quality, inexpensive Sichuanese food with terrace seating, fast service and an English menu. Note, the English menu doesn't have prices, so you might want to ask for the Chinese menu (*zhōngwén càidān*) too.

Zìgòng Cànguǎn

SICHUANESSE \$\$

(自贡菜馆; 127-129 Kehua Beilu; 科华北路127-129号; dishes Y18-48; ☎10am-11pm) You'll find all the usual Sichuanese favourites with the addition of some specialities from the southern town of Zìgòng, historically one of this region's three culinary centres (along with Chéngdū and Chóngqǐng). Look for the characters for Zìgòng (自贡) written in brackets after dishes. Zìgòng food uses different types of chillies and peppers from standard Sìchuān fare, and often contains rabbit meat (兔肉; *tùròu*), fish (鱼肉; *yúròu*) or frog (田鸡; *tiánjī*). Dishes are spicy, as you'd expect, but not quite as blow-your-head-off spicy as in other parts of the province. There's a photo menu, but to get you started try Yùmǐ Nèntù (玉米嫩兔; Y25), boneless rabbit pieces and sweet corn in a mild sauce, or Tiàoshuǐ Tiánjī (跳水田鸡; Y45 per *jìn*), frogs in a spicy ginger sauce. One *jīn* (Chinese weight, about 600g) is enough for one person.

Chén Mápó Dòufu

SICHUANESSE \$\$\$

(陈麻婆豆腐; 2nd fl, 197 Xi Yulong Jie; dishes Y12-58; ☎11.30am-9pm) This plush branch of the famous chain is a great place to sample *mápó dòufu* (small/large Y12/20) – soft, fresh bean curd with a fiery sauce of garlic, minced beef, salted soybean, chilli oil and Sìchuān pepper. It's one of Sìchuān's most famous dishes and this restaurant's speciality. Photo menu.

Xīnjiāng Hóng Mùdān Mùsīlín Kuàicān

MUSLIM \$

(新疆红牡丹穆斯林快餐; cnr Kehua Jie & Guoji-
aiao Xijie; dishes Y6-50; ☎10am-11.30pm) This extremely popular Xīnjiāng restaurant be-

side Sìchuān University is a great place to sample the Uighur speciality *dàpánjī* (literally 'big plate chicken') – a massive portion of chicken, potatoes and peppers stewed in a savoury, spicy sauce. Even the 'small' plate (Y30) will serve two or three. When you're part-way through the meal, staff dump a pile of handmade noodles into your dish, perfect for sopping up the sauce. Lamb skewers (羊肉串; *yángròu chuàn*; Y1) and grilled naan bread (烤馕; *kǎo náng*; Y4) are good accompaniments. If you're eating solo, the *dīngdīng miàn* (丁丁面; Y6 to Y8) is a noodle dish worth sampling.

Huì Zhī Fèng

BARBECUE \$\$

(惠之风; Blue Caribbean Plaza, cnr Kehua Beilu & Kehua Jie; 科华北路143号蓝色加勒比广场; dishes Y8-28; ☎11am-late; 🍴) Chéngdū's answer to teppan-yaki and a great place to fill up before drinks on Kehua Jie. There are tables outside, but it's more fun to sit inside, around the giant horseshoe-shaped hotplate and watch the chef griddle the dishes you've just ordered. There's an English menu, but if you're looking for inspiration, the bacon-wrapped mushrooms (培根卷; *péigēn juǎn*; Y20) are divine. Two dishes per person are usually enough.

Tiāntiān Fàndiàn

SICHUANESSE \$\$

(天添饭店; 17 Yulin Dong Jie; 玉林东街17号; dishes Y8-58; ☎9am-9.30pm) Specialises in duck dishes and stews, but has the whole range of classic Sichuanese dishes including a particularly delicious clay-pot mushroom dish (干锅茶树菇; *gānguō cháshùgū*; Y28). No English, but has a good photo menu.

Sultan

MIDDLE EASTERN \$\$

(苏坦; Sūtǎn; 1 Yulin Nanjie, Dushi Jin'an Bldg; dishes Y8-58; ☎11am-10pm; 🍴) Friendly, easygoing Middle Eastern restaurant with lamb kebabs, hummus, warm naan and homemade yoghurt. You could linger over dark Turkish coffee (there's free wi-fi), sit outside on the sunny patio, or lounge in a private room piled with cushions and puff on a fruit-flavoured *sheesha* pipe (Y50). The entrance is on a side road just east of Yulin Nanjie.

Kampa Tibetan Restaurant

TIBETAN \$

(康巴藏餐; Kāngbā Zàngcān; off 246 Wuhouci Dajie; 武侯祠大街246号附18; dishes Y8-28; ☎8am-11pm; 🍴) Small, friendly Tibetan-run restaurant next to Holly's Hostel serving tasty Tibetan classics like *tsampa* (porridge of roasted barley flour), yak meat and butter tea. English menu.



Drinking

Sichuān represents the culture of tea better than anywhere else in China. The art of tea-drinking dates back 3000 years, and Sichuān's teahouses have long been the centres of neighbourhood social life. They were, and still are, where people gossiped, played cards, watched opera performances, had haircuts and even had their ear wax removed! Today you'll find crowded teahouses all over Chéngdū, particularly in the city's parks and temple grounds. There are also some pleasant ones on the banks of the Brocade River. Tea is generally bought by the cup (Y5 to Y30) and is topped up for free as often as you like.

There's a decent number of bars and cafes here too. For the latest on Chéngdū's nightlife scene, pick up one of the city's expat magazines: *Chengdoo* or *More Chengdu*.

Hè Míng Teaing TEAHOUSE
(鹤鸣茶馆; Hèming Cháguǎn; People's Park; teas Y10-25; ☎7am-9pm) One of Chéngdū's most pleasant and popular spots to while away an afternoon over a bottomless cup of flower tea. The tea menu is in English. Having your ears cleaned (Y20) is optional.

Old Little Bar BAR
(小酒馆(玉林店); Xiǎo Jiǔguǎn (Yùlín Diàn); 55 Yulin Xilu; 玉林西路55号; beers from Y10; ☎6pm-2am) Reportedly set up by China's rock legend Cui Jian, this is Chéngdū's most established rock bar. It no longer has live performances – go to New Little Bar for that – but still a cool place to hang out with music-loving locals.

New Little Bar BAR
(小酒馆(芳沁店); Xiǎo Jiǔguǎn (Fāngqìn Diàn); ☎8515 8790; Fangqin Jie, behind 47 Yongfeng Lu; 永丰路47号芳沁街; beers from Y10; ☎6pm-2am) This small pub-like venue is *the* place in Chéngdū to catch local bands performing live. Bands play every Friday and Saturday, and occasionally on weekdays, usually from 8pm. Live music carries a cover charge of around Y30, depending on who's playing. Check expat magazine *Chengdoo* for monthly line-ups.

Bookworm CAFE
(老书虫; Lǎo Shūchóng; ☎8552 0177; www.chengdubookworm.com; 2-7 Yulin Donglu, 28 Renmin Nanlu; ☎9am-1am) This excellent bookstore-cafe, with branches in Běijīng and Sūzhōu, is a peaceful spot for a drink or a coffee. It often hosts author talks, concerts and other events. Check its website for a schedule.

Le Cafe Panam(e)

BAR

(巴黎酒吧; Bāfī Jiǔbā; 2nd fl, Blue Caribbean Plaza, cnr Kehua Beilu & Kehua Jie; 科华北路143号蓝色加勒比广场2层; beers from Y10; ☎5pm-4am) This hip French-owned bar is the coolest of a number of drinking venues in and around this small plaza.

Temple of Mercy TEAHOUSE
(大慈寺; Dàcǐ Sì; Dacisi Lu; admission Y3; ☎10am-6pm) Most of Chéngdū's temples have teahouses; this one is a favourite for tea, mah jong and lazy afternoons in the sun.

Leg and Whistle BAR
(2nd fl, 19 Chuanda Huayuan Building, Kehua Jie; 科华街川大花园19号2层) Near Le Cafe Panam(e), this is the place to go to watch football.

★ Entertainment

Chéngdū is the home of Sichuān opera, which dates back more than 250 years. It's nothing like Western opera; many performances feature slapstick, glass-shattering songs, men dressed as women, gymnastics and even fire breathing. An undoubted highlight is 'face-changing' (变脸; *biànlǎn*) in which performers swap masks, seemingly by magic.

Shǔfēng Yǎyùn Teahouse SICHUÁN OPERA
(蜀风雅韵; Shǔfēng Yǎyùn; ☎8776 4530; www.shufengyayun.com; Culture Park; tickets Y150-260) Located in Culture Park, this large teahouse puts on excellent shows that include music, puppetry, comedy, Sichuān opera and the province's famed face-changing performances. Shows run nightly from 8pm to 9.30pm. If you come at around 7.30pm you can watch performers putting on their make-up. Kids might like to have their own faces painted (from Y100).

Jīnjiāng Theatre SICHUÁN OPERA
(锦江剧场; Jīnjiāng Jùchǎng; ☎8662 0019; 54 Huaxingzheng Jie; 华兴正街54号; tickets Y120-260; ☎8-9.30pm) There are similar mixed-performance shows held daily at this renowned opera theatre. The adjoining **Yuèlái Teahouse** (悦来茶楼; Yuèlái Chálóu; teas Y6-15; ☎8.30am-9.30pm) also has performances on its small stage every Saturday from 2pm to 5pm. Tickets for the teahouse shows cost Y20 to Y35.

🛍 Shopping

The main modern shopping district, filled with famous brands from around the world, is a part-pedestrianised area east of Tianfu Sq, between Zongfū Lu and Dong Dajie.

Southeast of Wūhóu 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. It's an interesting area for wandering.

Outdoor clothing and equipment are a big buy in Chéngdū, as many people head to Tibet or the western mountains. More outdoor shops line Wuhouci Dajie, opposite Wūhóu Temple. Quality varies and fakes abound.

52 Camp OUTDOOR CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

(户外用品商城; Hùwài Yòngpǐn Shāngchéng; Renmin Nanlu; 人民南路; ☎9am-9.30pm)

Stocks good-quality camping gear and clothing, including brands such as Kar-rimor and Columbia.

i Information

Internet Access

All hotels and cafes we've reviewed here have internet access for laptop users. Most youth hostels and some top-end hotels also have computer terminals for guests. Internet cafes are plentiful; look for the characters 网吧 (*wǎngbā*).

Wǎntōng Wǎngbā (万通网吧; per hr ¥4; ☎24hr) Second floor of building in front of train station.

Xīnnánmén bus station (新南门汽车站; Xīnnánmén Qīchēzhàn; per hr ¥3; ☎24hr) Second-floor internet cafe.

Internet Resources

ChengduLiving (www.chengduliving.com) Smart, nicely designed website including well-written features, podcasts and reasonably active comments sections.

GoChengdoo (www.gochengdoo.com/en) Good introduction to the city from the guys behind Chéngdū's best expat mag, *Chengdoo*.

More Chengdu (www.morechengdu.com) OK website of the city's next-best English-language magazine. Good for restaurant listings.

Medical Services

Global Doctor Chéngdū Clinic (环球医生成都诊所; Huánqiú Yīshēng Chéngdū Zhēnsuǒ; ☎8528 3660, 24hr helpline 139 8225 6966; 2nd fl, 9-11 Lippo Tower Bldg, 62 Kehua Beilu; 科华北路62号力宝大厦2层9-11号; ☎8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri) English-speaking doctors and a 24-hour English-language helpline.

No 4 Huáxī Hospital of Sichuan University (华西第四医院; Huáxī Dìsì Yīyuàn; ☎8550 1570; Renmin Nanlu; 人民南路) The Huáxī hospital complex is Chéngdū's largest and gets

good reports from expats. Many of the doctors and some staff members speak English.

Money

Most ATMs now accept foreign cards. We've marked some convenient ones on the map.

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; 35 Renmin Zhonglu, 2nd Section; 人民中路二段35号; ☎8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun) Changes money and travellers cheques, and offers cash advances on credit cards.

Post

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; North Train Station; 北火车站; ☎8am-9pm summer, 8.30am-8pm winter) Handy branch outside train station; open later than most; can send parcels abroad.

Public Security Bureau

PSB (省公安厅外事科; Gōng'ānjú; ☎8640 7067; 391 Shuncheng Dajie; 391号顺成大街; ☎9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Foreign affairs office on 2nd floor; extends visas in five working days. For faster service, try offices in Lèshān, Kǎngdīng or, best of all, Sōngpān.

Tourist Information

Best sources for up-to-the-minute restaurant, bar and entertainment listings are free monthly magazines *Chengdoo* (www.gochengdoo.com) and *More Chengdu* (www.morechengdu.com). Look for copies at youth hostels or Western-friendly bars and cafes.

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

Travel Agencies

Skip the gazillion Chinese travel agencies around town and head straight to the travel desk at one of Chéngdū's many excellent youth hostels. Sim's is the pick of the bunch in terms of reliability.

i Getting There & Away

Air

You can fly from Chéngdū to pretty much any other major Chinese city, while there are international flights to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Los Angeles, Vancouver, London, Amsterdam, Sydney, Melbourne, New Delhi, Bangalore and Seoul.

Many travellers choose to fly from here to Lhasa. Those without much time on their hands, but a bit of extra cash, might consider flying to smaller destinations within Sichuan, such as Kǎngdīng or Jiǔzhàigōu.

The best place to find cheap flights is nearly always www.elong.com. Also worth trying are www.ctrip.com and www.travelzen.com.

If for some reason you can't book online, try the airline offices in Chéngdū:

Air China Chéngdū Booking Office (国航世界中心; Guóháng Shìjiè Zhōngxīn; ☎24hr hotline 4008 100 999; 1 Hangkong Lu, off Renmin Nanlu; 人民南路4段航空路1号; ☎8.30am-5pm)

China Southern Airlines (中国南方航空; Zhōngguó Nánfāng Hángkōng; ☎8666 3618; 278 Shangdong Dajie; ☎8.30am-5.30pm)

Bus

The main bus station for tourists is Xinnánmén (新南门), officially called the Tourism Passenger Transport Centre. The other two most useful are Chádìanzi (茶店子) and Běimén (北门). However, be prepared to be dropped at other bus stations when arriving in Chéngdū.

Destinations from Xinnánmén include the following:

Dānbā Y128, nine hours, one daily (6.30am*)

Éméi Shān Y42, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes (7.20am to 7pm)

Huánglóngxi Y8, one hour, every 30 minutes (8.30am to 3.20pm)

Jiǔzhàigōu Y141, 10 hours, one daily (8am**)

Kāngdīng Y119 to Y129, seven hours, hourly (7.10am to 2.10pm)

Lèshān Y45, two hours, every 20 minutes (7.20am to 7.30pm)

Pínglè Y25, two hours, five daily (8.30am to 5.15pm)

Qīngchéng Shān Y20, 1½ hours, every 30 minutes (8.30am to 11am)

Yǎ'ān (for Bífēngxiá) Y45, two hours, every 30 minutes (7.30am to 7pm)

Yībīn Y79 to Y89, four hours, two daily (9.10am and 3.30pm)

* This is a Dàofú-bound bus, via Dānbā and Bāmèi. You must buy a ticket to Bāmèi (Y148), then ask the driver nicely for a Y20 refund because you want to get off early at Dānbā.

** Roads to Jiǔzhàigōu were under repair at the time of research, so expect this info to change.

Following are some of the destinations from Chádìanzi:

Jiǔzhàigōu Y121, 10 hours, two daily (7.20am and 9am)

Sōngpān Y136, 11 hours, three daily (6.30am, 7am and 7.30am)

The new tunnel-tastic route to Jiǔzhàigōu, via Sōngpān, should be open by the time you read this; it was reportedly set to cut journey times down to four or five hours! Check at Chéngdū hostels for the latest.

Destinations from Běimén include the following:

Lángzhōng Y94, five hours, hourly (7am to 6.30pm)

Yībīn Y104, four hours, hourly (7.20am to 6.30pm)

Zigōng Y80, three hours, hourly (7am to 7.30pm)

Train

The ticket office of Chéngdū North Train Station is in a separate building on your right as you approach the station. Hotels can book tickets for an extra fee. Example destinations and fares:

Běijīng West sleeper Y405/402/431, 26/32/30 hours, three daily (11.40am/10pm/11.49pm)

Chóngqing seat Y98, two hours, hourly (8am to 7pm)

Éméi seat Y13 to Y24, two to three hours, eight daily (1pm to 9.30pm)

Kūnmíng sleeper Y153 to Y254, 19 to 24 hours, five daily (10am to 3.38pm)

Lhasa sleeper Y578, 44 hours, one daily (8.59pm)

Xī'ān seat/sleeper Y113/201, 13 to 18 hours, eight daily (11.40am to 9.41pm)

Xīníng sleeper Y300, 19/24 hours, two daily (12.10pm/8.59pm)

Yībīn seat Y25 to Y51, 6½ hours, seven daily (8.39am to 11.10pm)

Zigōng seat Y20 to Y41, 4½ to 5½ hours, seven daily (8.39am to 11.10pm)

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

Shuāngliú Airport is 18km west of the city. Bus 303 (Y10) is an airport shuttle (机场大巴; Jīchǎng Dàbā) that shadows flight times and travels from Yándào Jiē (盐道街) to the airport. Bus 300 runs a similar service between the airport and the North Train Station.

A taxi between the airport and the centre will cost Y50 to Y70, depending on how bad the traffic is. Most guesthouses offer airport pick-up services for slightly more than the taxi fare.

Bicycle

Chéngdū is nice and flat, although the traffic can be a strain on cyclists. Youth hostels rent out bikes for around Y20 per day. Make sure you use a lock.

Public Transport

BUS You can get almost anywhere in Chéngdū by bus, as long as you can decipher the labyrinthine bus routings. Stops are marked in Chinese and English, and most have posted route maps for the buses that stop there. Fares within the city are Y1 (一元) or Y2 (二元); the price is marked on the fare box.

Useful routes:

Bus 16 North Train Station–Renmin Lu–South Train Station

Bus 1 City centre–Wūhóu Temple

Bus 81 Mao statue–Green Ram Temple

Bus 28 Xinnánmén bus station–Běimén bus station

Bus 82 Chádiānzi bus station–Xinnánmén bus station

Bus 49 Xinnánmén bus station–Zhāojié bus station

Tourist Bus 902 Traffic Inn–Sim’s–Panda Breeding Base

Tourist Bus 901 Traffic Inn–Wūhóu Temple–People’s Park–Jinshā Site Museum

SUBWAY Chéngdū’s first five subway lines were under construction at the time of research. The extremely handy Line 1, which links up with North Train Station before following the length of Renmin Lu, will be open by the time you read this. The east–west–running Line 2, which meets Line 1 at Tiānfǔ Sq before continuing west to Chádiānzi bus station, was due to open during the summer of 2011.

Taxi

Taxi flag fall is Y5 or Y7, depending on the quality of the car. The Y5 cabs add a Y1 fuel charge; Y7 cabs don’t. All taxis are Y1 more expensive at night. At the time of research, rumour had it that taxi flag-fall prices were to be increased by Y2.

Around Chéngdū

SĀNXĪNGDUǐ MUSEUM

三星堆

The striking exhibits at the **Sānxīngduǐ Museum** (Sānxīngduǐ Bówùguǎn; admission Y82; ☉8.30am–6pm) highlight archaeological finds that some Chinese archaeologists regard as even more important than Xī’an’s Terracotta Warriors.

Throughout the 20th century, farmers around the town of Guǎnghàn, 40km north of Chéngdū, continually unearthed intriguing pottery shards and other dirt-encrusted detritus. However, war, the lack of funds and other challenges prevented anyone from taking these discoveries seriously. Finally, in 1986, archaeologists launched a full-scale excavation and made a startling discovery: they unearthed a major site dating from the Shu kingdom, considered the cradle of Chinese civilisation, in the upper reaches of the Yangzi River (Chǎng Jiāng).

The museum houses two buildings’ worth of artefacts from this period, but the stars of its collections are dozens and dozens of bronze masks – so sophisticated that

they wouldn’t look out of place in a modern art gallery, yet they were crafted more than 4000 years ago. Most travellers will be satisfied with a half-day trip here, but art and archaeology buffs may want to linger for hours.

One morning bus (Y14, two hours, 8.30am) runs here direct from Chéngdū’s Xinnánmén bus station. Alternatively, there are regular buses from Chéngdū’s Zhāojié station (Y12, two hours, 9am to 6.40pm) to Guǎnghàn, from where you can catch local bus 6 (Y2) for the remaining 10km to the site. There are no direct buses back to Chéngdū, so you’ll have to go via Guǎnghàn.

QĪNGCHÉNG SHĀN

青城山

Covered in dripping-wet forests, the lush holy mountain of **Qīngchéng Shān** (Azure City Mountain; admission Y90) has been a Taoist retreat for more than 2000 years. Its beautiful trails are lined with ginkgo, plum and palm trees as well as caves, pavilions and gorgeously, centuries-old wooden temples, some of which you can stay overnight in.

The weather is generally better than at Éméi Shān, so the views are less likely to be obscured by mist, and with a summit of only 1600m, it’s also a far easier climb; four hours up and down. There’s a detailed map of the trails on the back of your entrance ticket and signs are in English too.

The new high-speed rail link means the mountain is now even more popular with Chéngdū day trippers, who can crowd some trails, particularly those near the entry and exit to the cable car (one way/return Y35/60). Some travellers prefer heading instead to **Qīngchéng Hòushān** (青城后山; Azure City Back Mountain), a more peaceful, less touristy area some 15km northwest of Qīngchéng Shān proper that has over 20km of hiking trails in a more natural environment. Buses and minibuses ply the road between the two mountains.

If you want to stay the night, two or three temples on the mountain welcome guests, including the fabulous **Shàngqīng Temple** (Shàngqīng Gōng; d with bathroom Y180 & Y280), a Qīng-dynasty rebuild of the original Jīndynasty temple set in the forest near the top of the mountain; it has a restaurant (dishes Y15 to Y25) and a teahouse (tea from Y5). The cheapest rooms (Y40 to Y100) are supposed to be reserved for pilgrims, but you may be able to land one if you ask sweetly.

SIX THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT PANDAS

- » Pandas weren't discovered by the Western world until 1869, when French curate-naturalist Père Armand David brought a pelt back from China.
- » There are now fewer than 1000 wild pandas, restricted to just five mountain ranges straddling the provinces of Sichuān, Shaanxi (Shānxī) and Gānsù.
- » About 99% of a wild panda's diet is made up of bamboo, but pandas have a carnivorous (meat-eating) ancestry and do, very occasionally, eat small rodents.
- » Over the centuries, pandas have developed a 'thumb' – not a real thumb, but a modified wrist bone that enables them to strip bamboo leaves from their branches and to manipulate shoots and stems.
- » Bamboo is very low in nutrients, so pandas need to spend around 16 hours a day munching through almost 40kg of the stuff in order to stay healthy.
- » About every 25 years bamboos flower and die en masse, and the pandas must move to other feeding areas to survive. In the mid-1970s more than 130 pandas starved to death when bamboos flowered and died in Mǐn Shān, Sìchuān.

Snack stands are scattered along the mountain trails.

There are still direct morning buses to Qīngchéng Shān from Chéngdū's Xīnnánmén bus station (¥20, two hours, 8am to 11am, last bus back 6.30pm), but it's far preferable to take the high-speed rail link from Chéngdū's North Train Station (¥15, 50 minutes, 7.15am to 7.25pm, last train back 8.30pm). Bus 101 (¥2, five minutes) links the train station to the mountain.

Consider getting off the train one stop before Qīngchéng Shān to take a look at the **Dūjiāngyàn Irrigation Project** (都江堰水利工程; Dūjiāngyàn Shuǐlǐ Gōngchéng; admission ¥90; ☉8am-6pm). Constructed in the 3rd century BC to tame the fast-flowing Mǐn River, it's now a Unesco World Heritage Site.

BÌFÈNGXÍÁ PANDA BASE

碧峰峡大熊猫基地

Established in 2003 under the direction of the Giant Panda Research Centre at Wòlóng, the **Bìfēngxíá Panda Base** (Bìfēngxíá Dàxióngmāo Jīdì; admission ¥118, foreigner visitors ¥60; ☉8.30am-6pm), outside the city of Yǎ'ān (雅安), originally focused more on research than on tourism. However, after the Wòlóng Nature Reserve was severely damaged in the 2008 earthquake, all of its surviving pandas were moved to Bìfēngxíá, and the Yǎ'ān reserve began to receive an influx of tourists. It's now home to more than 80 pandas, the world's largest collection of captive pandas. At the time of research, the plan was to move some of the pandas back to Wòlóng once it had been rebuilt, sometime in 2012.

The Bìfēngxíá area is very spread out and spans a deep gorge and some stunning forest scenery, making for some lovely walks. The **panda centre** (☎08352318145) is on the opposite side of the park from the entrance (there's a zoo too, which you can skip). The **ticket office** is inside Bìfēngxíá Dàjiūdiàn, the large hotel in the main car park. At the time of research foreigners received a 50% discount. Be sure to bring your passport with you in case this excellent promotion is still running when you visit.

To get to the panda centre, 3km away from the ticket office, there's a free bus, but it's a pleasant half-hour walk. Alternatively, take the free lift (请云梯; qǐngyúntī) down to another section of the road below, and walk the long way round (90 minutes). Buses don't go this way round, so it's a more peaceful walk. There's more walking to be done on trails inside the panda centre, where the pandas are kept in OK enclosures similar to those at Chéngdū's Giant Panda Breeding Research Base. There's also an oh-so-cute 'panda kindergarten' enclosure; 13 baby pandas were born here the year before we visited, so there was plenty to coo about.

Bìfēngxíá is an easy day trip from Chéngdū, but you can stay in the park. Staff at the panda centre can help you arrange a room.

To get here, catch a bus from Xīnnánmén to Yǎ'ān. Get off just before the main bus station at the Tourist Bus Station (旅游车站; Lǚyóu Chēzhàn), where you'll find mini-buses (¥5) waiting to take you the final 18km to the panda base. The last bus back

to Chéngdū from the Tourist Bus Station leaves at 6.30pm.

PÍNGÈ

平乐

A popular subject of paintings for Chinese art students, this ancient riverside village was originally a way station on the Southern Silk Road more than 2000 years ago. Modern life is encroaching, as are sellers of tourist trinkets, but enough old-town life remains for a pleasant day-long excursion from Chéngdū.

The buildings in the **old town** (古镇; *gǔzhèn*) date to the Ming and Qing dynasties, and locals still live in these old wooden houses lining the narrow streets on both sides of the river. The town's most venerable inhabitants, though, are its banyan trees, a dozen of which are more than 1000 years old. Don't miss the cutest of old stone passageways, called Fúhuì Street Water Gate (福惠街水门; Fúhuì Jiē Shuǐmén), which leads down to a river pathway housing two reconstructed wooden waterwheels and a couple of teahouses.

There are plenty of teahouses across the river too, where you can also board bamboo boats (Y50 per hour) or wander away from the water for a rural stroll in the decidedly untouristy surrounding farmland.

The old town has several small inns – look for signs saying 客栈 (*kèzhàn*; guest-house) or 住宿 (*zhùsù*; lodgings) – although for most visitors a day trip will be sufficient. **Dàhé Kèzhàn** (大河客栈; 18-24 Changchong Jie; 长庆街18-24号; ☎8878 2830; r Y90), the first place by the river you reach from the bus station, has nice little rooms, with weenie private bathrooms. Restaurants are everywhere. Look out for the tasty steamed buns (Y0.50) made from either sweet corn (玉米馍; *yùmǐ mó*) or pumpkin (南瓜馍; *nánguā mó*).

Five daily buses for Píngè leave from Chéngdū's Xīnnánmén bus station, returning at 7am, 1pm, 2.20pm, 3.20pm and 4.50pm. Walk out of Píngè bus station and turn right for the old town.

LIǚ Jiāng

柳江

The lovely pastoral setting is the main draw of this gorgeous village tucked away in the central Sichuan countryside. The old town (古镇; *gǔzhèn*), with its narrow alleyways, wooden courtyard buildings and ancient banyan trees, straddles both sides of the Yángcūn River (杨村河; Yángcūn Hé) in a picture-perfect setting. In fact, after recent

renovations, it's almost too perfect (you'll have a hard time picking out genuine old buildings here), and at weekends it becomes overrun by tourists all craving a piece of rural charm. Nevertheless, it's still a lovely spot for a lazy lunch or a trip to a teahouse. If you want to stay the night, the charming **Wàngjiāng Kèzhàn** (望江客栈; ☎139 0903 6203; Guzhen Laojie; 古镇老街; r Y80) has creaky wooden floorboards, basic rooms with shared bathrooms, and river views. If the crowds get too much, there's some excellent walking to be done in the surrounding countryside.

One fine option is the 3.5km uphill hike to Hóujiā Shānxiàng (侯家山巷). The start of the road here is close to the bus station and is marked by a wooden gateway. Once you've found that, just follow the road and signs past mooing cows, ploughing farmers, rice terraces, bamboo clumps and small tea plantations. On the road near the top is **Tiàowàng Wǎwū** (眺望瓦屋; ☎130 8838 1221; r Y80, dishes from Y5), a large renovated wooden courtyard building with simple twin rooms, friendly owners and fabulous views. You can grab a bowl of noodles (面; *miàn*) here or whatever rice dishes (饭; *fàn*) they happen to be cooking that day. Don't bother hiking any further up the hill, unless you want to bump into Chinese tourists ruining the ambience by belting out heavily amplified, out-of-tune karaoke songs at the modern three-storey hotel at the top of the mountain.

You can reach Liǚ Jiāng direct from Xīnnánmén bus station (Y46, three hours, 9am). The return bus leaves at 3pm. If that's full, there are regular buses to Hóngyǎ (洪雅), where you can change. Last bus from Hóngyǎ to Chéngdū is 5.20pm. If that's full, change at Méishān (眉山; last Chéngdū bus 6.50pm).

WÒLÓNG NATURE RESERVE

卧龙山自然保护区

Formerly the largest of China's panda conservation centres, **Wòlóng Nature Reserve** (Wòlóng Zìrán Bǎohùqū), 140km northwest of Chéngdū, suffered extensive damage in the 2008 Sìchuān earthquake. At the time of research, the reserve remained closed to the public, and all of the pandas had been transferred to the Bífēngxiá Panda Base near Yǎ'an.

Wòlóng was scheduled to reopen to tourists, with at least some of its pandas back in place, in 2012. Check at hostels in Chéngdū for the latest.

Èméi Shān

峨眉山

☑0833 / ELEV 3099M

A cool, misty retreat from the Sìchuān basin's sweltering heat, stunning **Èméi Shān** (adult ¥150) is one of China's four most famous Buddhist mountains (the others are Pǔtúoshān, Wǔtái Shān and Jiùhuá Shān). Here you'll find fabulous forested mountain scenery, ramshackle wooden temples and macaques demanding tribute for safe passage. There's also the wonderful opportunity to spend the night in one of the many monasteries that dot the mountain range.

Èméi Shān has little of its original templework still remaining. Glittering Jīnding Temple (Jīnding Sì), with its brass tiling engraved with Tibetan script, was completely gutted by fire. Other temples suffered the same fate, and all were looted to various degrees during the war with Japan and the Cultural Revolution. Some do still go back a few years, though, with Wǎnnián Temple, the oldest, clocking in at a very respectable 1100 years old.

The waves of pilgrims, hawkers and, most of all, tourists during peak season eliminate much solitude, but the crowds hover largely around the areas closest to the cable cars and the major temples. Away from them, the pathways, lined with fir, pine and cedar trees, make for peaceful hiking. Lofty crags, cloud-kissing precipices, butterflies and azaleas together form a nature reserve, and the mountain joins Lèshān, Jiǔzhàigōu and Dūjiāngyàn Irrigation Project on Unesco's list of World Heritage Sites in Sìchuān.

When to Go

The best time to visit Èméi Shān is between May and October. Avoid the national holidays, when the number of visitors reaches epic proportions.

Snowfall generally begins around November on the upper slopes. In winter you can hire iron soles with spikes to deal with encrusted ice and snow, but trails can be extremely slippery.

Temperate zones start at 1000m. Cloud cover, mist and often-dense fog are prevalent year-round, interfering with views of the sunrise (and of the trail ahead). If you're very lucky, you'll be able to see Gōnggā Shān (Gongga Mountain) to the west; if not, you'll have to settle for the less appealing Telecom



WHAT TO BRING

You can buy all of the following in Bàoguó Village. Teddy Bear Hotel stores bags for free. Bàoguó bus station charges ¥0.50 per hour.

- Sturdy footwear or hiking boots (the stone paths can get very slippery)
- Rain jacket with hood (it rains a lot on Èméi)
- Extra jumper (it's chilly near the summit, especially in the evenings)
- Walking stick (for knackered knees and monkey attacks)
- Fixed-length umbrella (doubles as a walking stick)
- Torch (if you stay on the mountain)
- Fruit and snacks (to supplement all those instant noodles)
- Toilet paper

tower – or perhaps just your hand in front of your face.

Some average temperatures:

	JANUARY	APRIL	JULY	OCTOBER
Èméi town	7°C	21°C	26°C	17°C
Summit	6°C	3°C	12°C	-1°C

👁️ Sights

Bàoguó Temple

BUDDHIST MONASTERY

(报国寺; Bàoguó Sì; Declare Nation Temple; admission ¥8) Constructed in the 16th century, this temple features beautiful gardens of rare plants, as well as a 3.5m-high porcelain Buddha dating back to 1415, which is housed near the Sutra Library.

Qīngyīn Pavilion

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(清音阁; Qīngyīn Gé) Named 'Pure Sound Pavilion' after the soothing sounds of the waters coursing around rock formations, this temple is built on an outcrop in the middle of a fast-flowing stream. Rest in one of the small pavilions here while you appreciate the natural 'music'.

'Ecological' Monkey Zone

WILDLIFE AREA

Between Qīngyīn Pavilion and Hóngchūn Píng (Venerable Trees Terrace) is the first place most hikers encounter the mountain's infamous monkeys. Despite the area's 'ecological' moniker, attendants here alternately feed the monkeys and, when they get too aggressive, chase them away with sticks and slingshots.

Wànnián Temple

BUDDHIST MONASTERY

(万年寺; Wànnián Sì; Long Life Monastery; admission Y10) Reconstructed in the 9th century, Wànnián Temple is the oldest surviving Éméi temple. It's dedicated to the man on the white elephant, the Bodhisattva Pūxián (also known as Samantabhadra), the Buddhist Lord of Truth and protector of the mountain. This 8.5m-high **statue** cast in copper and bronze dates from AD 980 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.

Elephant Bathing Pool

BUDDHIST MONASTERY

(洗象池; Xǐxiàng Chí) According to legend, Elephant Bathing Pool is where Pūxián 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 often crowded with pilgrims.

Jīndǐng Temple

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(金顶寺; Jīndǐng Sì; Golden Summit Temple) The magnificent Jīndǐng Temple is at the Golden Summit (Jīn Dǐng; 3077m), commonly referred to as the mountain's highest peak. Covered with glazed tiles and surrounded

by white marble balustrades, the renovated temple, which now occupies 1695 sq metres, is quite striking. In front of the temple, the unmissable 48m-tall golden statue **Multi-dimensional Samantabhadra** (十方普贤; Shífāng Pūxián) honours mountain protector Puxian and was added in 2006.

The mountain's highest point is actually nearby **Wànfó Dǐng** (Ten Thousand Buddha Summit) at 3099m, but it has been closed to visitors for some years now.

Fúhǔ Temple

BUDDHIST MONASTERY

(伏虎寺; Fúhǔ Sì; Crouching Tiger Monastery; admission Y6) Located about 1km from Bàoguó Temple, Fúhǔ Temple is hidden deep within the forest. It houses a 7m-high copper pagoda inscribed with Buddhist images and texts.

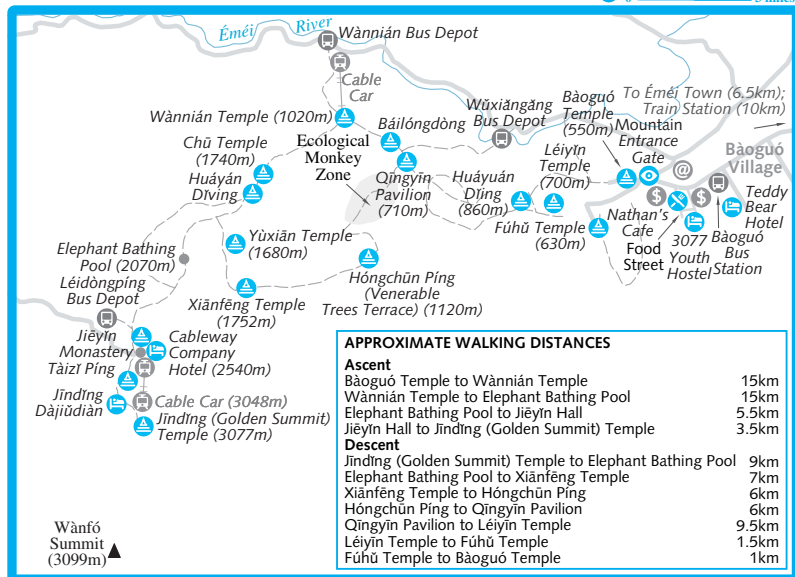
Xiānfēng Temple

BUDDHIST MONASTERY

(仙峰寺; Xiānfēng Sì; Immortal Peak Monastery) Somewhat off the beaten track, this well-looked-after monastery is backed by rugged cliffs and surrounded by fantastic scenery.

**Sleeping****ON THE MOUNTAIN**

Almost all the temples on the mountain (with the notable exception of Jīndǐng Temple at the summit) offer cheap lodgings

Éméi Shān

POSSIBLE ROUTES

There are numerous options for tackling Éméi Shān with various combinations of buses, cable cars, hiking trails and monastery stop-offs. Here are four popular ones:

- » **One day** Make use of buses and cable cars by taking a bus to Wǎnnián Temple (45 minutes), then hiking to the top (four hours) with the help of both cable cars before walking down to Léidòngpíng bus depot (1½ hours) and taking a bus back to Bàoguó Village (90 minutes).
- » **Two days** Take the bus to Wǎnnián bus depot (45 minutes) then hike up via Chū Temple to the summit (five to six hours). On the way down, turn right a short distance past Elephant Bathing Pool and take the more scenic path, via Xiānfēng Temple, back to Wǎnnián bus depot (eight hours).
- » **Two days** Take the bus to Léidòngpíng (90 minutes) then walk to the top (one to two hours) before making your long descent to Bàoguó Village (10 hours) via an overnight stay in a monastery.
- » **Three days** Ditch the buses completely and simply hike up and down the whole mountain (about 20 hours in total). To mix things up, go via Wǎnnián Temple on the way up and via Xiānfēng Temple on the way down. While you're on the way down, start preparing yourself mentally for at least three to four days of jelly legs.

in dormitory-style accommodation with shared bathrooms but usually no showers. Some also have guesthouse-quality private rooms, sometimes with private bathrooms.

Xiānfēng Temple

MONASTERY \$

(仙峰寺; Xiānfēng Sì; dm & tw without bathroom Y30-260, tw with bathroom Y280) This pretty remote temple, with a lovely forested location backed by rugged cliffs, is set around a large shaded front courtyard and has a wonderfully peaceful atmosphere. There's a good range of rooms from dorms to pricier twins that have showers. Approximate walking time from foot/summit is six/four hours.

Yùxiān Temple

MONASTERY \$

(遇仙寺; Yùxiān Sì; dm/tw from Y30/80) Scenery wise this is one of the most spectacular places to stay – the views are stunning here. And considering how small the temple is, there's also a large choice of rooms, from basic dorms to private twins. It is very remote here, though, so could feel a little eerie if you're staying on your own. From foot/summit is seven/three hours.

Hóngchún Píng

MONASTERY \$

(洪椿坪; Hóngchūn Píng; dm Y30-40, tw Y45-80) Arguably the smartest of the temples with accommodation, this place is another with a nice courtyard, making it a comfortable choice to spend some time in. Rooms are simple but decent. From foot/summit is three/seven hours.

Tàizǐ Píng

MONASTERY \$

(太子坪; Tàizǐ Píng; dm Y30-40) What this quiet, ramshackle wooden temple lacks in comfort, it gains in charm. Expect extremely basic three-bed dorms with a cold-water sink for washing. From foot/summit is 9¼ hours/45 minutes.

There are also two hotels on the mountain, although standards are low considering the prices:

Jīndìng Dàjiǔdiàn

HOTEL

(金顶大酒店; Jīndìng Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎509 8088/77; tw/tr Y780/580, discounted to Y620/460) From foot/summit 9½ hours/30 minutes.

Cableway Company Hotel

HOTEL

(索道公司招待所; Suǒdào Gōngsī Zhāodàisùsù; ☎155 2030 0955; tr/tw Y150/260) From foot/summit 8½ hours/90minutes.

IN BÀOGUÓ VILLAGE

Teddy Bear Hotel

YOUTH HOSTEL \$\$

(玩具熊酒店; Wánjùxíng Jiǔdiàn; ☎559 0135, 138 9068 1961; www.teddybear.com.cn; 43 Baoguo Lu; dm Y35, d & tw from Y260, tr Y180; ☎@☎) This 'backpacker central' place has cute, well-maintained rooms and English-speaking staff. The left-luggage service is free and there are massages available when you make it back down the mountain. Guests are also given an excellent hand-drawn map of the mountain trails for free. The café here serves OK Chinese and Western food and is a great place to swap tales of monkey attacks and sore knees. Standard

twins often slide to Y100. Call for a free pick-up from Éméi bus or train station.

3077 Youth Hostel

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

(峨眉3077青年旅社; Éméi Sānlíngqīqī Qīngnián Lúshè; ☎559 1698; www.em3077.com; nr Língxiù Wēnquán Spa; 灵秀温泉附近; dm Y30, tw from Y80; ㊦㊧㊨) This new hostel is aimed primarily at Chinese backpackers, so English-speaking skills may not be quite as good as at Teddy Bear. However, with its large courtyard, wood-interior cafe-restaurant and cool bedroom furnishings it has a lot more character. Shared bathrooms only.

✂ Eating

On the mountain, most temples have small dining halls, but you're never very far from one of the many trailside cafes that dot the mountain. Most serve simple noodle (面; *miàn*) or rice (饭; *fàn*) dishes as well as instant noodles (方便面; *fāngbiàn miàn*).

In Bàoguó Village, restaurants and supermarkets abound. Haochi Jie, or 'Food Street', is crammed with places to eat, many with outdoor seating.

A speciality breakfast snack here is the yellow buckwheat bun (荞麦粿; *qiáomài bā*; Y1).

Nathan's Cafe

SICHUANESE \$\$

(梁山饭店; Liángshān Fàndiàn; Haochi Jie; 好吃街; dishes Y4-60; ☎7am-10pm; ㊩) With a small outdoor seating area on lively 'Food Street', this place does Western breakfasts, simple noodle dishes and all the Sichuan classics. Some English spoken.

i Information

Agricultural Bank of China (农业银行; Nóngyè Yínháng; ☎9am-5pm) Has foreign exchange desk and foreign-friendly ATM. The ATM by Bàoguó bus station also accepts foreign cards.

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y2; ☎24hr) Walk five minutes north from mountain entrance then climb steps on right to level of road bridge. At top, turn right and walk 200m. Can also get online at youth hostels listed above.

i Getting Around

Bàoguó (报国) Village is your gateway to the mountain. Buses from the village bus station travel to three bus depots on the mountain: Wúxiǎngǎng (五显岗; Y20, 15 minutes), about a 20-minute walk below Qīngyīn Pavilion; Wànnián (万年; Y20, 45 minutes), below Wànnián Temple; and Léidǒngpíng (雷洞坪; Y40, 90 minutes), a few minutes' walk from Jīngdīng Cable Car.

Buses run roughly half-hourly from 6am to 5pm from 26 April to 31 October and from 7am to 4pm from 1 November to 25 April.

The last buses back down the mountain leave at 6pm (5pm in winter) from each of the three mountain bus depots. However, it is usually possible – especially during the summer – to get a seat on a private coach going back down the mountain. They keep running for at least an hour after the public buses stop. The ticket office at the mountain bus depots will help you get on one.

i Getting There & Away

The town of Éméi (峨眉山市; Éméi Shān Shì) lies 6.5km east of the mountain Éméi Shān and is the transport hub for the mountain. All buses to Éméi Shān terminate here – at the new **Éméi Shān Passenger Traffic Centre** (峨眉山客运中心; Éméi Shān Kèyùn Zhōngxīn), directly opposite Éméi Train Station (峨眉山火车站; Éméi Huǒchēzhàn). From here, it's a Y20 cab to Bàoguó Village, the gateway to the mountain. Alternatively, take Bus 1 (Y1) from outside Éméi bus station to Pēnshuǐ Chí (喷水池) bus stop, then take Bus 5 (Y1.50) from across the square to Bàoguó (报国).

Note, whilst it's not possible to travel direct to Bàoguó from most long-distance destinations, some long-distance buses do leave from Bàoguó (see below). If you want to head south to Zìgōng, you must leave from Éméi bus station (Y48, three hours, frequent services 7.50am to 3.30pm).

Buses from Bàoguó bus station include the following destinations:

Chéngdū Y45, 2½ hours, frequent services (8am to 6pm)

Chóngqīng Y115, six hours, one daily (8.30am)

Lèshān Y11, one hour, frequent services (8am to 5.30pm)

Train

Destinations from Éméi Train Station include the following:

Chéngdū seat Y24, 2½ hours, seven daily (5.53am to 11.28pm)

Kūnmíng sleeper Y224, 17 hours, three daily (3.35pm, 5.20pm and 6.16pm)

Xī'ān sleeper Y232, 19 hours, one daily (10.28am)

Lèshān

乐山

☎0833 / POP 156,000

With fingernails bigger than the average human, the world's tallest Buddha (see the boxed text, p955) draws plenty of tourists to this relaxed riverside town. It's an easy day

DON'T MISS

TOP 10 SICHUĀN TEAHOUSES

Sadly, in many parts of China, teahouses are shadows of their former selves. Not so in Sichuān, where tea culture still thrives and where you'll find some of the country's best remaining teahouses (茶馆; *chāguǎn*) and tea gardens (茶园; *cháyuán*). Here are our favourites:

- » **Wángyé Temple, Zigòng** Housed in an ochre-coloured, 100-year-old temple overlooking Fǔxī River (釜溪河; Fǔxī Hé).
- » **Huánhóu Palace, Zigòng** Surely the most dramatic entrance gate to any tea-house in China?
- » **Hèming Teahouse, People's Park, Chéngdū** Perfect people-watching material. Sip tea by the park lake, play cards or even get your ears de-waxed!
- » **Tibetan Restaurant, Gānzī** A riot of reds, blues and golds, this friendly teahouse, run by a local nun, is *the* place for yak-butter tea in Gānzī.
- » **Moon Reflection Tea Garden, Sōngpān** Beside the rushing waters of the Mǐn River and a favourite with mah jong–playing locals.
- » **Any teahouse by the river, Pínglè** Order a pot of China's finest and sit beside a wooden Ming-dynasty building while you watch other tourists punt their way along the river on bamboo rafts.
- » **Tibetan Culture Dew, Kāngdīng** Distinctly Chinese on the outside, but inside it's rustic-Tibetan, with stone walls and wood beams decorated in colourful prayer flags.
- » **Shàngqīng Temple, Qīngchéng Shān** Inside a Qing-dynasty wooden temple near the summit of Qīngchéng Taoist mountain.
- » **Yuèlái Teahouse, Chéngdū** Popular local teahouse that really comes into its own on Saturday afternoons when it holds intimate opera performances on a small stage.
- » **River Viewing Pavilion Park, Chéngdū** Tea gardens set among 150 varieties of bamboo.

trip from Chéngdū or a convenient stopover en route to or from Ēméi Shān.

While it's possible to see the Buddha and head onward the same day, Lèshān isn't a bad spot to hang out for a day or two. In the evenings, you can stroll the riverfront along Binhe Lu; in the large square near the intersection with Baita Jie, you may find fan dancers, ballroom dancers and even tango lessons under way.

Sights

Grand Buddha

BUDDHIST SITE

(大佛; Dàfó; adult ¥90; ☉7.30am-6.30pm Apr-early Oct, 8am-5.30pm early Oct-Mar) Lèshān's pride and joy is the serene, 1200-year-old Grand Buddha carved into a cliff face overlooking the confluence of the Dàdù River (大渡河; Dàdù Hé) and the Mǐn River. And at 71m tall, he's definitely big. His ears stretch for 7m, his shoulders span 28m, and each of his big toes is 8.5m long.

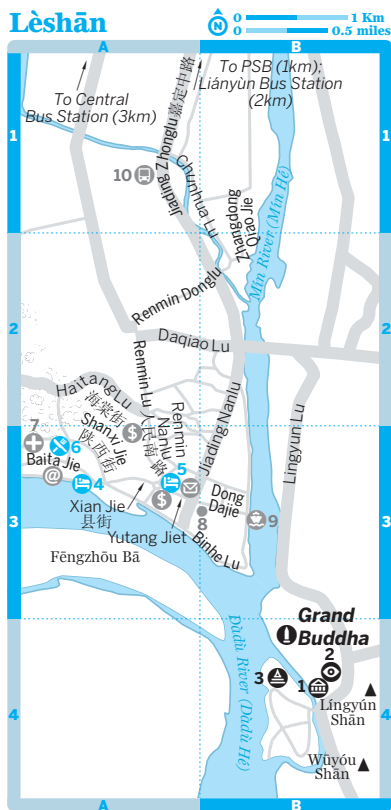
A Buddhist monk called Haitong conceived the project in AD 713, hoping that the Buddha would calm the swift rivers

and protect boatmen from lethal currents. The huge project wasn't completed until 90 years after Haitong's death but eventually, just as he had once wished, the river waters calmed. Locals say it was the Grand Buddha's calming effect. Sceptics say it was due to the lengthy construction process in which surplus rocks from the sculpting filled the river hollows.

Inside the body, hidden from view, is a water-drainage system to prevent weathering, although Dàfó is showing his age and soil erosion is an ongoing problem.

To fully appreciate the Buddha's magnitude, get an up-close look at his head, then descend the steep, winding stairway for the Lilliputian view. Avoid visiting on weekends or holidays, when traffic on the staircase can come to a complete standstill.

Admission to the Buddha includes access to a number of caves and temples on the grounds and to the **Máhào'yá Tombs Museum** (麻浩崖墓博物馆; Máhào'yámù Bówǔguǎn), which has a modest collection



Lèshān

☉ Top Sights

Grand Buddha.....B4

☉ Sights

- 1 Mháoyá Tombs Museum.....B4
 2 Oriental Buddhist Theme Park.....B4
 3 Wūyóu Temple.....B4

🏠 Sleeping

- 4 Jiāzhōu HotelA3
 5 Post & Telecommunication
 HotelA3

✕ Eating

- 6 Yang's Restaurant.....A3

Information

- 7 People's Hospital.....A3
 8 Photo Shop.....B3

Transport

- 9 Ferry Dock.....B3
 10 Xiàobà Bus Station.....A1

of tombs and burial artefacts dating from the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220).

Also included in the ticket price is **Wūyóu Temple** (乌尤寺; Wūyóu Sì), which, like the Grand Buddha, dates from the Tang dynasty, with Ming and Qing renovations. This monastery also contains calligraphy, painting and artefacts, but the highlight is the hall of 1000 terracotta arhat (Buddhist celestial beings, similar to angels) displaying an incredible variety of postures and facial expressions – no two are alike. Also inside the 1909 **Luóhàn Hall**, where the arhat are housed, is a fantastic statue of **Avalokiteshvara**, the Sanskrit name of the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin in Chinese).

One sight on the grounds that requires a separate ticket is the recently constructed **Oriental Buddhist Theme Park** (东方佛都; Dōngfāng Fódū; admission Y70), housing 3000 Buddha statues and figurines from around

Asia, including a 170m-long reclining Buddha, said to be the world's longest.

Bus 13 (Y1) travels from Xiàobà bus station and loops through the town centre (you can catch it on Dong Dajie) before crossing the river to reach the Grand Buddha Scenic Area and Wūyóu Temple.

You could charge through the Grand Buddha area in a couple of hours, but allowing at least a half-day would be more relaxed.

👉 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. Large **tour boats** (Y50, 30 minutes) and smaller **speedboats** (Y50, 15 to 20 minutes) both leave regularly from the ferry dock (旅游船码头; *lǚyóuchuán mǎtóu*). They run from 7.30am to 6.30pm (1 April to 7 October) or from 8am to 5.30pm (8 October to 31 March).

The affable **Mr Yang** (☎211 2046, 130 3645 6184; richardyangmin@yahoo.com.cn; Yang's Restaurant, 2f 186 Baita Jie), of Yang's Restaurant fame, arranges a village visit as a day trip for foreign tourists that includes a calligraphy demonstration, an old-town tour and a visit to a local school. He charges Y200 per person including transport, lunch and his services as an English-

speaking guide. Call ahead and he'll meet you at the bus station.

Sleeping & Eating

Jiāzhōu Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(嘉州宾馆; Jiāzhōu Bīnguǎn; ☎213 9888; 85 Baita Jie; 白塔街85号; r incl breakfast from Y360; 📞📧) Rooms aren't quite as grand as the lobby suggests, but this place is more upmarket than most and makes for a very comfortable stay. Third-floor rooms and above have internet connection for laptop users, and many rooms, even some of the cheapies, have river views. Standard twins often go for Y220.

Post & Telecommunication Hotel

HOTEL \$

(邮电宾馆; Yóudiàn Bīnguǎn; ☎211 1788; 82 Yutang Jie; 玉堂街82号; tw incl breakfast Y148, with computer Y168; 📞📧) The orange and peach colour scheme is a little garish, but this place is clean and quiet. It's set back from the street behind the post office (go through the car park to the hotel entrance).

Yang's Restaurant

SICHUAN \$

(杨家餐厅; Yángjiā Cāntīng; 2f 186 Baita Jie; 白塔街186号2层; dishes Y15-25; ☎6-9pm) Octogenarian and travel guru Mr Yang and his wife run this small restaurant in the living room of their home. They serve simple but tasty local food and he may regale you with tales of his life while you eat.

Lots of small restaurants are hidden away on Lèshān's side streets. For dumplings, noodles and other quick bites, try Dong Dajie and the surrounding streets between the post office and the river. There are more small eateries and fruit stalls on Xian Jie west of the roundabout and along Baita Jie and Shanxi Jie.

Information

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; 16 Renmin Nanlu) Changes money and travellers cheques, offers cash advances on credit cards and has foreign-friendly ATM. Another ATM near the Post & Telecommunication Hotel.

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; 62 Yutang Jie)

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y2;

☎24hr) Opposite Yang's Restaurant; 2nd floor. There are others dotted around town. Just look for the characters 网吧.

People's Hospital (人民医院; Rénmín Yīyuàn; ☎211 9310, after-hr emergencies 211 9328; 238 Baita Jie) Has some English-speaking doctors.

Photo shop (世界图片社; Shìjiè Túpiànshe; 139 Dong Dajie; 东大街139号; ☎9am-8.30pm) CD burning per disk Y10.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 省公安厅外事科; Gōng'ānjú; ☎518 2555; 243 Jiading Beilu; 嘉定北路243号; ☎9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Visa extensions in two days. North of town, on corner of Bailu Lu (百禄路); take Bus 1 (Y1) or a taxi (Y5 to Y6) from the centre.

Getting There & Around

Lèshān has three bus stations, all north of the centre. Buses from Chéngdū's Xinnánmén station arrive at Xiàobà bus station (肖坝车站; Xiàobà chēzhàn), but Central bus station (乐山客运中心车站; Lèshān Kèyùn Zhōngxīn chēzhàn) is bigger and has more frequent services to more destinations. You may also be dropped at Liányùn bus station (联运车站; Liányùn chēzhàn).

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

Bus services from Xiàobà bus station include the following destinations:

Chéngdū Y45 to Y51, two hours, every 30 minutes (7am to 7pm)

Chóngqing Y104, six hours, one daily (10.40am)

Éméi Shān (Bàoguó) Y11, one hour, every hour (8am to 5.30pm)

Éméi town (Éméi Shì) Y8, one hour, every 30 minutes (7am to 6.30pm)

Yǎ'ān Y55, two hours, three daily (9.30am, 1.50pm and 4.10pm)

Services from Central bus station include the following:

Chéngdū Y45 to Y51, two hours, every 20 minutes (7am to 7.25pm)

Chóngqing Y104, six hours, hourly (7.10am to 4.30pm)

Éméi town Y8, one hour, every 15 minutes (8am to 6pm)

Jiājiāng Y7, one hour, every 40 minutes (7.30am to 6pm)

Kāngding Y129, eight hours, one daily (9.30am)

Local buses cost Y1. Some handy routes:

Bus 1 Liányùn bus station-PSB-Xiàobà bus station-town centre

Bus 6 Xiàobà bus station-town centre

Bus 13 Xiàobà bus station-town centre-Grand Buddha-Wūyóu Temple

Bus 9 Central bus station-Xiàobà bus station-town centre

Lángzhōng

📍0817 / POP 112,000

Seemingly endless black-tile roofs with swooping eaves overlooking the narrowest of alleys; flagstone streets lined with tiny shops; temples atop misty hills above a river. If you're looking for fast-disappearing 'old China' details like these, hop on a bus to the town of Lángzhōng, Sīchuān's capital city for 17 years during the Qing dynasty and home to the province's largest grouping of extant traditional architecture.

Despite Lángzhōng's increasing tourist development, the old town (古镇; *gǔzhèn*) is still largely home to locals who go about their day-to-day business – seamstresses working at sewing machines, herbalists dispensing medical treatments, and schoolchildren laughing and chattering through the lanes.

👁️ Sights

Lángzhōng's eclectic mix of sights showcases the town's rich history, allows visitors to walk through restored courtyard-style homes, and highlights the town's layout according to feng shui principles. Most attractions have an English-language overview sign, but inside, English captions vary from some to none. Most people will also be happy just wandering the alleys and gazing at the architecture – a blend of North China quadrangle and South China garden styles.

There's some good exploring to be done across the river, south of the old town. At the foot of one hill sits the sedate-looking **Grand Buddha** (大佛寺; Dàfó Sì), one of the largest Buddha statues in Sīchuān. Nearby, among Buddhist statuary, grottoes and caves littering the hillsides, is **No 1 Scholars Cave** (状元洞; Zhuànguān Dòng), where two legendary court officials crammed for their examinations.

For bird's-eye views of the town's rooftops and lanes, climb to the top of either of two towers: **Huánguāng Lóu** (华光楼; Dadong Jie; admission Y15), just past the Fēng Shuǐ Museum and rebuilt in 1867, or **Zhōngtiān Lóu** (中天楼; Wumiao Jie; admission Y10), a 2006 rebuild on the way to Zhāng Fēi Temple.

A Y80 combination ticket admits you to the towers and the three attractions listed below. You can buy individual tickets too. Many smaller sights charge admission as well, including some of the beautifully restored courtyard homes (typically around Y4); if you're not staying or stopping for

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lunch in a courtyard home, it's well worth a peek into at least one.

Zhāng Fēi Temple

TEMPLE

(张飞庙; Zhāngfēi Miào; Xi Jie; admission Y40) This temple is the tomb of and shrine to local boy Zhang Fei, a respected general during the kingdom of Shu, who administered the kingdom from here. It's on Xi Jie (西街), a continuation of Wumiao Jie (武庙街).

Fēng Shuǐ Museum

MUSEUM

(风水馆; Fēngshuǐ Guǎn; Dadong Jie; admission Y20) This museum includes a model of the town, illustrating its feng shui-inspired design. A helpful English-speaking guide is sometimes available here. It's next to Tiānyī Youth Hotel on Dadong Jie (大东街).

Gòng Yuàn

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

(贡院; Xuedao Jie; admission Y35) Among the best-preserved imperial examination halls in China. On Xuedao Jiē (学道街), which is parallel to Wumiao Jie, one block north.

🛏️ Sleeping

There are dozens of renovated courtyard guesthouses; look for signs saying 客栈 (*kèzhàn*; guesthouse) or 住宿 (*zhùsù*; lodgings).

TOP CHOICE Li Family Courtyard

COURTYARD \$\$

(李家大院; Lǐjiā Dàyuàn; 📍623 6500; 47 Wumiao Jie; 武庙街47号; r from Y368) You used to have to pay just to look inside this gorgeous 500-year-old courtyard home. Now you can stay in it! Immaculate twins and doubles, with dinky little bathrooms, are off three small courtyards and were going for Y128 when we were there. See p277 for directions to Wumiao Jie.

Tiānyī Youth Hotel

GUESTHOUSE \$

(天一青年旅舍; Tiānyī Qīngnián Lǚshè; 📍622 5501; 100 Dadong Jie; 大东街100号; d/tw without bathroom Y90/98, with bathroom Y188, discounts of 20%; 📞) If you want to improve your geomancy, settle into this inn beside the Fēng Shuǐ Museum. Each of the stylish doubles is inspired by a feng shui element: earth, wood, fire, metal or water. The shared-bathroom twins and doubles are simpler but still crisp and clean, with lots of natural wood. See p277 for directions to Dadong Jie.

🍴 Eating

Lángzhōng has long been one of China's major vinegar production centres – everything is pickled here! Otherwise, famed local fare includes *zhāngfēi niúròu* (张飞牛

肉; preserved water-buffalo beef) and *táng guōkuī* (糖锅盔; slightly sweetened pita-bread pockets; Y1).

There's an interesting **market** (市场; *shìchǎng*) off Dadong Jie where you can pick up fruit, vegetables and skinned pig's faces.

Zhāngfēi Zhuāngyuán

SICHUAN \$

(张飞庄园; ☎622 9659; 4 Wumiao Jie; 武庙街4号; dishes Y4-10; ☉9am-8.30pm) The old town has plenty of noodle joints, but this large eatery with wooden tables and benches opens to the street. The ordinary beef noodles (牛肉面; *niúròu miàn*; Y5) are good, but you really should try the house special *zhāngfēi niúròu* (Y13 to Y15), which are delicious and come with side dishes of soup, cold beef slices and *xiáncài*, the local-speciality pickled vegetables.



Entertainment

North Sichuan Shadow Puppetry THEATRE (川北皮影; Chuānběi Píyǐng; ☎623 8668; 67-69 Wumiao Jie; 武庙街67-69号; tickets Y10; ☉8-10pm) Informal but fun 20-minute performances of north Sichuan shadow puppetry are held in the small open-air courtyard here. They need at least four people for the show to start. It's a couple of doors down from Lǐ Family Courtyard.



Information

Along the river at the eastern end of the old town, a **tourist information centre** (游客中心; Yóukè Zhōngxīn) has flashy touch-screen computers illustrating the town's sights, and some staffers speak some English. For **street maps** (地图; *dìtú*), you can pick up better versions (free to Y10) at shops around town or at some tourist sights. Multilingual signs and maps are posted throughout the old town's streets.

The **Bank of China ATM** (cnr Dadong Jie & Neidong Jie) at the top end of Dadong Jie is foreign-card friendly and there's an **internet cafe** (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y3; ☉8am-midnight) on Maojia Xiang (毛家巷) off Bailishi Jie (百里树街), a lane just outside the old town running parallel to Dadong Jie.



Getting There & Away

Buses from Chéngdū's Běimén bus station arrive at Kèyùn Zhōngxīn Qìchēzhàn (客运中心汽车站), the main bus station here, which also serves Chóngqing (Y109, five hours, 7.20am, 8.40am, 9.40am, 10.50am and 2pm). Buses returning to Chéngdū leave between 6.40am and 5.30pm.

Lǎngzhōng also has a smaller bus station, Bāshíjǔ Duì (89队), which serves Guǎngyuán (Y49, four hours, 8am, 9am, noon and 2pm),

from where you can catch trains north to Xī'ān or buses west to Jiúzhàiǒu. A local bus, labelled simply 89队 (*bāshíjǔ duì*; Y2, 20 minutes), connects the two stations.

For the old town (古镇; *gǔzhèn*), get off this bus at the Rénmín Hospital stop (人民医院; Rénmín Yiyuàn). If you're coming from the main bus station, keep walking in the same direction the bus was going, then turn left at the first lights, onto Tianshangong Jie (天上宫街) and keep walking straight. Dadong Jie will be on your left. Wumiao Jie will be straight on.

SOUTHERN SICHUAN

Not often on the radar of foreign tourists, steamy southern Sichuan is for those who prefer things a little offbeat. Quirky sights here include dinosaur fossils, ancient cliff-face hanging coffins and a bamboo forest. It's also home to some of China's very best teahouses.

Zìgòng

自贡

☎0813 / POP 693,000

This intriguing, rarely visited riverside city has been an important centre of Chinese salt production for almost 2000 years. Remnants of that industry make up part of an unconventional list of sights that includes the world's deepest traditional salt well and Asia's first dinosaur museum. Zìgòng is also the undisputed king of Sichuan teahouses, so there's plenty of opportunity to while away the hours here if you fancy putting your feet up for a day.

Sights

Salt Industry History Museum

MUSEUM

(盐业历史博物馆; Yányè Lìshǐ Bówùguǎn; 89 Dongxing Si; 东兴寺89号; admission Y20; ☉8.30am-5pm) This absorbing museum, housed in a beautiful 270-year-old guildhall, is devoted to the region's salt industry and does an excellent job of telling the story through old photographs, good English captions and a modest collection of exhibits. The building itself, though, built by Shaanxi salt merchants in 1736, threatens to steal the show with its cool stone courtyards, intricate woodcarvings and wonderful swooping eaves.

To get here from the hotels, walk down the hill and turn left onto Jiefang Lu (解放路). The museum will be on your right after about 500m.

Shēnhǎi Salt Well

SALT WELL

(燊海井; Shēnhǎi Jǐng; ☎510 1721; 289 Da'an Jie; 大安街289号; admission Y20; ☀8.30am-5pm) This 1001m-deep artesian salt well was the world's deepest well when it was built in 1835 and it remains the deepest salt well ever drilled using the traditional mining technique of percussion drilling.

Many of the original parts, including a 20m-high wooden derrick that towers above the tiny 20cm-wide mouth of the well, are still intact, and the well still operates as a salt provider, although on a much smaller scale than before. Nine salt cauldrons are still in operation and visitors can see them bubbling away beside rows of the 2ft-high blocks of salt that came from them.

There are excellent English captions explaining how bamboo was once used for brine pipes, how buffaloes used to turn the heavy winch (an electric motor is used these days) and how tofu was added to the brine to help separate impurities.

Take bus 5 or 35 (Y1) from opposite the Róngguāng Business Hotel. Bus 35 continues to the Dinosaur Museum.

Dinosaur Museum

MUSEUM

(恐龙馆; Kǒnglóng Guǎn; ☎580 1235; 238 Dashan Pu, Da'an District; 大安区大山铺238号; admission Y42; ☀8.30am-5.30pm) As if a still-working ancient salt well wasn't quirky enough, Zìgōng is also home to Asia's first museum dedicated entirely to dinosaurs. Built on top of an excavation site, which has

WORTH A TRIP**SICHUAN'S MYSTERIOUS HANGING COFFINS**

Travellers looking to get off the beaten track might want to consider a trip to the remote corner of southeast Sichuan, home to one of the province's most unusual and most mysterious sights: the Hanging Coffins of the ancient Bo people. The origins and eventual disappearance of the Bo continue to baffle archaeologists. It is thought they may be distant relatives of the Tujia, who can still be found scattered around the Three Gorges area, particularly in southwestern Húběi and northwestern Húnán. However, almost everything we know about the Bo has been gleaned from the sites of their coffins, which can still be found resting on wooden stakes, hammered into the side of cliffs up to 1000 years ago.

We know, for instance, from crude paintings found on some of the cliff faces, that the Bo were keen horsemen with a sharp social divide. Adult skeletons that have been recovered have also shown that the Bo knocked out their own teeth whilst still alive, although exactly why they practised this custom is still unknown.

There are hanging coffins at a few sites in this part of China, but at **Luòbiǎo** (洛表) the **hanging coffins** (悬棺; xuánguān; admission Y20; ☀8am-6pm) are found in greater numbers than elsewhere and are reasonably accessible.

At one time there were more than 300 coffins here, although about one-third have fallen to the ground as their support stakes gradually rotted away.

There's a small, free-to-enter museum just inside the site entrance with old photos and a coffin you can inspect up close. About 100m on, you'll find a large collection of coffins with steps leading up to a better vantage point. About 2km further on is another impressive collection of coffins.

One of the reasons this place is so rarely visited is that it's a pain in the neck to get here. First you need to get to the grim coal-mining town of Gōngxiàn (珙县), which you can reach on buses from either Yíbīn (Y20, one hour, every 20 minutes from 6.30am to 7pm) or Chángníng (Y10.50 or Y13, one hour, frequent services from 5.50am to 6.10pm) near the Bamboo Sea. At Gōngxiàn, catch a bus to Luòbiǎo (Y15, two hours 45 minutes, every 20 minutes from 6am to 5pm), from where you can walk (40 minutes; take the right fork) or take a motorcycle taxi (Y5) to the entrance. The last bus back to Gōngxiàn leaves at 5.20pm.

Locals say the area is at its most photogenic first thing in the morning as the sun rises opposite the cliffs, so you may want to consider arriving the evening before and staying at one of the cheap guesthouses by the bus station. The coffins are Luòbiǎo's only tourist sight but you could fill any spare time with walks around the fabulous surrounding countryside.

one of the world's largest concentrations of dinosaur fossils, this museum has a fabulous collection of reassembled skeletons as well as half-buried dinosaur bones left in situ for visitors to see.

Dinosaur fossils started being discovered here in 1972 and their high numbers baffled archaeologists at first. It is now believed the skeletons were dumped here en masse from other sites in the region by huge floods.

Take bus 35 (Y1, 30 minutes) from opposite Róngguāng Business Hotel.



Sleeping

Róngguāng Business Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(容光商务酒店; Róngguāng Shāngwù Jiǔdiàn; ☎211 9999; 25 Ziyou Lu; 自由路25号; tw & d incl breakfast Y288-328; ㊟) Large, smart rooms with friendly staff, internet access for laptop users and free-to-use computers on the 4th floor, where you also get your free buffet breakfast. Rooms are discounted to Y120 and Y160. To get here, take bus 1 or 35 from the bus station or bus 34 from the train station.

Xióngfēi Holiday Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(雄飞假日酒店; Xióngfēi Jiàri Jiǔdiàn; ☎211 8888; 193 Jiefang Lu; 解放路193号; r from Y600; ㊟) For a bit more class, although not a lot more comfort in the standard rooms, try this upmarket place a few doors down from Róngguāng Business Hotel on the corner of Ziyou Lu and Jiefang Lu. Rooms were going for half-price when we were here.



Eating & Drinking

Evenings here are all about *shāokǎo* (烧烤; barbecue), with stalls spilling onto the pavement around Róngguāng Business Hotel as well as elsewhere around town. Zigong locals love their rabbit meat (兔肉; *tùròu*) and the skewers on offer include rabbit.

If you fancy a break from fiery Sichuan cuisine, try the small dumplings restaurant, just up the hill from Róngguāng, which does delicious Tiānjīn-style boiled dumplings (小笼包; *xiǎolóng bāo*; Y4 per basket) and rice porridge (稀饭; *xīfàn*; Y1) and is open from 6am to 8pm. Look for the piles of bamboo baskets.



Wángyé Temple TEAHOUSE \$
(王爷庙; Wángyé Miào; Binjiang Lu; 滨江路; teas from Y4, dishes Y8-20; ☎8.30am-11pm) There are many wonderful teahouses in Zigong, particularly along the river, but this one, housed within the ochre-coloured

TOP FIVE SICHUANESE DISHES

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

walls of a 100-year-old temple, is one of the nicest you'll find anywhere in Sichuan. Perched above the Fūxī River (釜溪河; Fūxī Hé), it sits opposite Fàzàng Temple (法藏寺; Fàzàng Sì). Apparently, the pair were built to ensure safe passage for cargo boats transporting salt downstream. Now locals hang out here, drink tea, play cards and admire the river view. It's also a fine spot for lunch, with all the usual Sichuan favourites as well as rabbit hotpot (鲜锅兔; *xiānguō tù*; Y50) and a tasty fried rabbit dish (小煎兔; *xiǎojiān tù*; Y16), although food is only served between 11am and 1pm. From the hotels listed above, walk down to the river, turn left and follow the river for about 750m.

Huánhóu Palace TEAHOUSE \$
(桓侯宫; Huánhóu Gōng; Zhonghua Lu; 中华路; teas Y4-8; ☎8.30am-8pm) Another fabulous Zigong teahouse, this one is housed inside an 1868 butchers guildhall with a dramatic stone facade, wood-beamed courtyard interior and old stone stage. It's on your left as you walk towards the salt museum from the hotels listed above.



Information

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; Ziyou Lu) Foreign-friendly ATM next to Róngguāng Business Hotel.

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbǎ; per hr Y1.50; ☎24hr) Up an alley beside the bank.



Getting There & Around

Bus
Destinations from Zigong bus station include the following:

Chéngdū Y60 to Y75, 3½ hours, every 30 minutes (6.30am to 7pm)

Chóngqing Y74, 3½ hours, frequent services (6.40am to 6.30pm)

Éméi Shān Y48, 3½ hours, frequent services (6.10am to 5pm)

Lèshān Y41, three hours, frequent services (6.10am to 5pm)

Yibin Y26, one hour, every 30 minutes (7.30am to 7pm)

Local Buses

To get to either of the hotels we list here, walk out of the bus station, turn right and walk 200m to the first bus stop. Then take bus 1 or 35 (Y1) six stops to Shízi Kǒu (十字口) bus stop. The hotels are opposite and down the hill a bit from the bus stop. From the train station, take bus 34 (Y1) to Bīnjiāng Lù (滨江路) bus stop. From there, walk back 100m and turn left up Ziyou Lu.

Train

Destinations from the train station include the following:

Chéngdū seat Y20 to Y41, six to seven hours, three daily (9.26am, 9.40am and 10.05am)

Chóngqing seat Y25 to Y29, seven hours, two daily (8.27am and 2.10pm)

Kúnmíng sleeper Y207/126, 16/18½ hours, two daily (fast 3.13pm, slow 8.02pm)

Yibin seat Y5.50 to Y13, 1½ hours, 11 daily (3.49am to 11.03pm)

Yibin

宜宾

This relatively modern, mid-sized Chinese city has little in the way of tourist sights but acts as a travel hub for trips to the Bamboo Sea and the Hanging Coffins.

The good-value **Jingmào Hotel** (经贸宾馆; Jingmào Bīnguǎn; ☎0831-701 0888; 108 Minzhu Lu; 民主路108号; tw Y258-308; @), where discounts bring rates down to Y130 to Y150, is a smart choice in the centre of town.

The lanes behind the hotel are lined with **barbecue stalls** (烧烤; shāokǎo) every evening. In the daytime, look for *ránmiàn* (然面), a delicious fried noodle dish and a local favourite.

On the 2nd floor of the building next to Jingmào Hotel is an **internet cafe** (per hour Y2; ☺24hr). For a foreign-friendly **ATM**, turn right out of the hotel, then right again at the lights. Bank of China will be on your right before you reach the river.

i Getting There & Around

Bus

Most travellers will arrive in Yibin at the new Gāokè bus station (高客站; Gāokè zhàn), north

of the centre. Take bus 4 (Y1, 10 minutes) into town and get off at Xǔfú Shāngchéng (叙府商城) bus stop on Renmin Lu (人民路). Turn right at the lights ahead of you and Jingmào Hotel will be on your left.

Continue on bus 4 to get to Nánkè bus station (南客站; Nánkè Zhàn) for buses to the Bamboo Sea (竹海; Zhúhǎi; Y20, 90 minutes, 9.30am and 10am) and the Hanging Coffins in Luòbiǎo (洛表; Y32, three hours, 2.05pm). If you miss the direct buses to the Bamboo Sea, go via Chángníng (长宁; Y13.50, one hour, every 15 minutes from 6.45am to 7.30pm). If the direct Luòbiǎo bus isn't convenient, go via Gōngxiàn (珙县; Y16, one hour, every 20 minutes from 6.30am to 7pm).

Consider visiting the Hanging Coffins from the Bamboo Sea, as buses from Chángníng go to Gōngxiàn.

Buses from Yibin's Gāokè bus station include the following destinations:

Chéngdū Y90 to Y106, four hours, frequent services (7.30am to 7pm)

Chóngqing Y96 to Y108, four hours, frequent services (6.50am to 7pm)

Éméi Shān Y78, 4½ hours, three daily (8.20am, 12.10pm and 1.10pm)

Lèshān Y68, four hours, five daily (9am, 10.40am, 11.20am, 2.20pm and 4.10pm)

Zigong Y26, one hour, frequent services (7.30am to 7pm)

Train

Bus 11 links the train station with Gāokè bus station and passes by the end of Renmin Lu. Trains leaving from Yibin train station (火车站; huǒchē zhàn) include the following destinations:

Chéngdū seat Y25 to Y51, 7½ to nine hours, three daily (8am, 8.08am and 8.28am)

Chóngqing seat Y31 to Y36, nine hours, two daily (6.34am and 12.35pm)

Kúnmíng sleeper Y117/191, 17/15 hours, two daily (slow 4.45pm, fast 9.28pm)

Zigong seat Y5.50 to Y13, 1½ hours, 11 daily (1.10am to 3.40pm)

Bamboo Sea

蜀南竹海

Swaths of swaying bamboo forest, well-marked walking trails and a handful of charming lakes and waterfalls make south Sichuan's Bamboo Sea, or **Shūnán Zhúhǎi** (adult Y90), a worthwhile detour for those heading south.

There are more than 30 types of bamboo across this 120-sq-km national park and the scenery is gorgeous enough to have attracted many a TV and film director.

The villages of **Wànlíng** (万岭), near the west gate, and **Wànlǐ** (万里), near the east gate, are the main two settlements inside the park and your best bet for a base. Both have walking options nearby, but one possibility is to hike between the two. It's about 11km if you follow the road the whole way, but various loops within scenic areas mean you'll probably end up walking a lot more than that. Expect to take at least half a day. Two possible **cable car** (索道; *suǒdào*) rides can shorten your walking distances considerably, and are a great way to see the forest from another angle.

From Wànlíng, it takes about 20 minutes to reach the **Guānguāng cable car** (观光索道; *Guānguāng Suǒdào*, one way/return Y30/40; ☀8am-5pm), a 25-minute trip which takes you over some stunning bamboo forests. There's a nice forest loop you can walk (about one hour) just beyond the entrance to the cable car. Once you've ridden the cable car, turn right as you exit to reach the 10-minute **Dàxiágǔ cable car** (大峡谷索道; *Dàxiágǔ Suǒdào*; one way/return Y20/30; ☀8.30am-5.30pm), which crosses a dramatic gorge and leads into another scenic area with a number of trails, some of which pass by two lakes. Leaving this area, head for Sānhé Jiè (三合界), a junction where you can find accommodation. Turn right here for the final 30-minute walk to Wànlǐ village.

Two waterfalls near Wànlǐ are worth a look. To get to **Rainbow Falls** (七彩飞瀑; *Qīcǎi Fēipù*), either follow the lake by the village or turn right before it and walk along the road for about 1km to the signposted main gate. You can continue down past these falls to **Golden Dragon Falls** (金龙瀑布; *Jīnlóng Pùbù*). This is off the tourist maps so pretty quiet, although you do have to pay Y10 to an enterprising old man for right of passage. You can climb back up to the main road through a wonderfully peaceful bamboo forest.

If you're hiking you'll pass numerous guesthouses and hotels along the way. In Wànlíng, try **Chéngbīnlóu Jiǔdiàn** (承宾楼酒店; ☎0831-498 0104; s/tw Y180/200, discounted to Y60/80). Wànlǐ also has plenty of accommodation, but for somewhere more tranquil walk 1km beyond Wànlǐ to **Zhúyùn Shānzhuāng** (竹韵山庄; ☎497 9001, 138 9092 5673; r from Y360), opposite the main gate to Rainbow Falls. It backs onto a quiet lake, and spotless rooms with private bathroom were going for Y60 when we were here.

All guesthouses and hotels do food too. It's generally pretty good, although more expensive than outside the park. Alternatively, look out for one of the cheap noodle restaurants (面馆; *miànguǎn*) in Wànlíng or Wànlǐ.

i Getting There & Around

There's a **map** on the back of your entrance ticket, and you can get hold of maps in the park, but the easiest to use and most detailed maps are the ones drawn on wooden boards throughout the park. Take a photo of one to guide you. All the main sights are signposted too.

Motorbike taxis can take you between the two main villages (around Y50, 45 minutes) if you decide not to walk.

Bus

Buses into the park stop at the west gate to allow you to get off and buy your entrance ticket, before passing through Wànlíng then terminating at Wànlǐ.

There are two direct buses from Wànlǐ back to Yibin (Y20, 90 minutes, 7am and 1.10pm), although times can change, so check when you get here. Both pass Wànlíng (30 minutes) and, if you ask, will drop you at the junction for Chángning (one hour), where you can change for Gōngxiàn to get to the Hanging Coffins.

WESTERN SICHUAN

North and west of Chéngdū, green tea becomes butter tea, Confucianism yields to Buddhism and gumdrop hills leap into jagged snowy peaks. Welcome to Tibet, in all but name.

This part of Sichuan makes up a large chunk of what Tibetans refer to as Kham (in Chinese 康巴; *Kāngbā*), one of old Tibet's three traditional provinces, and is home to the Khampas, a Tibetan ethnic group known throughout Tibetan history for being fierce warriors.

Western Sichuan experiences up to 200 freezing days per year, but summers can be blistering by day and the high altitude invites particularly bad sunburn.

Kāngdìng (Dardo)

康定

☎0836 / POP 82,000 / ELEV 2616M

Coming from the Chéngdū area, there are two main gateways into Tibetan Sichuan. One option is Dānbā, but by far the most popular is Kāngdìng, and for many travellers this will be their first taste of the Tibetan world.



BRING PLENTY OF CHINESE CASH

At the time of research it was impossible to change money or travellers cheques, get advances on credit cards or use ATMs with foreign bank cards anywhere in western Sichuān apart from Kāngding. The one handy anomaly was the ATM in Xiāngchéng, near the border with Yúnnán, which accepted VISA cards.

The town has long been a trade centre between Chinese and Tibetan cultures and you'll find elements of both here.

Set in a steep river valley at the confluence of the raging Zhéduō and Yālā Rivers (known as the Dar and Tse in Tibetan), with the towering Gōnggā Shān (7556m) beyond, Kāngding is famous throughout China for a popular love song inspired by the town's surrounding scenery.

👁 Sights

Monasteries

MONASTERIES

There are several small monasteries in and around Kāngding. The central **Ānjué Temple** (安觉寺; Ānjué Sì; Ngachu Gompa in Tibetan) dates back to 1652 and was built under the direction of the fifth Dalai Lama.

Nánwú Temple (南无寺; Nánwú Sì) belongs to the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) sect of Tibetan Buddhism and is the most active monastery in the area. It also affords good views of Kāngding and the valley. Walk south along the main road, cross the river and keep going for about 200m until you see a rusty old sign (in traditional Chinese characters: 南無寺) for the monastery on your right. Follow that track uphill, beside a stream, and the monastery will be on your right.

Nearby, about 100m further along the main road, is **Jīngāng Temple** (金剛寺; Jīngāng Sì), a 400-year-old Nyingma monastery set around a lawned courtyard. Turn right at the sign for Knapsack Inn.

Other Sights

SCENIC AREAS

You can head up **Pǎomǎ Shān** (admission Y50) for excellent views of Kāngding and the surrounding mountains and valleys. The ascent takes you past oodles of prayer flags, several Buddhist temples and up to a white *chörten* (Tibetan stupa). Avoid hiking alone, as a British tourist was murdered here in 2000 and one or two muggings have been reported.

Two sets of steps lead up the hill, or you can take the **cable car** (索道; suǒdào; one way/return Y20/30). By the entrance to the cable car is a small **Tibetan museum** (admission Y30; ☎8am-6pm).

Ērdào Bridge Hot Springs

HOT SPRINGS

(二道温泉; Ērdào Wēnuǎn; admission Y10-120; ☎7am-midnight) About 5km north of Kāngding, these springs are a pleasant 45-minute walk along the Yālā River, or take a cab (Y8).

🌟 Festivals & Events

Kāngding's biggest annual festival, the **Walking Around the Mountain Festival** (Zhuànshānjié), takes place on Pǎomǎ Shān on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month (normally in May) 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.

🛏 Sleeping

Yōngzhū Hotel

GUESTHOUSE \$

(拥珠驿栈; Yōngzhū Yìzhàn; ☎283 2381, 159 8373 8188; dm Y30-40, d Y120-160) Hidden in a lane beside Kāngding Hotel off Guangming Lu, this small, friendly guesthouse has comfortable, well-kept rooms, including three- and four-bed dorms, decorated with colourful Tibetan furnishings and built around an inner atrium. There's 24-hour hot water in both the common and private bathrooms.

Kāngding Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(康定宾馆; Kāngding Bīnguǎn; ☎283 2077; 25 Guangming Lu; 光明路25号; r from Y360; 📞@) For something more comfortable, this decent midranger, right beside Ānjué Temple, had standard twins going for Y240 when we were there.

Dēngbā Hostel

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

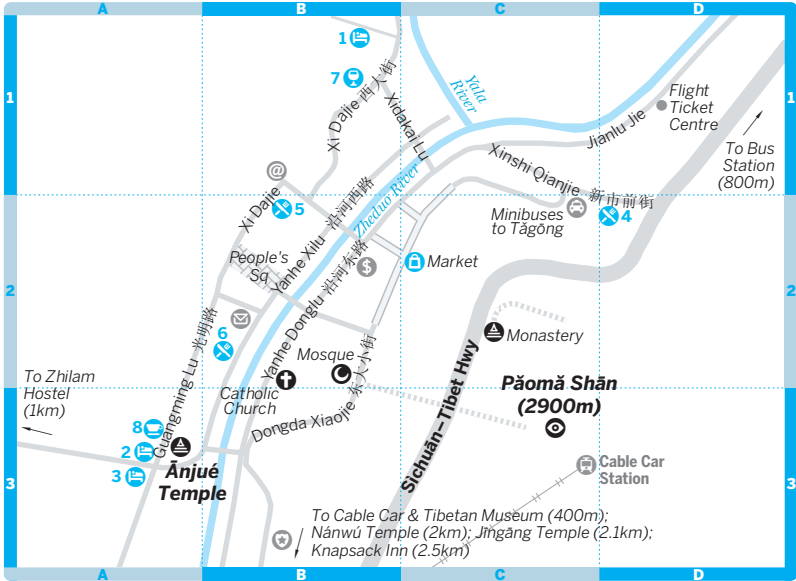
(登巴客栈; Dēngbā Kèzhàn; ☎282 3009; 6 Bei'er Xiang; 西大街北二巷; dm/s/tw Y25/30/60; 📞@📞) Tatty but very welcoming hostel with small rooms. Common showers and toilets only. Self-service laundry and bike rental (per day Y20 to Y30). Off Xo Dajie.

Two hostels that were closed at the time of research, but which generally get good reviews from travellers:

Zhīlam Hostel

HOSTEL \$\$

(汇道客栈; Huìdào Kèzhàn; ☎283 1100; www.zhīlamhostel.com; Bái Tǔkǎn Cūn; 白土坎村;



Kāngdìng (Dardo)

📍 Top Sights

- Ānjué Temple A3
- Pǎomǎ Shān (2900m) C3

🏠 Sleeping

- 1 Dēngbā Hostel B1
- 2 Kāngdìng Hotel A3
- 3 Yōngzhū Hotel A3

🍴 Eating

- 4 Ā'Rè Tibetan Restaurant D2
- 5 Barbecue Stalls B2
- 6 Tibetan Culture Dew B2

☕ Drinking

- 7 Happiness in Heaven B1
- 8 Village Window A3

dm/d Oct-Apr Y35/260, May-Sep Y60/450;

🇺🇸🇨🇦 American-run; it's a 10-minute walk up the lane beyond Yōngzhū Hotel.

Knapsack Inn

HOSTEL \$

(背包客栈; Bēibāo Kèzhàn; ☎283 8377; dm Y25-35, d without bathroom Y80; 📍) Next door to Jīngāng Temple.

🍴 Eating

On mild evenings, Sīchuān **barbecue stalls** set up around the northeast corner of People's Sq.

TOP CHOICE Tibetan Culture Dew

TIBETAN \$

(西藏雨; Xīzàng Yǔ; ☎158 0836 6530; Yanhe Xilu; 沿河西路; dishes Y15-38; ☀11am-11pm) Hang out with the yak-butter-tea-sipping locals at this lovely teahouse/

restaurant with a rustic stone-and-wood interior decorated with colourful Tibetan prayer flags. There are all sorts of tea if you don't like the yak-butter variety, plus coffee and beer. The English menu is limited, but includes *tsampa*, Tibetan yoghurt, a few yak-meat dishes and some delicious dumplings.

Ā'Rè Tibetan Restaurant

TIBETAN \$\$

(阿热藏餐; Ā'rè Zàngcān; ☎669 6777; Xinshi Qianjie; 新市前街; dishes Y12-78; ☀9am-10pm; 📍) Bigger menu and more of a proper restaurant than Tibetan Culture Dew, this place does tasty soups, *tsampa* and yak-meat dishes including a whole yak hoof, if that sort of thing takes your fancy. English menu.

EATING TIBETAN

ENGLISH	TIBETAN PRONUNCIATION	TIBETAN SCRIPT	CHINESE PRONUNCIATION	CHINESE SCRIPT
roasted barley flour	<i>tsampa</i>	ཙམཔ།	<i>zānbā</i>	糌粑
yak-meat dumplings	<i>sha-momo</i>	ཤ་མོལ།	<i>niúròu bāozi</i>	牛肉包子
vegetable dumplings	<i>tse-momo</i>	ཚེ་མོལ།	<i>sùcài bāozi</i>	素菜包子
noodles	<i>thuk-pa</i>	ཐུག་པ།	<i>zàngmiàn</i>	藏面
rice, potato and yak-meat stew	<i>shamdra</i>	ཤ་འབྲུག།	<i>gāilí niúròu fàn</i>	咖喱牛肉饭
Tibetan yoghurt	<i>sho</i>	ཤོ།	<i>suānnǎi</i>	酸奶
butter tea	<i>bo-cha</i>	བོད་ཇ།	<i>sūyóu chá</i>	酥油茶



Drinking & Entertainment

Village Window

CAFE \$

(村窗; Cūn Chuāng; ☎283 5665; Guangming Lu; 光明路; coffees from ¥10; ☀noon-11pm; 📷📷) The coolest of the new cafes in town, this Tibetan-run place, adorned with books and ornaments, does fresh coffee, various teas, beer and snacks. You can use the internet for free, if you order a drink. English menu.

Happiness in Heaven

TIBETAN DANCE HALL \$

(天地吉祥; Tiāndì Jíyàng; Xi Dajie; 西大街; drinks from ¥20; ☀7pm-midnight) Traditional Tibetan and Chinese songs, including the famous 'Kāngdīng Love Song' (康定情歌; Kāngdīng Qínggē), are performed to ear-splitting techno beats and appreciative audiences, and you can get up and dance once the performances are finished.



Information

ATM (自动柜员机; Zìdòng Guìyuán Jī; Yanhe Donglu) China Construction Bank ATM. One of a few around town that takes foreign cards.

Internet café (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr ¥3; ☀24hr)

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōng'ānjú; ☎281 1415; Dongda Xiaojie; ☀8.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm) Next-day visa-extension service.



Getting There & Away

Air

Kāngdīng Airport only serves Chéngdū (35 minutes), and only has one daily flight (8.13am). Tickets cost around ¥1000 before discounts, but can often be had for ¥500 or less. Buy them

online or from the **flight ticket centre** (机场售票中心; Jīchǎng Shòupiào Zhōngxīn; ☎287 1111; 28 Jianlu Jie; 箭炉街28号; ☀8.30am-5.30pm) at the north end of town. An airport bus (Y22) leaves from outside the ticket centre at 6.30am.

Bus

The bus station is a 10-minute walk north of the centre. Minibuses to all destinations listed here leave from outside the bus station. Ones to Tǎgōng are cheaper from Xinshi Qianjie. Remember: private hire – *bāochē* (包车); shared vehicle – *pinchē* (拼车).

Bātáng ¥142.50, 12 hours, one daily (6am)

Chéngdū ¥121 to ¥131, eight hours, hourly (6am to 4pm)

Dānbā ¥46, three hours, two daily (7am and 3.30pm)

Dégé ¥176, 16 hours, one daily (6am)

Gānzǐ ¥113, 11 hours, one daily (6am)

Lèshān ¥113, seven hours, one daily (7am)

Lítáng ¥87.50, eight hours, one daily (6.30am)

Tǎgōng ¥39, three hours, one daily (6am)

Xīchāng ¥103.50, eight hours, one daily (6am)

Dānbā

丹巴

☎0836 / POP 58,200 / ELEV 1800M

This friendly town, set in a dramatic gorge overlooking the confluence of three rushing rivers, makes a nice alternative to Kāngdīng as a gateway into Tibetan Sichuān.

The hills surrounding Dānbā contain clusters of fascinating ancient watchtowers and a number of picturesque Tibetan villages, some offering homestays.

Sights

Qiāng Watchtowers

RUINS

(羌族碉楼; Qiāngzú Diāolóu) These ancient stone towers, nestled incongruously among village homes on hillsides overlooking the Dādū River, were built by the Qiang people between 700 and 1200 years ago. The towers range from 20m to 60m in height and were used as places of worship and to store valuable goods as well as to signal warnings of would-be attackers. They were built with a number of inner wooden storeys, which have since disintegrated, and entrances that were some metres above ground. One enterprising family in **Suōpō** (梭坡; the nearest village to Dānbā with watchtowers) has rebuilt the wooden levels of the tower next to their home and allows visitors to climb up the inside from their rooftop, for a small fee, of course (Y15). Don't worry about finding them. They, or a 'friend' of theirs, will find you.

To get to Suōpō, turn left out of Zháxī Zhuōkāng Backpackers Hostel and walk along the river for about 30 minutes. Turn down the track beside the small police station then cross the suspension bridge and keep walking up to the village. Look for stone steps under some large trees up to your left, just after you reach the village's first couple of buildings. These steps lead to the nearest towers.

Tibetan Villages

VILLAGES

(藏寨; Zāngzhài) There are a number of pretty Tibetan villages in the hills round here but Dānbā's pride and joy is **Jiājū** (甲居; admission Y30), 7km northwest of town and perched on top of a multiswitchback track that winds its way up a steep river gorge. Being named 'Best Village in China' by Chinese *National Geographic* in 2005 was probably going a bit far, but with its fruit trees, its charming Tibetan stone houses and its remote location, Jiājū is certainly worth the trip.

One of a number of stone houses that has been converted into a homestay is the excellent **Liǎngkē Shù** (两棵树; ☎8807 199, 135 6868 5278; dm inc meals Y50), with simple dormitories decorated with traditional Tibetan furniture, a pleasant central courtyard and stunning views. The owner can arrange trips into the fabulous surrounding countryside. To get here, take a shared minivan (Y5) from the Bāměi end of Dānbā. A private taxi costs Y40 one way.

Another popular homestay village is **Zhōnglù** (中路; admission Y20), 13km from town, but you'll need to take a taxi (Y80).

Sleeping & Eating

Local specialties include aromatic pigs trotters (香猪蹄; *xiāng zhūtūi*), cured pork (腊肉; *là ròu*) and a prized fish dish called *shí bāzi* (石巴子), which will set you back about Y200 per *jīn*. In Chéngdū it costs more than Y1000! A number of small restaurants by the bus station open early for breakfast noodles (面; *miàn*) or dumplings (小笼包子; *xiǎolóng bāozi*).

Zháxī Zhuōkāng Backpackers Hostel

HOTEL \$

(扎西卓康青年旅舍; Zháxī Zhuōkāng Qīngnián Lúshè; ☎352 1806; 35 Sanchahe Nanlu; 三岔河南路35号; dm Y20-30, tw without/with bathroom Y60/80; @) Despite being more hotel than youth hostel, this place is still traveller central in Dānbā. You'll receive a friendly welcome and there's free internet in the lobby, but the rooms are standard budget-hotel jobs. It's a 25-minute walk from the bus station (walk down to the river, turn right and keep going) or Y5 in a cab.

Wǎnglǎo Wǔ

SICHUAN \$\$

(王老五; dishes Y15-40; ☉noon-11pm) Across the street from Zháxī Zhuōkāng Backpackers Hostel, this decent 2nd-floor Sichuanese restaurant rustles up all the usual Sichuan favourites plus some excellent cured-pork dishes. Try the cured pork with green chillies (腊肉青椒; *là ròu qīngjiāo*; Y25) or the mushrooms with pork slices (木耳肉片; *mù'ěr ròupiàn*; Y15). If you can't afford the *shí bāzi* (石巴子; Y240 per *jīn*), try the ordinary braised river fish (红烧鱼; *hóngshāo yú*; Y30 to Y40 per *jīn*). No English menu.

Information

Jiarong Buxing Jie is a pedestrian-only shopping street that you pass on the walk between the bus station and Zháxī Zhuōkāng Backpackers Hostel. At its east end, in one of the last buildings on the left, is an **internet cafe** (网吧; wǎngbā; 26 Jiarong Buxing Jie; per hr Y3; ☉8am-midnight).

Getting There & Away

For Tǎgōng, take a minibus (Y50, three hours) from the west end of town, via Bāměi (Y30, two hours). Bus destinations include the following:

Chéngdū Y120, nine hours, two daily (6.20am and 6.30am)

Gānzǐ Y97, nine hours, one daily (7am)

Kāngdīng Y45, four hours, two daily (6.20am and 3pm)

Mǎ'ěrkāng Y44, six hours, one daily (7.30am)



TIBET BORDER CLOSED

At the time of research, foreigners were forbidden from travelling overland from Sichuān into Tibet proper because Tibet's far eastern prefecture of Chamdo, which borders Sichuān, was completely off limits. Check the Tibet branch of Lonely Planet's online forum, **Thorn Tree** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree), for the latest information.

Sichuān–Tibet Highway (Northern Route)

The legendary Sichuān–Tibet Hwy splits in two just west of Kāngdīng. The northern route is 300km longer than the southern route, and is generally less travelled. You'll pass awesome high-plateau grasslands and traditional Tibetan communities with their remote monasteries and motorcycle-riding yak herders.

Crossing Chola Mountain, the highest pass (5050m) this side of Lhasa, takes you to Dégé and the border with the TAR (Tibetan Autonomous Region), or Tibet proper. You can also take this route to head north into Qīnghāi province via Sěrsū.

You *must* come prepared with warm clothing; even in midsummer, it can be very cold at higher elevations. Remember that bus services can be erratic – this is no place to be in a hurry.

TĀGŌNG

塔公

☎0836 / POP 8000 / ELEV 3750M

The small Tibetan village of Tāgōng and its beautiful surrounding grasslands offer plenty of excuses to linger. As well as an important monastery and a fascinating nearby nunnery, there's also horse trekking and hiking, and travellers give rave reviews to the Tibetan homestays here.

Take time to adjust to the altitude if you're coming from lower terrain to the east.

👁 Sights

Tāgōng Monastery

BUDDHIST MONASTERY

(塔公寺; Tāgōng Sì; admission Y20) The story goes that when Princess Wencheng, the Chinese bride-to-be of Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo, was on her way to Lhasa in the 7th

century, a precious statue of Jowo Sakyamuni Buddha toppled off one of the carts in her entourage. A replica of the statue was carved on the spot where it landed and a temple then built around it. You'll find the statue in the right-hand hall here. The original, which is the most revered Buddha image in all of Tibet, is housed in Lhasa's Jokhang Temple.

Also note the beautiful 1000-armed Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) in the hall to the left. And don't miss the impressive collection of over 100 *chörtens* behind the monastery.

👣 Activities

Horse trekking (per person per day Y250) and guided **grassland hikes** (per person per day Y150) can be arranged with Angela at Khampa Cafe & Arts Centre. Prices are all-inclusive. She will also point you in the right direction if you want to hike out into the grasslands on your own.

🌟 Festivals

Like many places in this part of Tibetan Sichuān, Tāgōng holds an annual **horse-racing festival** (*sāimāhui*) during the fifth lunar month (usually early July), which features thousands of Tibetan herdsmen and Tibetan opera.

🛏 Sleeping

Angela at Khampa Cafe & Arts Centre can arrange **Tibetan homestays** (per person per night Y40). The homestays get particularly good reviews from travellers.

Jya Drolma and Gayla's Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

☎266 6056; dm Y25, tw without bathroom Y50) Bedrooms here – even the dorms – are a riot of golds, reds and blues, with elaborately painted ceilings and walls. There are common toilets on each floor and one shower with 24-hour hot water. Look for the English sign on the opposite side of the square from the monastery. No English spoken, but a very friendly welcome.

Snowland Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(雪城旅社; Xuěchéng Lúshè; ☎286 6098, 130 5645 7979; tagongsally@yahoo.com; dm from Y10, s without bathroom Y20, tw with bathroom Y80) This long-standing backpacker hang-out, right beside Tāgōng Monastery, has less character than Gayla's but is still a fine choice. Sally, who also runs the adjacent cafe-restaurant, speaks a bit of English.

HÉPÍNG FĀHUI NUNNERY

Lama Tsemper was a revered local hermit who spent much of his life meditating in a cave about two hours' walk across the grasslands from Tägöng. Local nuns would bring him food and generally look after him so that when, just before his death in the 1980s, he requested a temple be built here, it was decided to build a nunnery too.

Héping Fāhui (和平法会), known locally as *ani gompa* (nunnery, in Tibetan), is now home to around 500 nuns and more than 100 monks and is a fascinating place to visit.

Lama Tsemper's remains are in a *chörten* (Tibetan stupa) inside the original **cave**; you may have to ask a nun to unlock the door to look inside. Below the cave is the **temple**, and a huge **mani wall** (a wall made from prayer stones), as big as the temple itself, which has its own *kora* circuit that attracts many pilgrims.

From the mani wall, you can see a hill, covered in thousands of prayer flags, where **sky burials** take place. Some families donate the deceased's possessions to the nunnery, and these genuine Tibetan family heirlooms can actually be bought in the small **convenience shop** at the foot of the hill. Next to the shop is a **canteen** (noodles ¥6, tsampa ¥6, butter tea ¥8) with a simple **guesthouse** (dm ¥20) upstairs.

Getting to *ani gompa* across the grasslands is half the fun. Walk north out of town as far as the Golden Temple; 100m past the temple, turn right down a track. You'll be able to see the golden roof of a monastic school way off in the distance to your left. The nunnery is beside this. But first, continue along the track, crossing the river bridge, and keep walking until the track starts to lead away from the monastic school. That's your cue to head off-piste, over the grasslands, dodging yaks, horses and the occasional wild rabbit en route. The nunnery is to the left of the monastic school. The track linking the two leads to the mani wall and then on down to the guesthouse. If you continue past the nunnery you'll eventually get back to the main road, where you may be able to hitch a lift back to Tägöng.

Eating

Khampa Cafe & Arts Centre

TIBETAN, WESTERN \$

(☎136 8449 3301; <http://definitelynomadic.com>; dishes ¥9-28; ☀8am-11pm) Run by Angela, a super-helpful American woman, and her Tibetan husband Djarga, this fantastic new cafe serves authentic Tibetan cuisine as well as Westernised Tibetan dishes (think yak burger) and straightforward Western food, including good breakfasts. The fresh coffee is excellent, as is the yak-butter tea, and there should be wi-fi up and running by the time you read this. They also sell beautiful clothes, handicrafts and jewellery handmade by locals from various parts of western Sichuan and Tibet. Next door to Tägöng Monastery.

Sally's Kham Restaurant

TIBETAN, WESTERN, CHINESE \$

(☎139 0564 7979; tagongsally@yahoo.com; dishes ¥3-35; ☀8am-10pm) This spit-and-sawdust cafe-restaurant serves Tibetan, Western and Chinese food and is another good place to meet travellers. Sally, who speaks OK English, can help with travel information.

Getting There & Away

A bus from Gänzi to Kängding (¥40, two hours, 7.30am) passes Tägöng Monastery, but you might not get a seat. Alternatively, take a shared minivan (¥50). Note, you might struggle to find fellow passengers after about 10am.

To get to Litáng, take the Kängding bus or a shared minivan to Xīndūqiáo (新都桥; ¥15, one hour), from where you can flag down the Kängding-Litáng bus (¥64, seven hours), which passes by at around 9am, or a minibus (¥80).

For Dānbā, take a shared minivan to Bāměi (八美; ¥20, one hour), then switch minivans (¥30, two hours).

For Gänzi (¥80, eight hours), you can try to snag a seat on the bus from Kängding, which passes here between 9am and 10am. You may be able to arrange a shared minivan too.

GĀNZĪ

甘孜

☎0836 / POP 61,400 / ELEV 3394M

This dusty but lively market town in a picturesque valley surrounded by snowcapped mountains is the capital of the Gänzi (Garzê) Autonomous Prefecture and is populated mostly by Tibetans.

Gänzi is a handy intermediate stop between Sērshu and Kängding or on the way

west to Dégé and beyond. It's easy to spend a couple of days here exploring the beautiful countryside, which is scattered with Tibetan villages and monasteries. Photo opportunities abound.

Sights

North of the town's Tibetan quarter, **Gānzī Temple** (甘孜寺; Gānzī Sì; Garzê Gompa in Tibetan; admission Y15) is the region's largest monastery, dating back more than 500 years and glimmering 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 views into the mountains from here are fantastic.

The monastery is about a 25- to 30-minute walk from the bus station. Turn left out of the station and keep going until you reach the Tibetan neighbourhood. Then wind your way uphill around the clay and wooden houses.

Sleeping & Eating

Jìntàiyáng Bīnguǎn HOTEL \$
(金太阳宾馆; ☎7525479; 53 Jiefang Jie; 解放街53号; r without bathroom Y30-50, with bathroom Y80; 🍽️) Simple but clean rooms around a courtyard out back. Round-the-clock hot water, even in the common bathrooms, and, believe it or not, wi-fi (not the quickest, mind)! Turn left out of the station and it's on your left. Another building off Chuanzang Lu houses smarter twins with private bathrooms that usually go for Y100; it also has wi-fi. Turn left out of the station, take the first right and it's on your left through an archway.

Golden Yak Hotel HOTEL \$
(金牦牛酒店; Jīnmáoniú Jiūdùdiàn; ☎752 2353; Dajin Tan; 打金滩; r without/with hot water Y60/150) This dependable chain has branches at a number of bus stations in western Sichuān. This particular one has a main building at the back of the bus station forecourt, with standard doubles discounted to Y120, and a separate building across the forecourt housing enormous but slightly shabby twin rooms with bathrooms but no hot water.

TOP CHOICE Tibetan Restaurant TIBETAN \$
(藏餐馆; Zāngcānguǎn; 2nd fl, 47 Dajin Tan; 打金滩47号2层; dishes Y10-35; ☎7am-11pm; 🍽️) This wonderfully decorated teahouse/restaurant, just across from the bus station, is run by a local nun and is the

main Tibetan hang-out in town. Sip butter tea, tuck into hearty plates of yak meat and get your hands covered in dough as you attempt to mix your own *tsampa*. English menu.

Information

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y4; ☎24hr) Turn left out of the bus station and take the second road on your right; it's on the 2nd floor.

Getting There & Away

A bus to Dégé (Y66, eight to 10 hours), via Manigango (Y30, three hours), passes through here at 9am, but it's often full. Minibuses ply the same route for Y10 to Y20 more, but leave before the bus arrives (between 7.30am and 8.30am). After 9am it's hard to find fellow passengers, so you'll either have to fork out for the whole minibus or hitch.

Scheduled bus services run to the following destinations:

Chéngdū Y220, 18 hours, one daily (6am)
Dānbā Y99, nine hours, one daily (6.30am)
Kāngding Y115, 11 hours, one daily (6.30am)
Sěrsu Y101, six hours, one daily (6.30am)
Yùshù Y146, 13 hours, one daily (6am)

AROUND GĀNZĪ

There are a number of Tibetan villages and monasteries in the fabulous countryside west of Gānzī.

Perched attractively on a hill up a rutted dirt track, **Berī Gompa** (白利寺; Báilì Sì) is a mid-sized monastery about 15km west of town, on the road to Dégé. On sunny days, its gold top sparkles against the deep-blue sky. The scenery from Gānzī to here is stunning, so you might consider hiking to the monastery and back from Gānzī. Bring a packed lunch. Turn left out of the bus station then take the first left; follow the road over the bridge then along the river all the way, passing plenty of Tibetan villages and temples en route. Otherwise, hitch a ride on any Dégé-bound vehicle.

Further along the same road, about 30km from Gānzī, is **Darjay Gompa** (大金寺; Dàjīn Sì). This monastery was once home to more than 3000 monks. Many were killed during the Cultural Revolution. Others escaped to India. Nowadays, around 300 monks reside here. They spend much of their time having animated debates in the courtyard outside the main hall. Inside the hall, you'll find large photos of the 14th Dalai Lama and, right at the back, a row of impressive 3m-tall Buddha images. You

DALA GONG GUESTHOUSE

Travellers who are sick of staying in dusty market towns, and only seeing this area's drop-dead-gorgeous scenery through the window of a bus, will adore **Dala Gong Guesthouse** (dm Y30).

A 10-minute walk from **Darjay Gompa**, one of the area's most revered monasteries, the small temple of Dala Gong is home to three friendly monks who welcome guests to share their mudbrick wood-beamed living quarters set among the prettiest scenery you can imagine – snowcapped mountains to one side; rolling grasslands and a river to the other. Climb up onto the roof for 360-degree views and to plot your next hike to one of the nearby villages, monasteries or mountains.

Accommodation was dormitory-only when we stayed, and as basic as it gets, but two small modern blocks were being built in the courtyard at the time of research, promising private rooms with bathrooms (Y100) and, wait for it...hot water! We shall see.

If, as we suspect, the showers are cold, fear not; there are some free-to-use, open-air **hot springs** five minutes' walk away over the other side of the river. Locals use them to wash themselves, their children, their clothes and sometimes even their motorbikes, but there's plenty of room for everyone, so squeeze in.

The only food options are eating with the monks (offer them whatever money you feel is right). If you tire of eating *tsampa* (porridge of roasted barley flour) three times a day, there's a small **shop** (☎8am-9pm) on the main road outside the monastery, which sells drinks, snacks and instant noodles.

To get to the guesthouse from Darjay Gompa, walk for 10 minutes along the only track that leads away from the back entrance of the monastery.

may have to get one of the monks to unlock the door to the hall.

Travellers who wish to stay the night here and soak up the sumptuous scenery should consider the wonderful but simple **Dala Gong Guesthouse**, a 10-minute walk from the monastery and just a short stroll from some **hot springs**.

To get to Darjay Gompa from Gänzi, either grab a seat on the Dégé-bound bus (Y10, 45 minutes, 8.30am) or take a mini-bus (Y30). Note, the bus is often full and the shared minibuses leave before it (around 7.30am). A private taxi will cost at least Y50. Keen hikers could consider walking here but it will take a whole day. Walk to Beri Gompa and just keep going.

MANIGANGO

☎0836 / ELEV 3800M

马尼干戈

There's not much going on in this dusty two-street town halfway between Gänzi and Dégé. Nearby, though, is the stunning turquoise lake, Yilun Lha-tso, while the large monastery, Dzogchen Gompa, isn't too far away on the road north to Yüshü.

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

🏠 Sleeping & Eating

Manigange Pani Hotel

HOTEL \$

(马尼干戈怕尼酒店; Mǎnigāngē Pàni Jiǔdiàn; dm Y10-20, tw without/with bathroom Y80/160) This good hotel has become the town's centre of gravity, with its car park used as the unofficial bus station and its buffet-style restaurant the most popular lunch stop for passing motorists. Sleeping-wise there are rooms for everyone; from dirt-cheap five-bed dorms to really quite decent twins with private bathrooms, and hot water (8pm to 11pm only), that go for Y130 when it's quiet. The **restaurant** (vegetable/meat dishes Y10/15; ☎7am-11pm) has an easy-to-order, point-and-choose buffet with surprisingly good results.

Qingzhan Gansu Lintan Fandian

MUSLIM \$

(清真甘肃临潭饭店; noodles from Y8; ☎8am-11pm) This popular Muslim restaurant run by a friendly guy from Gansu province makes a nice change from Sichuanese or Tibetan. No menu, but noodle dishes on offer include beef noodle squares (牛肉面片; *niùròu miànpian*; Y8) and glass noodles with beef (牛肉粉条; *niùròu fēntiáo*; Y8). The *shǒuzhuā yángrou* (手抓羊肉; Y35 per *jīn*) is the restaurant's speciality lamb dish. One *jīn* is enough for one person. Located at the town crossroads.

i Information

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr ¥5; ☉noon-11pm) Located 100m along the lane opposite Manigange Pani Hotel.

i Getting There & Away

A daily bus to Dégé (¥40, three to four hours) passes through Manigango at about 11am, but is often full. Going the other way, there are usually some empty seats on the Gǎnzī-bound bus (¥30, three to four hours), which passes by at a similar time. Catch both from Manigange Pani Hotel. A bus from Gǎnzī, heading for Sērshu (¥80, seven hours), passes by the crossroads at around 8.30am.

Plenty of minibuses congregate outside Manigange Pani Hotel waiting to scoop up bus-less passengers.

YILHUN LHA-TSO

新路海

The fabulous turquoise-blue waters of this holy alpine **lake** (Xīnlù Hǎi; admission ¥20), 13km southwest of Manigango, are the main reason most travellers stop in this area. The stunning lake is bordered by *chörten* and dozens of rock carvings, and is framed by snowcapped mountains. You can walk an hour or two up the left (east) side of the lake-shore for views of the nearby glacier.

This is also a great place to camp – some travellers have even slept in caves here – although you'll need to bring your own tent and guard against mosquitoes. Monks from Darjay Gompa sometimes camp here during the summer in colourful Tibetan nomad tents.

To get here, either nab a seat in a Dégé-bound minibus (¥20), hitch a ride or hike. The lake is a five-minute walk from the main road, along a signposted track. Motorbikes (¥20) wait to take you back to Manigango.

DZOGCHEN GOMPA

竹庆佛学院

This important Nyingmapa **monastery** (Zhúqīng 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 hundred monks live here.

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). The college offers beds for ¥15 per

night, though you need a sleeping bag and your own food.

Buses to Yùshù and Sērshu run daily past Dzogchen, but in practice it's easier to hitch. Make sure you set out in the morning, as there is little traffic on the roads come the afternoon. Hiring a taxi in Manigango will cost at least ¥200/300 one way/return. The road crosses over the Muri La Pass (4633m), so make sure you have warm clothes, especially if you're hitching in the back of a truck.

DÉGÉ

德格

☑0836 / POP 58,600 / ELEV 3270M

Your bumpy bus rides just got bumpier. Dégé is cut off from the rest of western Sichuān by the towering Chola Mountain (6168m), and to get here from the east you will probably have to endure a highly uncomfortable, slightly scary three-hour minibus ride along a dirt track that goes up and over the 5050m-high Tro La (Chola) Pass. Here, Tibetans on board will throw coloured prayer paper out the window and chant something that you can only hope will help carry you all to safety.

Unless you've managed to secure the correct permits to enter the rarely travelled Chamdo prefecture of Tibet proper, the main reason you'll have made the arduous trek out here is to see Dégé's famous printing monastery, one of this region's stellar sights.

👁 Sights

TOP CHOICE Bakong Scripture Printing Press & Monastery

BUDDHIST MONASTERY

(德格印经院; Dégé Yīnjīngyuàn; www.degeparkhang.org; admission ¥50; ☉8.30am-noon & 2-6.30pm) This striking 18th-century monastery houses one of western Sichuān's star attractions: a fascinating printing press that still uses traditional woodblock printing methods and which houses an astonishing 70% of Tibet's literary heritage.

There are more than 217,000 engraved blocks of Tibetan scriptures here from all the Tibetan Buddhist orders, including Bön. These texts include ancient works about astronomy, geography, music, medicine and Buddhist classics, including two of the most important Tibetan sutras. A history of Indian Buddhism comprising 555 woodblock plates is the only surviving copy in the world (written in Hindi, Sanskrit and Tibetan).

Within the monastery, dozens of workers hand-produce over 2500 prints to order each day, as ink, paper and blocks fly through the workers' hands at lightning

speed. In one side room you'll find an older crowd of printers who produce larger and more complex prints of Tibetan gods on paper or coloured cloth.

You can also examine storage chambers, paper-cutting rooms and the main hall of the monastery itself, protected from fire and earthquakes by the guardian goddess Dröma (Tara). There are some nice murals in the two ground-floor chapels, so bring a torch.

You aren't allowed to take photos in the storerooms or the main hall, but the workers were happy for us to snap away while they worked frantically to meet their quota.

To get here, turn right out of the bus station then left over the bridge and keep walking up the hill.

Other Monasteries BUDDHIST MONASTERIES
If you continue following the road up the hill beyond the printing house, you'll reach the recently renovated 1000-year-old **Gonchen Monastery**.

High in the mountains to the south and east of Dégé are several other monasteries, including **Pelpung Gompa**, **Dzongsar Gompa** and **Pewar Gompa**. To head out this way, try to get a seat in a minibus leaving from outside the bus station.

Sleeping & Eating

Héxié Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(和谐旅馆; Héxié Lúguǎn; ☎8226111; Chamashang Jie; 茶马街; tw Y200-250) A friendly Tibetan-run hotel with a homely feel to it. Spacious carpeted rooms come with coat stand, hot-water flask and pinewood table and chairs, while the comfy beds have clean sheets and warm puffy duvets. Bathrooms are shared but have 24-hour hot-water showers. Best of all are the discounts. Rooms normally go for Y60, and sometimes for as little as Y40, making this the best-value stay in Dégé. Turn left out of the bus station and it's on your left after about five minutes' walk.

Róngmài Ángzhā Bīnguǎn HOTEL \$
(绒麦昂扎宾馆; Chamashang Jie; 茶马街; dm Y30, tw from Y188) The private rooms with showers, some overlooking the river, are of decent quality and can be nabbed for Y120. The three-bed dorms are clean and reasonably spacious, and come with a TV. The common bathrooms, though, don't have showers. On the right before Héxié Hotel.

Kāngbā Zàngcān TIBETAN FOOD \$
(康巴藏餐; Chamashang Jie; 茶马街; dishes Y10-35; ☉noon-midnight) The decor is half

Tibetan, half African safari, but the food and the clientele are as Tibetan as it gets. There's butter tea (Y10), Tibetan yoghurt (Y5), yak-meat *momos* (Y10) and various yak-meat dishes including a hearty yak pie (牛肉饼; *nǐuròu bǐng*; Y20). *Tsampa* (Y5) isn't on the menu, but is of course available. No English menu. No English sign. No English spoken. Turn left out of the bus station and it's on your right; on the 2nd floor.

There are several small restaurants and **noodle shops** near the bus station.

Information

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y3; ☉8.30am-midnight) Turn right out of the bus station, left over the bridge and down steps to your right. Entrance is just past the pool hall.

Getting There & Away

Just one daily eastbound bus leaves from here, at 7.30am, heading for Kāngding (Y179, next-day arrival) via Manigango (Y41, three hours), Gānzǐ (Y68, six hours) and Lúhuò, where it stops for the night. Otherwise, there are minibuses.

There's normally a daily bus to Jomda (江达; Jiāngdá) in Tibet proper, from where you can catch onward transport to Chamdo and Lhasa, but foreigners haven't been allowed to ride public transport in Chamdo prefecture for many years, so you will almost certainly have to have pre-arranged a private vehicle in advance if you want to cross the border here. You will, of course, need a Tibet permit.

A shared minivan from Dégé to Lhasa costs around Y600 per person and take two days.

SĚRSHU (SHÍQÚ) 石渠
☎0836 / POP 60,000 / ELEV 4100M

There are two places commonly called Sērshu (or Serشل): the traditional monastery town of Sērshu Dzong to the west and the modern county town of Sērshu (Shíqú Xiàn), 30km to the east, which has more lodgings and transport connections.

While you'll probably stop in Shíqú Xiàn en route between Manigango and Yùshù in Qīnghǎi, the huge monastery of Sērshu Dzong and its intensely Tibetan village is far more interesting and well worth a stopover.

It's home to hundreds of monks and has two assembly halls, a Maitreya chapel, several modern chapels and a *shedra*, with a *kora* encircling the lot. The road west 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.

It's pretty high here, so be alert for signs of altitude sickness.

Sleeping & Eating

In Sërshu Dzong you can stay at the **monastery guesthouse** (色须寺刚京饭店; sèxū sì gāngjīng fāndiàn; dm Y10-20, tw per bed Y40-50).

In Shíqú Xiàn, Tibetan-run **Gésà'ěr Jiüdiàn** (格萨尔酒店; tw/tr per bed Y20, d Y50) has acceptable cheapies, although the shared bathroom is nothing more than a row of pit toilets. Coming from the direction of Manigango, take the first left after the post office and look for the big green building. Reception is on the 2nd floor along with a very popular Tibetan restaurant. The only place we could find with showers was **Shangdeenyama Hotel** (香德尼玛大酒店; Xiāngdénimǎ Dàjiüdiàn; ☎862 2888; tr/d/tw Y242/246/288) in an imposing Tibetan-style building set back from the main street. The cheaper triples and doubles have common bathrooms and go for Y180. The standard twins with private bathrooms go for Y200. Make sure the hot water is working before splashing out for a room.

There are plenty of small restaurants – noodle joints as well as Tibetan teahouses – on and off the main road. The most comfortable place to get your fix of *momo*, *tsampa* and butter tea is the **Gésà'ěr Jiüdiàn's** colourful **Tibetan restaurant** (dishes Y8-35; ☺10am-11pm).

Getting There & Away

The small bus station at the far east end of Shíqú Xiàn has a 7am and a 12.30pm bus to Gánzǐ (Y99, eight hours), via Manigango (Y77, four hours). The 12.30pm bus is a through bus from Qīnghǎi province so isn't always punctual.

Buses to Yùshù (Y40, five hours) weren't running at the time of research because of the earthquake earlier in the year, but previously there had been an 8am bus, leaving from the even smaller bus station at the far west end of town, and a bus from Gánzǐ that passed through town at around 3pm.

The Yùshù-bound buses will let you off at Sërshu Dzong. Alternatively, it's Y20 in a shared minivan. The 12.30pm through bus to Gánzǐ passes through Sërshu Dzong at around 11am.

Sichuān–Tibet Highway (Southern Route)

Travel here takes you through vast grasslands dotted with Tibetan block homes and contentedly grazing yaks, while majestic peaks tower beyond. While journeying along this 2140km route is slightly easier

than taking the northern route, it's still not for the faint-hearted; road conditions can be pretty poor, and high altitude is just as much a factor here as it is further north. However, Kāngdīng–Lítáng–Xiāngchéng–Zhōngdiàn (Shangri-la) has become a very popular route into Yǔnnán.

As in the rest of western Sichuān, warm clothing is a must here, and be on the look-out for signs of altitude sickness.

LÍTÁNG

 0836 / POP 51,300 / ELEV 4014M

理塘

Lítáng claims to be the world's highest town. It isn't. That accolade is shared by Wēnquán in Qīnghǎi province and La Rinconada in Peru, both of which stand at a wheeze-inducing 5100m. Nevertheless, at a dizzying altitude of 4014m, Lítáng is still exceptionally high, so be sure to look out for signs of altitude sickness.

The surrounding scenery will certainly leave you breathless, and there are great opportunities to get out and see it – whether by horse, motorbike or simply hiking – making this a decent place to spend a couple of days.

Lítáng is famed as the birthplace of the seventh and 10th Dalai Lamas, but the town's large monastery, Chōde Gompa, is the most absorbing sight.

Sights & Activities

Chōde Gompa

MONASTERY

(长青春科尔寺; Chángqīngchūn Kē'ěr Sì) At the northern end of town, the large Chōde Gompa is a Tibetan monastery built for the third Dalai Lama. Inside is a statue of Sakyamuni that is believed to have been carried from Lhasa by foot. Don't miss climbing onto the roof of the furthest right of the three main halls for great views of the Tibetan homes leading up to the monastery and the grasslands and mountains beyond. Monks climb up here every day to sound the temple's long horns. To get here, walk past the post office, turn left at the end of the road then take the first right.

Báitǎ Gōngyuán

CHÖRTEN

(白塔公园) Worshipers seem to be perpetually circling Báitǎ Gōngyuán as they recite mantras and spin prayer wheels. You can join the locals hanging out in the surrounding park. Turn left out of the bus station and just keep walking.

If you keep walking past Báitǎ Gōngyuán, there are **hot springs** (温泉; wēnquán; admission Y15) 4km west of the centre.

Outdoor Activities

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Hiking opportunities abound outside of town. The hills behind the monastery are one fine option. For more ideas, talk to Mr Zheng at Tiāntiān Restaurant or to the English-speaking managers at either Potala Inn or Peace Guesthouse.

Potala Inn can also help organise **horse trekking**, while Peace Guesthouse can arrange renting **motorbikes** for the day.

Lítang has a **sky burial** site just behind the monastery. If you do attend a sky burial, be sure to remember exactly what you are watching and treat the ceremony, and all those involved, with the utmost respect. For more details, ask Longlife, the manager of Peace Guesthouse, or Mr Zheng at Tiāntiān Restaurant.

★ Festivals & Events

One of the biggest and most colourful Tibetan festivals, the annual **Lítang Horse Festival** includes horse racing, stunt riding, dance competitions and an arts-and-crafts fair.

Sadly, the event was cancelled in 2008, 2009 and 2010 due to political protests as well as disputes over race results, which spiralled into fighting. It usually starts on 1 August and lasts several days, but check at the hostels in Kāngdìng or Chéngdū for the current situation.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

**Potala Inn**

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

(布达拉大酒店; Bùdálá Dàjiùdiàn; ☎532 2533; dm Y25-35, tw Y140-180; @☎) Run by an English-speaking Tibetan woman called Metok, this large hostel has a mixed bag of rooms, ranging from basic bunk-bed dorms to Tibetan-style twins with private bathroom. Pretty much everything is on offer here – hiking, horse trekking, sky-burial visits, bike rental – but what makes this place stand out from the crowd is its excellent wi-fi-enabled 2nd-floor cafe, which wouldn't seem out of place in Běijīng. Those without laptops can get online on the ground floor (per hour Y4). Turn left from the bus station and it's on the right, set back from the main street.

Peace Guesthouse

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

(和平酒店; Héping Jiǔdiàn; ☎532 1100, 152 8360 5821; dm/tw Y20/40; @☎) A favourite with Israeli travellers, this friendly no-nonsense hostel, run by helpful English-speaking manager Longlife, has large, clean, albeit basic rooms, and a small cafe. Turn right out of the bus station and walk 50m up the hill.

Tiāntiān Restaurant

CHINESE, WESTERN \$

(天天饭食; Tiāntiān Fànshí; ☎135 4146 7941; 108 Xingfu Donglu; 幸福东路108号; dishes Y12-40; ☎7.30am-11pm; ☎☎) The ever-friendly, English-speaking, ace chef Mr Zheng has moved his popular travellers' haven across the road to a larger location. Look for the Lonely Planet logo. The same good food – a mix of Chinese, Tibetan and Western – is on offer, as is the excellent fresh coffee and reliable travel advice. English menu. Turn left out of the bus station and it's on the left.

Snow Mountain Restaurant

TIBETAN \$

(宫呷雪山民族特餐; Gōngǎ Xuěshān Mínzú Tècān; 222 Xingfu Donglu; 幸福东路222号; dishes Y10-40; ☎6.30am-11pm; ☎) For more-authentic Tibetan food, try this simple place with English menu. It's between the bus station and Tiāntiān Restaurant.

📍 Information

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; Tuanjie Lu; ☎9-11.30am & 2-5.30pm) Turn left out of bus station then right at main crossroads.

Internet cafe (网吧; wǎngbā; Tuanjie Lu; per hr Y5; ☎8.30am-midnight) Next to post office.

📍 Getting There & Away

Lítang's bus station, at the town's eastern end, has buses to the destinations shown below. Times are unpredictable, so double-check. It's normally easy to bag Kāngdìng or Xīndūqiáo tickets (same bus) but the others are through buses, so are often full by the time they get here. Minibuses hang around outside the bus station to save the day. There's an OK road north to Gǎnzī, but no public buses ply the route.

Destinations and fares:

Bātáng Y63, 3½ hours, one daily (around 3pm)

Dàochéng Y49, four hours, one daily (around 1.30pm)

Kāngdìng Y87, eight hours, one daily (6.30am)

Xiāngchéng Y66, five hours, one daily (around 1.30pm)

Xīndūqiáo Y63, six hours, one daily (6.30am)

BĀTÁNG

巴塘

☎0836 / ELEV 2589M

Just 32km from the Tibet border, Bātáng (or Bathang in Tibetan) is one of Sichuān's main gateways into Tibet proper. Foreigners will need to have all their paperwork in order, of course, but it is easy to catch minibuses from here to Markham or even Lhasa. Bātáng itself has a welcoming monastery, while outside the town are lovely suburbs of ochre-coloured Tibetan houses.

Bātáng is much lower than surrounding areas; when it's late winter in Litáng, it's already spring here.

The Gelugpa sect **Chöde Gaden Pen-deling Monastery** (康宁寺; Kāngníng Sì) was undergoing heavy renovations at the time of research but is usually well worth a 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. Continue down the hill from Jinsui Bīnguǎn.

There are some fine walks around town, including a lovely Tibetan hillside village, a riverside *chörten* and a hilltop, covered in prayer flags, offering views of the town.

Hotels and restaurants abound. **Jinsui Bīnguǎn** (金穗宾馆; ☎562 2700; 1 Ba'an Lu; 巴安路1号5附; dm Y30, tw without/with bathroom Y100/280, discounted to Y60/100) is an old standby with basic rooms. Ones at the back are quieter and face Tibetan homes. Turn left out of the bus station and take the first right after the hard-to-miss golden eagle. Nicer is **Xuěchéng Zhāxī Bīnguǎn** (雪城扎西宾馆; ☎562 3222; cnr Minguang Lu & Bakang Dadao; 巴康达到和民光路; tr/tw Y180/380, discounted to Y100/180; ☎) with its grand Tibetan-style lobby leading to the best rooms in town. Turn left out of the bus station then right at the golden eagle statue.

On mild evenings you can find excellent roadside Sichuan **barbecues** (烧烤; shāokǎo; per skewer Y0.50-1). For something more Tibetan, try **Xuěyǔ Zàngcān** (雪雨藏餐; dishes from Y5; ☎8.30am-11pm). Turn left out of the bus station and it's on your left.

There's an **internet cafe** (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y3; ☎9am-midnight) diagonally opposite Xuěchéng Zhāxī Bīnguǎn.

i Getting There & Away

All public buses are eastbound and leave Bātáng bus station at 6am. You can go to Litáng (Y58, 3½ hours), Xīndūqiáo (Y121, 10½ hours), Kāngding (Y140, 12 hours) and even Chéngdū (Y245, one day). The Chéngdū bus isn't a sleeper, though.

Tibet proper is served by shared minibuses, which congregate at the crossroads just down from Jinsui Bīnguǎn. Markham (芒康; Mángkāng; Y50, 2½ hours) and Lhasa (拉萨; Lāsà; Y500, two days) are popular destinations.

XIANGCHENG

☎0836 / ELEV 2836M

乡城

The small, modern town centre of Xiāngchéng has a sprinkling of Tibetan homes and a fine monastery commanding wonderful views of the surrounding villages, some of which contain ancient stone watchtowers. The main reason for coming here, though, is to travel to or from Zhōngdiàn (Shangri-la) in Yúnnán province.

Note: apart from in Kāngding, this is the only place in western Sichuan where you can withdraw cash with a foreign bank card. Load up!

Xiāngchéng's attractive **monastery** (admission Y15) was completely rebuilt by hand by local carpenters, carvers and painters. It's at the opposite end of town from the bus station: just after Zhāxī Hotel, turn left onto Shuoqu Jie (倾曲街); at the end of the road climb the steps, turn right and follow the dirt track all the way.

Xiāngchéng's main street has plenty of lodgings and restaurants; turn left from the bus station to head into town. Near the station, on your left through a car-park courtyard, **Xiāngbālā Seven Lakes Hotel** (七湖宾馆; Qīhú Bīnguǎn; ☎189 9047 5516; tw without/with bathroom Y40/60) has basic rooms and friendly staff. More comfortable is **Zhāxī Hotel** (扎西大酒店; Zhāxī Dàjiǔdiàn; ☎582 6111; tw Y260), which discounts good-quality doubles to Y140. It's on the right at the top end of town.

One quirky place to eat and drink is **Zhāpī Chéng** (扎啤城; Draft Beer City; beers Y6-8, dishes Y8-30; ☎5pm-2am), which resembles a German beer hall (wooden benches, jugs of beer) but which serves very tasty, distinctly Chinese cold snacks (spicy duck neck, rabbit head, pig's trotters), as well as a more substantial and equally delicious barbecued fish dish (烤鱼; kǎoyú; around Y30). There are four types of draught beer, the best being the standard lager (黄啤; huángpī; Y6) and the stout (黑啤; hēipī; Y8). It's on the right before Zhāxī Hotel.

Next to the beer hall is the Agricultural Bank of China **ATM** that accepts Visa cards. Behind this block is an **internet cafe** (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y4; ☎9.30am-midnight).

i Getting There & Away

From Xiāngchéng there's a morning bus to Zhōngdiàn (Shangri-la; Y85, eight hours, 6am). Going the other way, you can catch a bus to Kāngding (Y146, 12 hours, 6am), but note: you won't be sold tickets on this bus for Litáng even

though it's en route. You will have to travel by shared minibus (¥70, four to five hours).

NORTHERN SÌCHUĀN

Hiking, or even camping, in the stunning Jiūzhàigōu National Park or heading out on horseback around Sōngpān are how most travellers experience the carpets of alpine forest, swaths of grasslands, icy lakes and snow-topped mountains of northern Sìchuān. You can also travel north from here into Gānsù, Shaanxi or even Qīnghǎi.

The main roads heading north to this area from Chéngdū suffered severe damage in the 2008 earthquake and bus routes were still being affected by road repairs more than two years after the disaster. Get an update on the situation before you set out from Chéngdū.

Sōngpān

松潘

☎0837 / POP 71,650 / ELEV 2800M

Horse trekking into the woods and mountains is the main draw of this laid-back historic town, but the hiking's good too and there's a reasonably strong backpacker vibe, which makes Sōngpān a good place to catch up on the latest travel tales.

Note, in midwinter (December to March) Sōngpān shuts down almost completely. Many guesthouses and restaurants, including Emma's Kitchen, are closed then. However, horse trekking is still possible.

👁️ Sights

Sōngpān's part-rebuilt **town wall** may be less than 10 years old but its **ancient gates** are original Ming-dynasty structures going back some 600 years. Note the horse carvings at the foot of the two south gates, half swallowed up by the ever-rising level of the road. The only original part of the **old wall** is by the rebuilt West Gate, which overlooks the town from its hillside perch.

Two wooden **covered bridges** (古松桥; Gǔsōng Qiáo), the bases of which are genuinely old, span the Mǐn River. On the western side of the river is **Guānyīn Gé** (观音阁), a small temple near the start of a hillside trail that offers good views over Sōngpān.



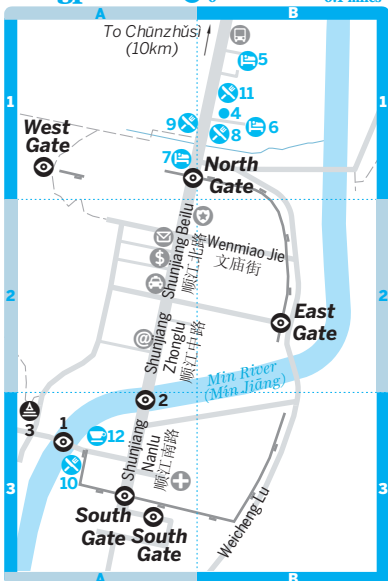
Activities

Horse Trekking

HORSE TREKKING

One of the most popular ways to experience the idyllic mountain forests and emerald-

Sōngpān



Sōngpān

📍 Top Sights

East Gate.....	B2
North Gate.....	A1
South Gate.....	A3
South Gate.....	A3
West Gate.....	A1

📍 Sights

1 Covered Bridge.....	A3
2 Covered Bridge.....	A3
3 Guānyīn Gé.....	A3

Activities, Courses & Tours

4 Shùnjiāng Horse Treks.....	B1
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🏠 Sleeping

5 Old House.....	B1
6 Shùnjiāng Guesthouse.....	B1
7 Sun River International Hotel.....	A1

🍴 Eating

8 Emma's Kitchen.....	B1
9 Lánzhōu Niúrǒumiàn.....	A1
10 Mòuni Tibetan Restaurant.....	A3
11 Song in the Mountain.....	B1

☕ Drinking

12 Teahouses.....	A3
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THE WAY TO XĪ'ĀN

For those on their way to XĪ'ān in Shaanxi province, the most direct way to get there overland is via the mid-sized town of **Guǎngyuán** (广元), which is on the main Chéngdū–XĪ'ān train line.

China's only female emperor, Wu Zetian, was born in Guǎngyuán during the Tang dynasty, and she is feted among the temples, pavilions and 1000-odd statues lining the modest cliffs at **Huángzé Temple** (皇泽寺; Huángzé Sì; admission Y50), on the west bank of Jiǎng Hé. However, Guǎngyuán is also the site of China's largest nuclear-weapons-grade plutonium production facility, so nobody really lingers here.

And there's no need to. There are nine trains a day, running pretty much every hour from 4.38pm right through until 3am. The 4.38pm (T8) is an express, and takes eight hours. The rest take 10 or 11 hours. Hard sleepers cost Y139. A seat should be Y76. If you get stuck here, there are loads of cheap hotels around the bus and train stations. Just don't expect anything too comfortable.

green lakes surrounding Sōngpān is by joining up with a horse trek. Guides take you through pristine valleys and forests aboard a not-so-big, very tame horse. Many people rate this experience as a highlight of their Sichuān travels.

Shùnjiāng Horse Treks (顺江旅游马队; Shùnjiāng Lúyóu Mǎduì; ☎880 9118) have been catering horse treks to tourists for years. The majority of travellers are happy, but now and again some report somewhat apathetic guides. On offer is anything from one- to 14-day treks and trips can be tailored to suit you.

One of the most popular treks is a three- or four-day trek to **Ice Mountain** (雪玉顶; Xuěyǔdǐng), a spectacular trip through unspoilt scenery.

Rates are around Y220 per person per day, all-inclusive. 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 and national parks visited on some of the trips, 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.

Hiking

HIKING

The surrounding hills are equally good for hiking. One option is to hike up to the only remaining part of the original town wall, by West Gate. It takes around one hour. There are three paths up, meaning you can complete a round trip. One starts beside the stream by Lánzhōu Niúròumiàn Muslim restaurant. Another leads up the hill from the post office, while a third is accessed via Guānyīn Gé temple. It's also possible to hike for about two hours to Shàngnǐbā

Monastery (上泥巴寺; Shàngnǐbā Sìmiào) in the eastern hills.

**Sleeping****Shùnjiāng Guesthouse**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(顺江自助旅馆; Shùnjiāng Zìzhù Lúguǎn; ☎723 1064; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; dm Y25, tw & d Y80) The owners of Shùnjiāng Horse Treks company run this smart guesthouse with simple rooms around an open courtyard. It can be freezing here in cold weather, but bathrooms have heat lamps and 24-hour hot water, and beds come with electric blankets.

Old House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(古韵客栈; Gǔyùn Kèzhàn; ☎172 31368; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; dm/s/tw Y30/80/100; @☎) Very handy for the bus station, this attractive old-style three-storey wooden building has small but clean rooms off an interior courtyard. English-speaking staff, 24-hour hot water and wi-fi, a rarity in these parts.

Sun River International Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(太阳河国际大酒店; Tàiyánghé Guójiā Dàjiùdiàn; ☎723 9888; Shunjiang Beilu; 顺江北路; tw & d Y880-980) Ignore the ridiculous rack rates here. Discounts are such that standard twins tend to go for Y160. And for Y250 to Y350 you can get very smart double rooms with internet access.

**Eating**

Sōngpān has an excellent assortment of breads – big crusty loaves, Tibetan flat-bread and sweet breads made and sold fresh all day at stalls along Shunjiang Zhonglu. The same road is also lined with small restaurants and noodle shops.



Emma's Kitchen

WESTERN \$\$

(小欧洲西餐厅; Xiǎo Ōuzhōu Xīcāngtīng; Shunjiang Beilu; ☎880 2958; mains Y8-40; ☀7.30am-late; @) Sōngpān's main travellers' hang-out is this laid-back cafe that serves fresh coffee, pizza and other Western fare, along with some Chinese dishes. Emma is exceedingly helpful and can sort out almost anything from laundry to travel information. Also has internet (per hour Y6) and CD burning (per disk Y15).

A couple of doors along, **Song in the Mountain**, run by the helpful Sarah Yang, has a similar menu (minus the fresh coffee) with similar prices.

Móuni Tibetan Restaurant

TIBETAN \$\$

(牟尼藏餐; Móuni Zàngcān; ☎723 3929; mains Y10-55; ☀8am-7pm) The English menu is limited but the location, in a lovely garden by the river, is worth the visit. By Mín River off Shunjiang Nanlu.

Lánzhōu Niúròumiàn

MUSLIM \$

(兰州牛肉面; Shunjiang Beilu; dishes from Y5; ☀7am-9.30pm) For fresh noodles, try this unassuming restaurant. Pulled noodles (Lāmiàn; 拉面; Y6) are the speciality.



Drinking

Along the Mín River (岷江; Mín Jiāng), on the southern edge of town, are several small **teahouses** (tea from Y5) where you can while away the afternoon with the locals. **Moon Reflection Tea Garden** (映月茶园; Yìngyuè Cháyuán; ☀8am-6pm) is a particular favourite with tile-clinking mah jong players.



Information

Agricultural Bank of China (中国农业银行; Nóngyè Yínháng; Shunjiang Beilu) Foreign-friendly ATM.

China Post (中国邮政; Zhōngguó Yóuzhèng; Shunjiang Beilu; ☀9-11.30am & 2-5.30pm)

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōng'ānjú; ☎723 3778; Shunjiang Beilu; ☀8.30am-noon & 3-6pm) Can renew visas in one day.

Tōngtiānhé internet cafe (通天河网吧; Tōngtiānhé Wǎngbā; Shunjiang Zhonglu; per hr Y3; ☀24hr) Upstairs in an alley off the main street. No English sign.



Getting There & Away

Air

See Jiūzhàigōu section (p751) for information on flying to this area. There's no public transport between Sōngpān and the airport. A taxi should be around Y100.

Bus

Buses leaving from Sōngpān bus station (客运站; kèyùnzhàn) are detailed below. Note, bus times and prices change slightly depending on the season, so double-check. Buses to Chéngdū were still using the longer, more expensive route via Jiūzhàigōu at the time of research, which took almost 14 hours and cost Y175. The shorter route, which was damaged by the 2008 earthquake, should have reopened by the time you read this. For Lángmùsì and the overland route into Gānsù province, you'll need to change at Zōigē.

Chéngdū Y88, eight hours, two daily (6am and 6.30am)

Huánglóng National Park Y24, two hours, one daily (6am)

Jiūzhàigōu Y30, 2½ hours, two daily (7am and 1pm)

Zōigē Y42, three hours, two daily (10am and 2.30pm)

Huánglóng National Park

黄龙景区

A trip to this **national park** (Huánglóng Jīngqū; Yellow Dragon Valley; www.huanglong.com; adult Y200; ☀7am-6pm) is essentially a very expensive three-hour walk up and down one small valley. The valley, however, is stunning, and its terraced, coloured limestone ponds of blues, turquoises, yellows and greens are exquisite. So, if you can spare the cash, this place is well worth seeing. Interspersed with waterfalls and backed by the 5588m Xuěbǎo Peak (雪宝鼎; Xuěbǎo Dǐng), this string of shimmering ponds stretches down the valley where yellow-tinged calcium carbonate and limestone deposits help create the water's sparkle, particularly on sunny days. Note: in winter much of the water is frozen solid and many of the ponds are dried up. It's best to come between May and October, and preferably in July and August.

The most spectacular ponds, called **Wúcǎichí** (五彩池; Five-coloured Pool), are behind **Huánglóng Temple** (黄龙寺; Huánglóng Sì) at the top of the park. You can reach them in about 90 minutes, although you may need more time if the altitude bothers you; the highest pools are at 3553m. You can also take a **cable car** (索道; suǒdào; Y80) most of the way to the top.

Huánglóng doesn't draw nearly the crowds that Jiūzhàigōu does, but it's an increasingly popular tour destination. For a more peaceful visit, arrive first thing in the morning before the tour groups roll in. As

Those heading north into Gānsū province will need to bus-hop their way from Sōngpān. First stop is **Zōigē** (in Chinese 若尔盖; Ruò'èrgài), a small, dusty Tibetan town set among the remote plateau grasslands and with a distinct frontier-town feel to it. The grasslands here burst into life with wildflowers in late summer, and it's possible to arrange horse trekking, although facilities aren't as good as in Sōngpān, and English-language skills among those organising them are pretty much nonexistent.

Shūguāng Bīnguǎn (曙光宾馆; ☎0837-229 2988; tw Y100) has decent rooms with private bathroom. Turn left out of the bus station and walk 100m. There are plenty of eating options on this road (Shuguang Jie) too.

Zōigē buses go to Sōngpān (Y42, three hours, 10am and 2.30pm) and Lángmùsì (p818; Y21, two hours, 2.30pm), an enchanting monastery town that straddles the Sichuān–Gānsū border and from where you can catch onward transport towards Lánzhōu.

Be aware that altitudes are high out here (Zōigē is at 3500m) and temperatures often plummet to uncomfortable levels. In winter, snow sometimes renders roads unpassable, so buses can be sporadic.

you hike up, stay to the right to go directly to Wūcǎichí (follow the signs that say 'Way Up'), so you can appreciate the main attraction ahead of the crowds. Then as you descend, detour onto the 'sightseeing paths' to take in the rest of the pools and waterfalls.

By the park entrance is a modern **visitor centre** with restaurant, teahouse and free left-luggage room. You can pick up a free English-language leaflet with a map of the park here. There are a couple of expensive tour-group hotels by the entrance, but you can't stay in the park, so most independent travellers day trip here from Sōngpān or Jiūzhàigōu. There are a couple of canteens on the way up the valley, and vendors selling snacks, but this is great picnic territory so you might want to bring your own food. There's free oxygen available at certain points of the climb.

From Sōngpān, the 6am Píngwǔ-bound bus stops here (Y25, 90 minutes), although at peak times a slightly later bus is sometimes added to the schedule. Normally only one bus makes the return journey. It's supposed to pass Huánglóng at 2pm, although at the time of research it was more like 4pm. Alternatively, a bus bound for Jiūzhàigōu (Y40, three hours) leaves Huánglóng at 3pm and goes via Chuānzǐ Sì (川主寺; Y25, one hour), from where you can take a shared taxi to Sōngpān (Y10).

If you arrive at Jiūhuáng Airport in the morning, you can catch an airport bus to Jiūzhàigōu (Y100), which stops off here long enough for you to tour the park.

Jiūzhàigōu National Park

九寨沟风景名胜區

☎0837 / POP 62,000 / ELEV 2000M

The stunning Unesco World Heritage Site of **Jiūzhàigōu National Park** (Jiūzhàigōu Fēngjǐng Míngshèngqū; Nine Village Valley National Park; www.jiuzhai.com; admission May–mid-Nov Y220, mid-Nov–Apr Y80, shuttle bus Y90; ☀7am–6pm) is one of Sichuān's star attractions. An incredible 1.5 million people visit the park every year to gawp at its famous bluer-than-blue lakes, its rushing waterfalls and its deep green trees backed by snowy mountains. Add into the mix, kilometres of well-maintained walking trails and newly launched ecotourism camping trips, and you'll begin to get a feel for Jiūzhàigōu's charms.

The best time to visit is September through to November, when you're most likely to have clear skies and (particularly in October) blazing autumn colours to contrast with the turquoise lakes. Summer is the busiest but rainiest time. Spring can be cold but still pleasant, and winter, if you're prepared for frigid temperatures, brings dramatic ice-coated trees and frozen-in-place waterfalls (as well as lower prices).

Jiūzhàigōu means 'Nine Village Valley' and refers to the region's nine Tibetan villages. According to legend, Jiūzhàigōu 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.

👁 Sights

Lakes & Waterfalls

SCENIC SITES

The main road follows Zécháwā River (Zécháwā Hé) up Shùzhēng Valley, as it runs past Héyè Village (Héyè Cūn) to **Sparkling Lake** (火花海; Huǒhuā Hǎi), the first in a series of lakes filled by the **Shùzhēng Waterfall** (树正瀑布; Shùzhēng Pùbù).

A walking trail begins north of Sparkling Lake and runs along the eastern edge of the river up to **Nuòrìlǎng Waterfall** (诺日朗瀑布; Nuòrìlǎng Pùbù). Here, the road branches in two, with the eastern road leading to **Long Lake** (长海; Cháng Hǎi) and **Five-Coloured Pool** (五彩池; Wǔcǎi Chí) and the western road to **Swan Lake** (天鹅海; Tiān'ē Hǎi). The western route has a greater concentration of attractions, most of which are accessible from the quiet forest trail leading from **Mirror Lake** (镜海; Jìnghǎi) to **Panda Lake** (熊猫海; Xióngmāo Hǎi). Views from this trail are particularly good, especially of **Pearl Beach Waterfall** (珍珠滩瀑布; Zhēnzhū tān Pùbù).

The eastern route is almost better done by bus as the narrow road sees a great deal of traffic and there are fewer 'sights'. Nevertheless, the two lakes at the far end, Long Lake and Five-coloured Pool, are both well worth a visit.

From the park entrance to Nuòrìlǎng Waterfall is about 14km. It's a further 17.5km along the western road to Swan Lake and another couple of kilometres on to the **Virgin Forest**. It's about 18km up the eastern road from Nuòrìlǎng Waterfall to Long Lake.

Zhārú Temple

TEMPLE

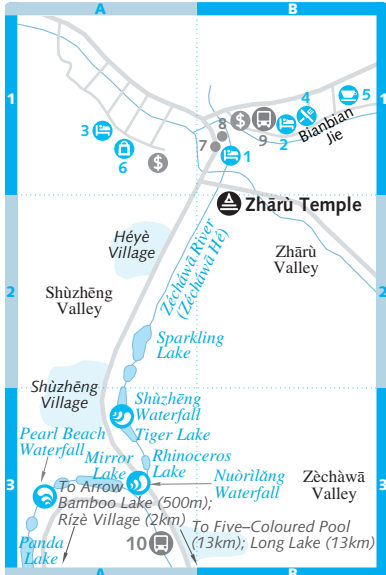
The first official site inside the park proper is the Tibetan Zhārú Temple (扎如寺; Zhārú Sì; Zaru Gumpa in Tibetan), in the Zhārú Valley. The bus doesn't stop here, but it's only a short walk from the ticket office; go left at the first fork off the main road.

🚶 Activities

As part of an excellent new **ecotourism program** (☎773 7811; ecotourism@jiuzhai.com; Visitors Centre; 1-/2-/3-day hikes Y380/760/1580) visitors can now hike along and even camp (if you're on one of the official guided eco tours) inside the Zhārú Valley, just east of the main tourist valley. This is an extremely rare opportunity in China and numbers are strictly limited so it's advisable to email or phone ahead, especially if you want to camp. Prices include park entrance fees, English-speaking guides, all camping equipment

Jiūzhàigōu

0 2 km
0 1 mile



Jiūzhàigōu

👁 Top Sights

Zhārú Temple B2

🏠 Sleeping

- 1 Jiūzhàigōu Grand Hotel..... B1
2 MCA Chalets B1
3 Self-Tour Youth Hostel A1

🍴 Eating

4 Àbù Lǔzǐ..... B1

☕ Drinking

5 Star Cafe B1

🛒 Shopping

6 Kodak Shop..... A1

Information

- 7 Park Entrance B1
8 Visitors Centre & Tickets..... B1

Transport

- 9 Bus Station..... B1
10 Nuòrìlǎng Bus Station..... A3

and main meals, although you may want to bring along some fruit and snacks. The multiday hikes include a day in the main park without a guide. Check the park



HOW TO 'DO' JIŪZHÀIGŌU

- » **Start early** Get into the park as close to the 7am opening as you can. Not only will you have more time, but you'll also beat the later-sleeping tour groups.
- » **Go up first** Since much of the most spectacular scenery is in the park's higher reaches, you'll see the highlights first if you take the bus to the top and walk or ride down. Head first to either Long Lake or Swan Lake, work your way down to the Nuòrìlǎng junction, then go up the other fork. Later in the day, you can see the lakes between Nuòrìlǎng and the entrance.
- » **Get out of the bus** Walking trails run throughout the park, and by walking, you'll steer clear of the biggest crowds. The walking trails are generally on the opposite side of the lakes from the road, so you'll have more peace and quiet, too.
- » **Pack a lunch** Dining options inside the park are limited and expensive. If you bring your own food, you can picnic away from the hordes.

website or ask at the Visitors Centre (游客中心; Yóukè Zhōngxīn) for more details.

For those who like to do things on their own, there are great hiking opportunities all over this area, although be sure to steer clear of the national park itself. One option is to hike around the hills near Zhuo Ma's homestay; Zhuo Ma can advise you on where's good.

Sleeping

There's an almost endless supply of hotels around Péngfēng Village (彭丰村; Péngfēng Cūn) and Bianbian Jie (although Bianbian Jie tends to close down in winter), so don't worry if the options listed here are full. Apart from at the youth hostels, where discounts are rare, expect prices close to rack rates only during high season (July and August) and major national holidays. Staying inside the park is not allowed any more, although villagers may still offer you a bed.



Zhuo Ma's

HOMESTAY \$

(卓玛; Zhuómǎ; ☎135 6878 3012; www.zhuomajiuhaigou.hostel.com; beds Y180) A genuine Tibetan homestay, this beautifully decorated wood cabin in a tiny village about 10km up the valley from the main park has three simple rooms and a wonderfully accommodating family. The lovely Zhuo Ma speaks some English and is on hand to welcome foreign guests. Her mother (*amma*) is the host and cooks the meals along with Zhuo Ma's brother Ke Zhu, a Lhasa-trained chef who prepares the food at the family's restaurant, Àbù Lǚzī. There's a common bathroom with shower, and prices include three meals a day.

If rooms are full, Zhuo Ma's neighbours offer spillover accommodation, although without a shower. It costs around Y50 to

get here in a taxi from Péngfēng Village. If you're coming from Sōngpān you could ask the driver to drop you on the main road at Shānsì Village (山四寨; Shānsì Zhài). Zhuo Ma's is about a 15-minute walk up a dirt track from there. Any problems, just call Zhuo Ma.

Self-tour Youth Hostel

YOUTH HOSTEL \$

(自游青年旅舍; Zìyóu Qīngnián Lǚshè; ☎776 4617; www.57jzg.com; Péngfēng Village; 彭丰村; Péngfēng Cūn; dm/d/tw/tr Y30/70/80/90; @☎)

There are five or six very similar youth hostels within 100m of each other in Péngfēng Village. This one is the nearest to the park entrance and one of the cheapest. It also rents mountain bikes (Y10 per two hours). Rooms are bigger here than in other hostels, although they lack character. Wi-fi doesn't extend into the rooms.

Jiūzhàigōu Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(九寨沟贵宾楼饭店; Jiūzhàigōu Guībīnlóu Fàndiàn; ☎773 9066, 773 5555; r incl breakfast from Y680) You can't beat the location, just behind the park entrance gate. The rooms themselves are run-of-the-mill midrange units, but some have views of either the mountains or the small river that runs alongside the hotel. Rates usually start at just over Y200 and include breakfast.

MCA Chalets

HOTEL \$\$

(国际乡村客栈; Guójī Xiāngcūn Kèzhàn; ☎773 9818, 136 7837 7715; Bianbian Jie; 边边街; r Y200-600) Has a range of rooms in a number of buildings along the pleasant river promenade known as Bianbian Jie. Prices often drop to around the Y100 mark.



Eating & Drinking

Péngfēng Village and Bianbian Jie are stuffed full with cheap restaurants. Inside

the park, you can buy pricey water and snacks in the villages. Otherwise, there's a restaurant at the Nuòrìlǎng junction.



Àbù Lǔzǐ

TIBETAN \$\$

(阿布魯孜; Àbù Lǔzǐ Fēngqíng Zàngcānba;

☎139 9042 1118, 135 6878 3012; www.abuluzi.com; 11 Bianbian Jie; 边边街11号; dishes Y22-58; ☺dinner only; 📷) The only genuine Tibetan restaurant in Jiūzhàigōu, this place, run by the same family who run Zhuo Ma's home-stay, has a limited but excellent menu which is in English and has photos.

Star Cafe

CAFE \$

(太白楼; Tàibái Lóu; ☎773 9839; 23 Bianbian Jie; 边边街23号; coffees Y10-30, food & snacks Y5-36; ☺noon-late; 📷) The coolest hang-out in town, Star Cafe has a good selection of fresh coffee, beers and spirits and some OK food. There's also wi-fi and patio seating by the river.

i Information

An **ATM** (自动柜员机; Zìdòng Guìyuán Jī) at the park entrance accepts foreign cards, as does the China Construction Bank and Agricultural Bank of China, where you can also change cash. There's a number of **internet cafes** (网吧; wǎngbā) in Péngfēng Village, which also has a **Kodak shop** (柯达; Kēdá) where you can burn CDs (Y20 per disk).

The park has an excellent English-language website at www.jiuzhai.com. You can also get information from the Visitors Centre at the park entrance.

i Getting There & Away

Air

More than a dozen daily flights link Chéngdū with Jiūzhàigōu Airport (officially called Jiūhuáng

Airport). Other direct flights include Běijīng, Shànghǎi, Hángzhōu, Chóngqīng, Kúnmíng and Xī'ān.

Buses to Jiūzhàigōu (Y45, 1½ hours) meet arriving flights. A taxi from the airport is about Y200.

There's also an airport bus that stops first at Huánglóng National Park, waiting long enough for passengers to tour the park, and then continues on to Jiūzhàigōu (Y100).

Bus

The new tunnel-tastic route from Jiūzhàigōu to Chéngdū, via Sōngpǎn, should be open by the time you read this and was reportedly set to cut journey times down to four or five hours! Check www.jiuzhai.com for the latest. At the time of research, buses leaving from Jiūzhàigōu bus station (汽车站; Qìchēzhàn) included the following:

Chéngdū Y140, 10 hours, two daily (7.30am and 8am)

Guǎngyuán Y90, nine hours, one daily (6.30am)

Huánglóng National Park Y40, three hours, two daily (6.30am and 7am)

Lánzhōu Y223, 11 hours, one daily (7am)

Sōngpǎn Y30, two hours, one daily (7.30am)

i Getting Around

Hop-on/hop-off buses (Y90) travel within the park itself, and are pretty much essential because of the size of the park. They stop at almost all the sights listed here.

Outside the park, there's no public bus service. To get around you have to walk, cycle or take a taxi. You can rent adequate mountain bikes from Self-tour Youth Hostel. Taxi fares begin at Y5.

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