

SAMPLE TOUR ITINERARY

HISTORY AND CULTURE

ACCOMMODATIONS

# PEMAGATSHEL

## TOURISM ATTRACTIONS







# PEMAGATSHEL

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- Sample Tour Itinerary
- History & Culture
- Accommodations



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SHINE (Sustainable Hospitality Industries Inclusive  
of Native Entrepreneurs)

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# Foreword

Tourism benefits have been rather concentrated in western Bhutan. Most of eastern and central areas are barely visited by international tourists, despite the vast potential of the attractions - pristine landscapes, rich cultural heritage, historical narratives and diverse ethnic minorities. The project “Sustainable Hospitality Industry Inclusive of Native Entrepreneur (SHINE)” funded by the EU SWITCH-Asia Programme aims at more inclusive tourism development in Bhutan, by promoting the indigenous and authentic tourism resources of the eastern and central Bhutan. At large, SHINE adopts the two-way strategy: to vitalize tourism in eastern and central Bhutan, where the handicraft and agro- products are made; and conversely, to bring these products into the supply chain of the mainstream tourism.

The project was initiated by the Centre for Appropriate Technology (GrAT, Austria) and kicked off in May 2020 in partnership with the Handicrafts Association of Bhutan (HAB), Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAOWE), and STENUM Asia in India.

The project engages native producers - individuals and groups in the tourism value chain, links their products and services to the tourism hubs, and uses Appropriate Technology (AT) to increase production quality and quantity. SHINE’s various interventions include product diversification, quality and quantity improvement of handicrafts and agri-products, integrating indigenous attractions in tour products, and propagating and replicating the results. The beneficiary groups of the project are rural producers, craftsmen, hoteliers, village homestays, agro-producers, craft and agro-enterprises, women entrepreneurs, informal self-help groups, disadvantaged youth and the local communities. Through the multi-dimensional interventions, producers not only acquire better skills, but are also able to market their products more successfully. HAB and BAOWE also receive assistance in terms of skills development and capacity building. These agencies are active in helping the vulnerable and neglected players in the value chain. This volume of tourism attraction books is one vital step towards promoting the eastern and southern districts in Bhutan as attractive tourism destinations.

On behalf of the entire SHINE team, I would like to invite you to discover the exciting and diverse attractions presented in this first edition of our books, and wish you use this resource collection together with the local stakeholders for a joint and inclusive development.

**Dr. Robert Wimmer**  
**Lead Project Manager of the SHINE project**  
**Managing Director, Center for Appropriate Technology (GrAT) Austria**



Sustainable Hospitality Industry  
Inclusive of Native Entrepreneurs

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*Majestic view of new dzong of Pemagatshel*



Photo courtesy: Fb, Inside Bhutan



# Introduction

The uneven distribution of tourism benefits in Bhutan is one of the pressing concerns that the EU-funded SWITCH-Asia project SHINE (Sustainable Hospitality Industry Inclusive of Native Entrepreneurs) is addressing. The project's seven target districts - Zhemgang, Dagana, Lhuentse, Mongar, Trashigang and Pemagatshel - are far-flung districts with challenging accessibility by both road and air. An overwhelming majority of tourists visit only the western region, which resulted in heavy dependence on imported products such as handicrafts and agri-food to serve them while leaving behind the valuable and diverse traditional foods and rural crafts from the eastern districts. If more tourists travel to the rural areas to experience another aspect of Bhutan, or if the resources in the East are effectively mobilized to cover the high demand of tourists in the current tourism hotspots, local producers can improve their community livelihood and enhance the distribution of tourism values across the country. These seven districts have an enormous potential to attract tourists. Each is unique in itself. Every valley resounds with myths and tales from the past, and every village has its own folk traditions and customs. Their rituals, festivals, and social mores still retain that native originality and splendor. The way they work on their ancient farmlands, the food they consume, the community in which they thrive, and almost all other aspects of their lives are largely unsullied by modernization and external influences. To top it all, surrounding their homes and villages are pristine forests inhabited by a plethora of wildlife.

This volume of tourism attraction books is therefore an attempt to build an inventory of tourism resources in these seven districts by delving into every aspect of rural life including crops and forest products, history, culture, craft, monasteries and religious sites, folk life, etc. Various products deemed interesting enough for tourists to see, taste and listen to, are introduced. The volume consists of eight books: one presenting the agri-products and non-timber forest products, as well as traditional sports and cultural activities, which are commonly encountered and practiced in the region; each of the other seven books is dedicated to each target district with specific monasteries and stupas, distinguishable festivals and myths, and available accommodation options. Two sample itineraries per district are proposed to explore the uncharted Bhutan.

As a whole, this inventory will help policymakers and respective districts to develop sustainable and inclusive tourism models with the rich resources, tour operators and guides pick up the momentum of thriving rural eco-tourism trends of the world, and many producers along the tourism value chain to find the new opportunities for income generation by supplying cash crops, authentic handicraft, and village homestays with standard quality.

This is the first edition, and the SHINE project team hopes to receive feedback from readers, including potential stakeholders of the new sustainable tourism models, to verify and enhance the inventory, and tourists who are interested in discovering real Bhutan.

## About the Dzongkhag

Pemagatshel (literally meaning “the Lotus Garden of Happiness”) is located in southeastern Bhutan at an altitude range of 500-3,500 meters. More than half of this small district is under the cover of mixed broad-leaf and coniferous forests.

The district is famous for its artisans and weavers. Religious instruments like Jaling (oboe-like religious instrument) and Dhung (a long ritual trumpet) produced here are highly prized and sold throughout the country. The weavers of Pemagatshel produce fine Kira and Gho (traditional dress worn by women) from Bura (raw silk). Two particularly gorgeous examples of textile that are a specialty of the region are the Lungsermo and Aiekapur. The region is also famous for a locally made sweet known as Tshatsi Buram.

The region has its own special attractions. Situated upon a dagger-shaped mountain, Yongla Goenpa is one of the oldest and holiest shrines in eastern Bhutan. There are various other shrines and temples in the region including the 15th century temple Kheri Goenpa and the Dungkhar Goenpa.

The main crop grown in the region is maize but potatoes, oranges, bananas and other fruits are also cultivated. ‘Slash and burn Agriculture’ (Tseri) was once the dominant agricultural practice in the district but nowadays most farmers have orchards and sell much of their crop for income.

The district is known for its numerous festivals and folk songs. The most notable folk song is the Ausa, a song that is sung during the departure of family members, friends and relatives. Another song, Khoray, is sung during times of the singer’s personal anguish on being unable to leave the mundane world to go and practice Dharma.

While challenges in infrastructure developments like tourist-standard hotels and modern amenities remain a reality, what sets the district apart is its raw appeal with its crude natural settings and uncharted realms where only a handful of unorthodox and out-of-the-routine adventurers have managed to venture till date.

### PEMAGATSHEL AT A GLANCE

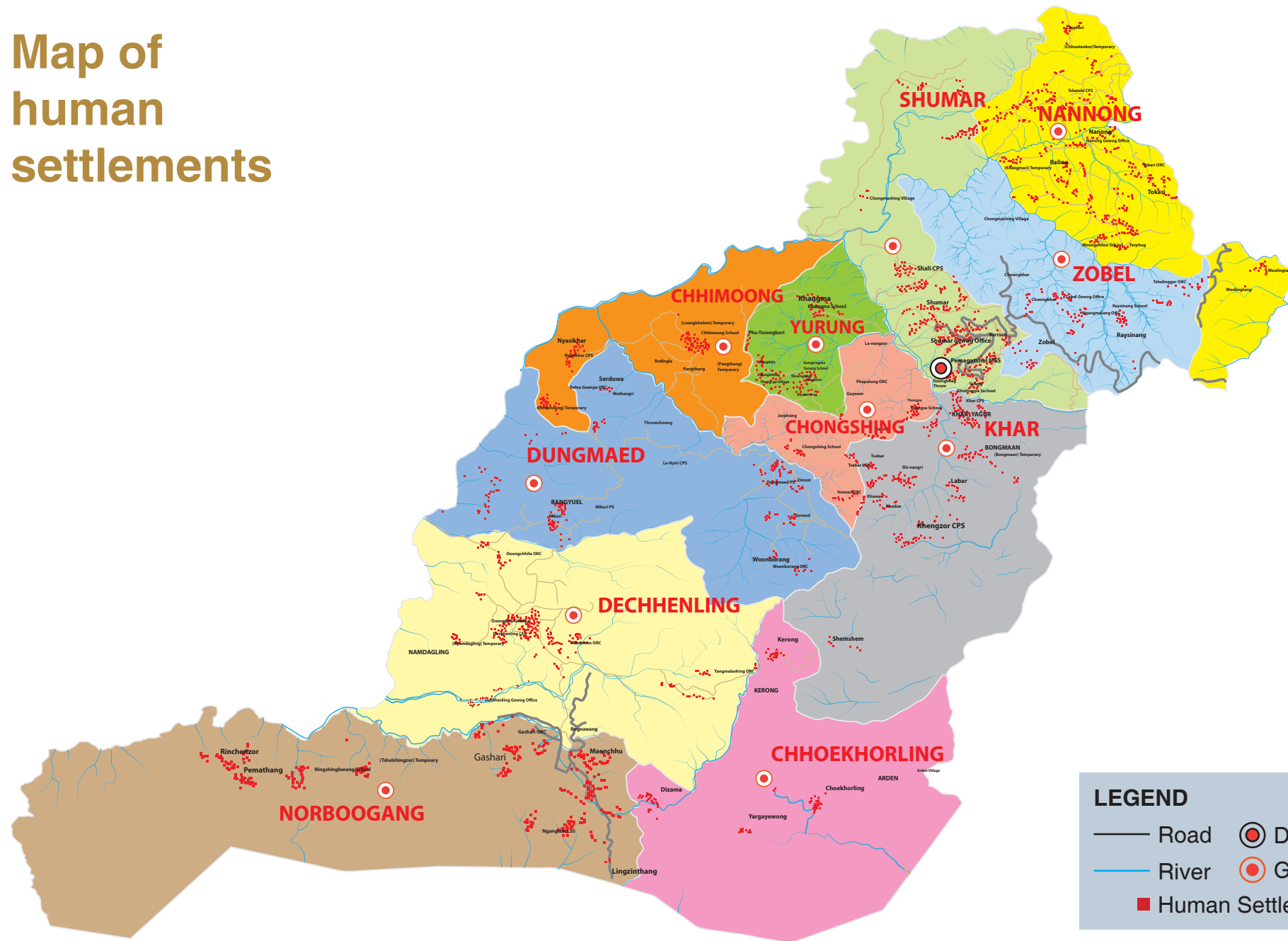
<b>National Statistical Bureau</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>EDUCATION</b>	
Area (sq. km)	1,022	Tertiary Institute under RUB	0
Altitude Range (masl).	500-3500	Central Schools	4
Dungkhags	1	Higher Secondary Schools	0
Gewogs	11	Middle Secondary Schools	2
Chiwogs	56	<b>AGRICULTURE</b>	
Villages	208	Dry land (acres)	10,700
Gungtong	849	Wet land (acres)	356
		Orchard (acres)	2,335.4
<b>POPULATION</b>		<b>INFRASTRUCTURE</b>	
Total	23,748	Roads (Kms)	650
Population density (per sq. km)	23.2	Electricity Coverage (%)	99.8
<b>HEALTH</b>		Telephone Connections (Nos).	180
Hospitals	1	Internet Connections (Nos)	150
Indigenous Units	5	Religious Institutions	2
Basic Health Units (BHUs)	12	Religious Monuments	121
Rural water supply coverage (%)	100	No. of tourists visited (2019)	71

### DISTANCE BY ROAD

From	To	Distance	Duration
Paro	Thimphu	65	1 hr 15 mins
Thimphu	Wangdue	70	3 hrs
Wangdue	Trongsa	137	5 hrs 30 mins
Trongsa	Bumthang	65	2 hrs 15 mins
Bumthang	Mongar	190	8 hours
Mongar	Trashigang	92	3 hrs 15 mins
Trashigang	Pemagatshel	123.8	4 hrs
Kheri Gonpa	Pemagatshel	5	20 mins
Tshelingkor	Pemagatshel	23	45 mins
Pemagatshel	Khotkha Mines	5	20 mins
Pemagatshel	Nganglam	192	7 hrs 30 mins
Pemagatshel	Samdrupjongkhar	162	6 hrs 15 mins
Samdrupjongkhar	Guwahati, Assam	110	3 hrs



# Map of human settlements



# LOTUS VALLEY TREK - A SWEET SOJOURN IN THE LOTUS VALLEY OF HAPPINESS



Nature, Culture,  
& The jaggery makers



Spring & Autumn



800-2500m



Warm &  
Dry-temperate



Moderate



8 Nights 9 Days

**P**emagatshel - the Lotus Valley of Happiness is dotted with various tourist attractions which make it exciting for sightseeing and exploration. One of the most famous places to see in Pemagatshel is Yongla Goemba located on a mountain shaped like a dagger. Among the many interesting facts about the Goenpa, it was used as a base of operations by the Trongsa Poenlop (feudal lord) Jigme Namgyel, from where he launched attacks on British troops.

The lotus valley trek takes you through the ancient route which was used for transporting salt and other essential goods by the eastern districts like Trashigang, Lhuentse, Trashi Yangtse, etc. It passes through the remote villages of Pemagatshel and mountain caps overseeing the great plains of Assam – the neighbouring state of India. These remote hamlets are also hubs of some ancient bon festivals like the least-documented Bokpi (Flour) Dance performed nowhere else in the country, while the majestic Pemagatshel Dzong in Denchi town plays host to the grand annual tshechhu (mask dance) festival.

01  
DAY

Activity



Arrival at Samdrup Jongkhar

Night halt



S/Jongkhar

02  
DAY

Activity



Samdrup Jongkhar - Pemagatshel

Night halt



Pemagatshel

03  
DAY

Activity



Pemagatshel - Dungkhar  
Goenpa via Jashar Goenpa:  
Enroute explore nature and visit  
religious sites.

Night halt



Dungkhar  
Goenpa - Camp

04  
DAY

Activity



Dungkhar Goenpa – Khawar Go-  
enpa & Thongphu: enroute explore  
village life, religious sites, Kharwar  
Goenpa, Thongphu Goenpa &  
local Incense factory.

Night halt



Khar Gewog  
VHS

05  
DAY

Activity



Thongphu – Yurung: Enroute  
explore Yurung village, Goitsho  
(Lake), Khangma Chorten & reli-  
gious sites.

Night halt



Yurung VHS

06  
DAY

Activity



Yurung to Pegagatshel: explore  
community life and nature.

Night halt



Pemagatshel

07  
DAY

Activity



Pemagatshel - Trashigang:  
Enroute visit Youngla Goenpa,  
Palri Buddha park, Wamrong  
monastery, and Khaling Lhakhang.  
(Drive)

Night halt



Trashigang

08  
DAY

Activity



Trashigang - Yoenphula - Paro:  
explore Paro valley

Night halt



Paro

09  
DAY

Activity



Depart from Bhutan via Paro  
International Airport or extend a  
day to visit the tiger's nest.





# LOTUS VALLEY CRAFT VILLAGE TOUR - INTO THE RURAL HINTERLANDS OF EASTERN BHUTAN.



Nature, Culture,  
Assortment of flora and fauna



Spring & Autumn



800-2500m



Warm &  
Dry-temperate



Moderate



6 Nights 7 Days

With about 90 percent of the district's population comprising of subsistence agri-farmers, the natives of Pemagatshel are content and peace-loving bunch of communities who indeed live up to their sobriquet - the Lotus Valley of Happiness.

Though considered one of the least developed districts in terms of modern infrastructural development, however, its rural hinterlands, with a rustic setting and traditional way of life, are considered some of the oldest communities of Bhutan and still possess that age-old cultural aesthetics and bucolic charm. Visiting Pemagatshel would mean delving into the heart of eastern Bhutan's rural societies and is a vivid reflection of the country's unsullied culture and tradition which the allures of modernization haven't been able to influence yet.

One of the things that Pemagatshel is famous for are its artists and weavers. Two kinds of religious instruments are manufactured here, Jalings (which have a strong resemblance to Oboe) and Dhungs (which are similar to long trumpets). Both of them are always in high demand throughout the country. The weavers are also popular in the country and Pemagatshel is only the district that produces cotton in the country. The weavers here produce the most prized textiles from cotton and the raw silk, called Bura.

Besides, the district's southern sub-tropical valleys like the Nganglam region are a habitat to a rich assortment of flora and fauna. Its lush evergreen forests are home to numerous birds, wild plants, and tropical mammalian species like the rare one-horned Indian rhino and the majestic Golden Langur.

01  
DAY

Activity



Samdrupjongkhar – Pemagatshel – enroute visit Yongla Goenpa and old Pemagatshel Dzong.

Night halt



Pemagatshel VHS

02  
DAY

Activity



Pemagatshel – Tsebar – visit the metal craft village and experience Dung and Jaling making crafts and the village lives.

Night halt



Tsebar VHS

03  
DAY

Activity



Tsebar – Thongsa – explore the Thongsa village and local sight-seeing.

Night halt



Thongsa Campsite/VHS

04  
DAY

Activity



Hold at Thongsa – experience cotton picking, threading, dyeing, and weaving.

Night halt



Thongsa Campsite/VHS

05  
DAY

Activity



Thongsa – Yurung – explore raw silk weaving community and experience weaving along with the local weavers.

Night halt



Yurung Campsite/VHS

08  
DAY

Activity



Yurung – Naglam – Enroute visit Tsebar Nangray Chorten, fermented soybean production groups.

Night halt



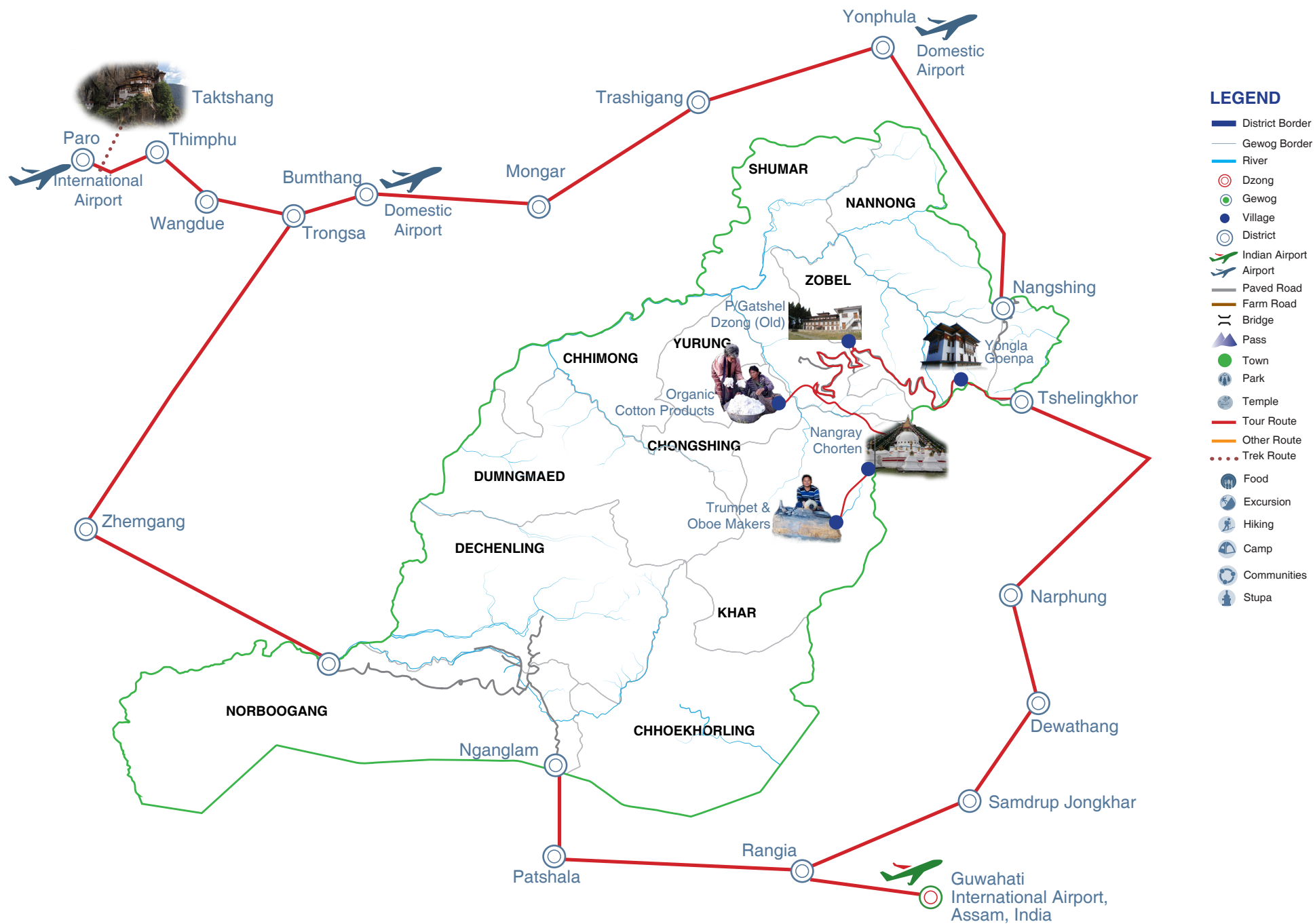
Nganglam

09  
DAY

Activity



Exist from Bhutan via Guwahati, Assam, India







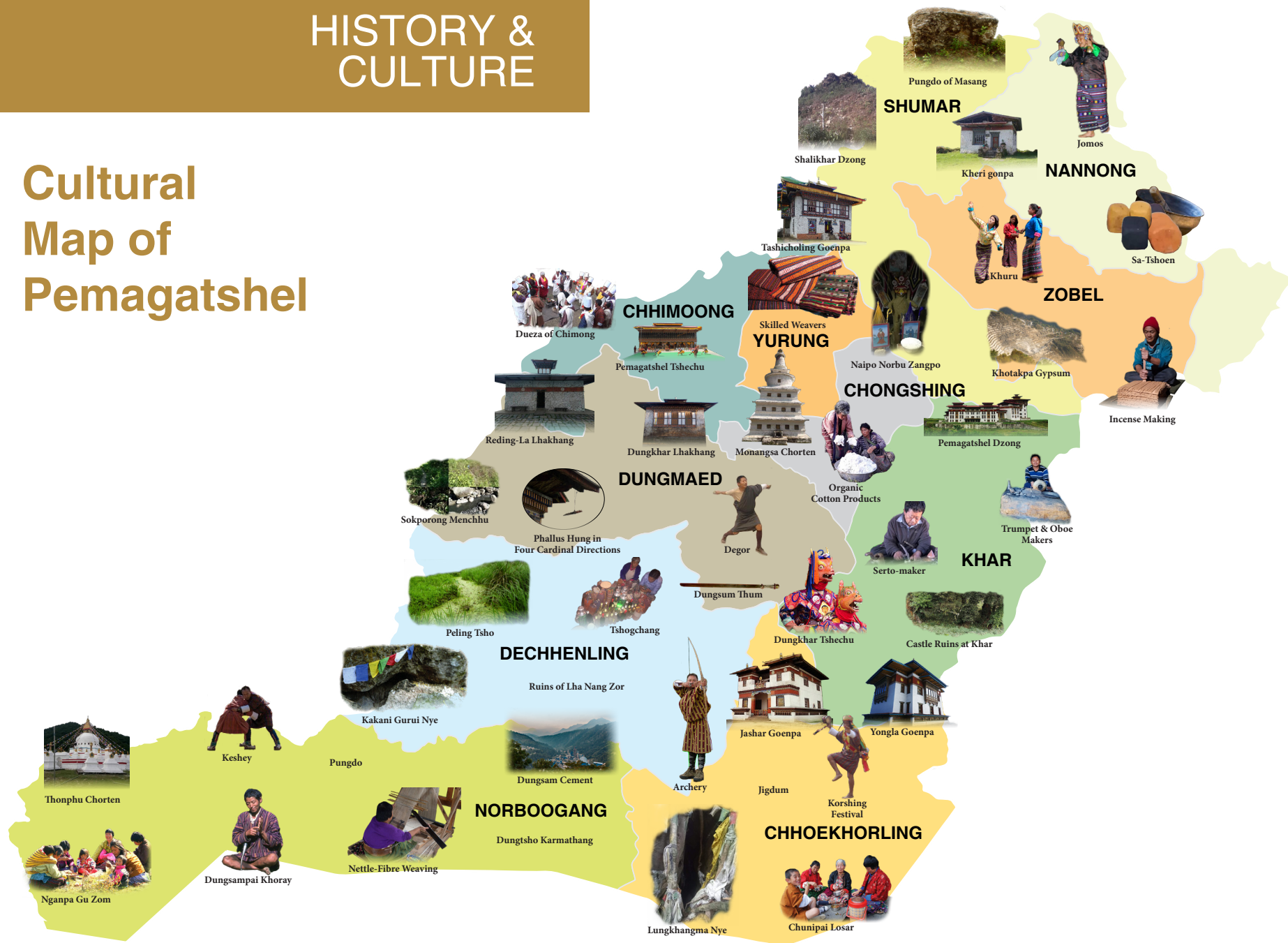
*View of cloud spreaded around mountains  
seen from Tshelingkhor*

# HISTORY & CULTURE

Photo Courtesy: Fb, Pema Gatsel Dzongkhag Administration

# HISTORY & CULTURE

## Cultural Map of Pemagatshel





*Performing Bhutanese traditional dance  
during the Tsechu festival*



Photo Courtesy: Fb. Pema Galshe Dzongkhag Administration





## Historical Sites & Heritage





Photo Courtesy: Fb, insidebhutan

## PEMAGATSHEL DZONG

One of the latest to be built, Pemagatshel Dzong is an iconic symbol of Bhutanese culture and society. Functionally, the Dzong is the administrative centre for the district, and sits at the terminus of an imposing boulevard with beautiful views of the surrounding valleys and hills.

The Dzong has its own sacred precinct which enhances its unique position in the order of daily life and society. The thick forests behind the Dzong have been developed as a “breakout” area for the public to wait and to rest. The image of the Dzong lingers in the memories of people who visit it, as a symbol of power, harmony and unity in the region.



Photo Courtesy: alamy.com

## SHALIKHAR DZONG

The ruins of Shalikhhar Dzong are located to the north of Pemagatshel Dzong. The origin of the Dzong is a mystery though some oral sources suggest that it was built by Thongley, the great-great-grandson of Lhasey Tsangma. Some records also point out that the Dzong was built to collect taxes while others imply it served the purpose of controlling the movement of people during political emergencies. Like other Dzongs, it also may have been used as a defensive fortress to ward off external intrusions from the east and the south.



# HISTORY & CULTURE



Photo Courtesy: Fb, DrukGeNey

## CASTLE RUINS AT KHAR

The remains of this medieval castle/fortress belonging to the lineage of Thrumchung Khoche can be seen shrouded in a thick forest on a hilltop between Mangthari (Laniri) and Bainang Goenpa. It is believed that Pelkyid, who is the progenitor of the first Thrumchung Khoche, built this castle sometime in the mid-17th century. The lineage of Thrumchung Khoche was also known as Khar Khoche, and descended from Lhasey Tsangma.

Pelkyid had two younger brothers Pelzang and Khar Gyalpo of which the latter was a close companion of the 2nd Druk Desi La-Ngonpa Tenzin Drukdra (1656-1668). While Pelzang and Pelkyid left their ancestral home in search of fortune elsewhere, the youngest, Khar Gyalpo, became the chieftain of Khar and ruled Kulikatra (now Chokhorling), parts of Assam Ali and the Duars when he was at the peak of his power.

Meanwhile, the two elder brothers became the ancestors of the Khoche nobility in Dechhenling, Mekuri, Darbari, Marshong, Thrumchung, Dungmin, and Chimong. It is said an internal strife between the two Khoche lineages led to the downfall of the castle. Objects such as Lu (stone grinder), a pigsty and remnants of a stupa can still be seen among the castle's ruins.





Photo Courtesy: Fb, insidebhutan

## PUNGDO OF MASANG

Masang, as a legend goes, was a man of super-human strength, born out of an illicit affair between a young woman and a powerful spirit. Around this time, in present-day Pemagatshel, a plot was being hatched to kill the ruler of Shalikhhar Dzong who ill-treated his subjects. The subjects were looking for an assassin, and Masang was the obvious choice.

Masang demanded that he be served with a meal prepared from a mon (40 kilograms) of rice and an entire pig prior to carrying out his mission. A woman from Yurung village was hand-picked to cook the meal. However, the woman clandestinely stashed away some kilograms of rice and a limb from the pig. With the feast served, Masang hurled a huge rock to destroy Shalikhhar Dzong. But the rock missed the target by bare millimeters and, it is said, the mishap occurred because the woman who cooked the meal had cheated. The rock lies near the ruins of the Dzong today.

The numerous exploits of Masang are being recounted all over eastern Bhutan. He was believed to have been born in Chaskhar and wedded to a woman from Chali in Mongar. The local people believe that his footprints can still be seen on rocks in Chali, Gonpung, Gamung and Dagor.



Photo Courtesy: mapio.ne



## Monasteries & Stupas





Photo Courtesy: Fb, SWK Photos

## REDING-LA LHAKHANG

Also called Pelri Lhakhang, it is located in Chimong gewog. From the temple's location, one can see 360° view of places such as Kengkhar, Yurung, Shali-Shumar, Khangma, Guyum, Chiphung-Ngyesikhar and Chimong village. Even the distant Indian plains to the south can be spotted from the temple's vantage point. Reding-La is considered as one of the oldest although the local people know very little about its history.

A legend goes that Reding-La was a place where elephants once roamed and that a lake existed at the spot where the temple was built. The tusks of an elephant which is said to have drowned in the lake is preserved in the temple. As the temple was built on the spot of the dried lake, it is said that no mural inside the temple can be glued onto the wall due to the water vapor emanating from the lake below.

The main deity of the temple is a statue of Dorji Neljorma, a female deity, which is believed to have miraculously flown to the present site from Tibet. This statue is regarded as a Ter (treasure) and is not available for public viewing.



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Tashi Dorji

## DUNGKHAR LHAKHANG

Dungkhar Lhakhang is one of the oldest temples in Pemagatshel. It was founded by Yab Tenpai Nima, father of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, on the spot where a lake called Dungscho Karmathang had once existed. During his sojourn in Pemagatshel, Yab Tenpai Nima married a local woman with whom he fathered Tenzin Drukdra, the second Desi (temporal ruler) of Bhutan.

The main relic of the Lhakhang is a conch shell with an anti-clockwise whorl (Dungkhar Yekhil) believed to have been discovered as a treasure from the very lake, Dungscho Karmathang, by Terton Pema Lingpa. It is said that the remnants of the lake can still be seen today concealed right beneath the temple's altar room. Another relic is the human skull (Thodpa) which has the sacred letter 'AH' imprinted on it. The skull bowl is used for preparing Duetse (sacred water).

Legend has it that Dungkhar Lhakhang was built with stones that were miraculously brought to the temple site by Dakinis (Khandromas).

# HISTORY & CULTURE



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Yurung Gewog Administration

## YONGLA GOENPA

Yongla Goenpa sits majestically atop a mountain that is said to resemble a Phurba (ritual dagger) and overlooks the valleys of Samdrup Jongkhar and the vast plains of Assam. It was built in 1736 by Kheydrup Jigme Kundrel as per the prophecy of his master Tertön Rigzin Jigme Lingpa.

Considered one of the most sacred monuments in the region, the monastery was used as a base by Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyel to perform appeasement rituals during the Duar war of 1864. Historically, Yongla Goenpa is considered to guard Bhutan's sovereignty from the south, while Rigsum Goenpa in Trashiyangtse dzongkhag rendered protection from the north. Today, Yongla Goenpa is the summer residence for the Pemagatshel Rabdey.

The relics at the Goenpa include a statue of Guru Dorji Drolo flanked by Horthok Mardok (The Guru in a wrathful form) and numerous ritual daggers. Among others, it houses a stupa that preserves the embalmed body of the founder and the statues of the region's two protecting deities.



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Kinzang S Rigzin

## KHERI GOENPA

Kheri Goenpa was founded in 1534 by Kheydrup Kuenga Wangpo, son of Tertön Pema Lingpa. An account has it that Kheydrup Kuenga Wangpo was on a pilgrimage to Gyalwai Zyingchhog Tsachhog Drong (present day Guwahati, Assam) in 1534. As he reached Dungsam he rested on a stone slab to take a brief respite when out of nowhere a bird flew towards him and started to dance. Stupefied, he clandestinely followed the bird when he stumbled across a small lake in a clearing in the forest. Considering this as a good omen, he constructed a temple and named it as Khe (bird) Ri (lake) Goenpa (temple). It is believed that there still exists a pond under the temple's base.

The main relic housed in the temple is a statue of Buddha Sakyamuni, besides a sacred Phurba (ritual dagger). The other statues comprise of Avalokiteshvara, Guru Pema Jungney and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, and an inner sanctum dedicated to Gonpo Manning Nagpo.





Photo Courtesy: Fb, Yurung Gewog Administration

## TASHI CHOLING GOENPA

Tashi Choling Goenpa in Khominang village, Yurung gewog, was built by a Tibetan Lama named Tashi Jamtsho. It is said that the Lama, through a prophecy, identified the spot to build the temple but found that the sacred site was already occupied by a lake. He then asked the lake's deity, a mermaid, to relocate the lake to another place following which the temple was built.

The temple later fell into disrepair and was used as Nagtshang (lodge for civilian chieftains). During stopovers on their journeys in the region, Zhongar Dzongpon (governor) Kunzang Wangdi and Yurung Khoche (chieftain) Kuenzang both resided at the Nagtshang and made it their official place of governance. In 1919 the Nagtshang was restored to its original reverence as a temple.

The Lhakhang's main relics – a Kasung Lhalung Pekar Dorji statue and Sungten (text) Sergi Laekbum – were said to have been brought from Tibet by the temple's founder.



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Karma Samkharpa; Trashigang

## MONANGSA CHORTEN

One of the most visually-arresting landmarks in the district, Monangsa Chorten, also known as Samdruptse chorten or Khangma chorten, is located in Khangma village under Yurung gewog. The stupa was built by Dungsam Jadrunpa, governor of the Dungsam province, sometime in 1845.

It is said that the majestic chorten, shaped like a Tashigomang (portable altar), was built with the help of Dakinis who aided Jadrunpa during the entire construction process. It is also believed that the sacred chorten has wish-fulfilling attributes and has survived several desecration and attempted robberies in the past.

Dungsam Jadrunpa was appointed by the then powerful Trongsa Penlop to collect taxes from Dungsam and the Assam Duars until its annexation by British-India during the Duar Wars of 1864-5.

# HISTORY & CULTURE



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Tsebar Community

## THONPHU CHORTEN

Thonphu Chorten is similar to the Boudhanath stupa in Nepal. It was built by Lam Sangay Dorji in 1994 to fulfill his father's and the people of Dungsam's dream after realizing that not everyone had time and the financial resources to travel all the way to Boudhanath stupa in Nepal.

Today, it is known as Samdupcholing Chorten (wish-fulfilling stupa) and people living in its neighborhoods believe that the community is spiritually blessed because of the presence of this sacred monument.

Located at Tsebar gewog, this gigantic stupa which is encircled by a cluster of smaller stupas is perched on the lap of a small knoll surrounded by beautiful oak and pine forests.



Photo Courtesy: vymaps.com

## JASHAR GOENPA

Jashar Goenpa, meaning “the monastery of rising rainbow”, is a fruition of one woman's dream to devote her life to the Buddha's teachings. In 1958, Ani (nun) Woesel Choden saw, from the window of her hermitage above Yongla Goenpa, a rainbow just a short distance away. For the next couple of days, whenever she looked out, the rainbow was there, exactly at the same spot.

Thereafter, she moved to a solitary hilltop above Yongla Goenpa to meditate but felt unwelcomed by the local deity, Tsheringma. To fulfill the prophetic and ominous signs of the rainbow sighting and to tame the negative forces dwelling in the valley, she thus decided to build Jashar Goenpa, about 11 kilometers before reaching the old Pemagatshel town.

Believed to be a Yogini in her previous life, Ani Woesel Choden also excelled as a student of Togden Shakya Shri, a famous Tibetan Buddhist master.

Ani Woesel Choden passed away in 1982 but her work continues. Today, the nunnery at Jashar Woong, Zobel, is being looked after by Gyaltsen Trulku, a well-known adept and teacher who runs many Buddhist centers across eastern Bhutan.





## Nye (Sacred sites)

# HISTORY & CULTURE



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Dungsam Sonam Tshering

## LUNGKhangMA NYE

The Nye is located at a place called Lungkhangma between Nganglam town and Chhokholing gewog. The massive boulder, which comprises the Nye, is split into two halves owing to which the place derives its name - Lungkhangma - and one can clearly see a pool of water, considered a sacred lake, wedged in between the two portions.

Locals believe that, depending on one's karmic faith, one can see different manifestations of Guru Rinpoche reflected on the lake's surface.



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Dungsam Sonam Tshering

## KAKANI GURUI NYE

Locals believe that there once dwelt a serpent demon that was subdued by Guru Rinpoche on the site where the Nye is located. Today, pilgrims who throng the sacred site attempts to crawl through a narrow crevice between the rocks, believed to be the exact passage where the demon was subdued by the guru.

Kakani Guru Nye is located in a small clearing just before one reaches Dechenling gewog, northeast of Nganglam town.





Photo Courtesy: Fb, UNDP Bhutan

## PELING TSHO

Peling Tsho (lake) is located in the northern frontiers of Dechenling gewog and is about two-hours drive from Nganglam town. The marshy area comprise of about 500 acres where, locals say, once existed a massive lake. In the past, the lake was the primary source of water for the people dwelling in the area. However, later after the lake shrank in volume, the government allotted some portion of the marshy fields to the community for wetland cultivation.

Today, the lake is protected by the locals and people living nearby say the lake's volume continues to shrink every year due to human encroachment and other developmental activities.



Photo Courtesy: Fb, bbs

## SOKPORONG MENCHHU

Sokporong Menchhu (mineral spring water) in Dungmaed gewog is well known among the people in the community and nearby places for its healing properties such as cure from skin-related diseases and urinary tract infection. However, its location is a major disadvantage as there is no road connecting to the site and the Menchu lies, almost abandoned, in a dense jungle far away from human settlements.

People have to walk for almost three hours from the nearest road to reach the Menchhu. The journey entails an arduous trek along the banks of Sokporong river and several other streams, along narrow and treacherous footpaths which are infested with snakes, leeches and wild animals.

# HISTORY & CULTURE



Photo Courtesy: Chenga Tshewang, Khar

## DUNGTSHO KARMATHANG

Located on a hill above the present-day Khar village, it is said that Tertön Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) revealed a Ter (a sacred hidden treasure) from this lake. The lake dried up later and humans started to settle in its neighborhoods. Through the years, the inhabitants of the new-found settlement became the ancestors of the Khoche nobility in Dungsam.

Mipham Tenpai Nyima (1567-1619), the father of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, is also said to have visited and sanctified this place. Local folklore say, at one time, a mysterious epidemic struck the communities at Dungtsho Karmathang and all the inhabitants perished except for two Khoche brothers who endured the plague.

The remnants of the deserted settlement can still be seen today.



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Dungsamlhomon

## DUNGSAMPAI KHORAY

Khoray is a folk song that dates way back in time and is supposed to have originated from Dungsam, the present-day districts of Pemagatshel and Samdrup Jongkhar. Today, this timeless melody is sung all over the country.

The song's lyrics are not rigid – just about anybody can come up with their own composition and sing – while the beautiful melody and intonation remain the same. The ancient lyrics would mostly describe one's longing to be amid beautiful nature or express one's desire to leave the mundane world and embrace spirituality. It is basically a song of longing and sorrow.

In the past, the song used to be popular among cow herders tending their cattle in lonely and remote forests and mountains, farmers ploughing fields with their oxen, and traders who traveled for days on foot to India to sell their wares and bring back salt, oil, clothes and other household necessities.



*An ancient stupa at Khar*



Photo Courtesy: Ep, DungkharGonpa





# Festivals





Photo Courtesy: bbs.bt

## DUEZA OF CHIMONG

The people of Chimong village in Pemagatshel observe an ancient festival called Dueza. The villagers congregate and indulge themselves in days of merriment, uttering sexually-explicit verses.

A highlight of the festival is that the phalluses used in the festival are carved by a chosen person from the village and dyed red with a plant called Tsod (a species of madder). The shimmering-red phalluses of varying sizes are then hung on a 'deity tree' creating a spectacular view straight from the medieval archives. After the ritual concludes, the crowd jostles to strip the tree off the phalluses and take them home as trophies to be kept in the granary in the hope of guaranteeing a good harvest and to stave off misfortunes.

This strange ritual, they believe, brings harmony to the community. Dueza is observed for 15 days, from the 1st day of the 2nd Bhutanese month until the 15th day. In addition, ceremonial Tshog offerings are made for three days, from 10th till the 12th day.



Photo Courtesy: Fb, bbs

## NAIPO NORBU ZANGPO OF YURUNG

He provided water where there was none and, at one time, even went so far as to lend household utensils to the local community. That is Naipo Norbu Zangpo, the benign Yue-Lha (protecting deity) of Yurung village. He is a popular supernatural figure, celebrated and worshiped, especially during the annual Lhasoel rite, which the Yurung community performs to appease him.

It is said that he reached Yurung after he was banished from Lhasa in Tibet by Guru Padmasambhava. Back in those days, the deity was apparently one of the demonic forces who tried to destroy Samye monastery. The Guru expelled him out of his hideout in a rocky cliff using slingshots and then subdued him in a lake, binding him thence to be a Dharma-protector in Lho-Moen (Bhutan).

Somewhere near Lha Nang Zor, in a hamlet called Chorteng, he took an overnight refuge in a household and there, through divination, found his abode in the Guyum Riwoo (mountain). The water source for Yurung that exists there is named after him, although it is said he no more lends out utensils after some of his faithfuls did not bother to return them.

# HISTORY & CULTURE



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Pema Gatshel Dzongkhag Administration

## PEMAGATSHEL TSHECHU

People from all over the district come to Pemagatshel Dzong where the annual mask dance festival is held and all public offices remain closed for three days. Different kinds of mask dances are performed, which are believed to provide protection from misfortune and exorcise evil influences. The festival is a religious ceremony and one is said to gain merit simply by attending and witnessing it. It is also an annual social gathering where people from all walks of life get together to celebrate.

The Tshechu was instituted in the early 1980s after the completion of the Dzong at the old Pemagatshel town. However, today, the venue of the festivals has been shifted to the new Dzong at Denchi with the consecration of the grand fortress in 2021.

The three-day mask dance festival is observed in the month of November corresponding to the 13th and 15th day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar.



Photo Courtesy: firefoxtours.com

## DUNGKHAR TSHECHU

The Tshechu begins on the 15th day of the third month of the lunar calendar every year at the community temple. Performed over four days, the festival is considered to be one of the oldest and the most sacred in the Dungsam region. It is usually performed in line with the Peling tradition of the Nyingma sect of Buddhism.

The festival attracts people not just from the nearby villages but also from far-flung places like Yurung, Chimung, Tshebar and Mikuri. They come to witness the ancient mask dances and to receive blessings from a sacred lake which is believed to exist under the temple's altar room.

What makes this festival unique is that anyone found indulging in sexual conducts during the celebrations is punished. To keep an eye on such obscene activities during the festival, night guards are appointed. Those found breaking the rule are marked, reported to the head lama and, to atone for their sins, made to circumambulate the temple carrying the festival's bulky dance masks.





Photo Courtesy: bhutantimes.bt

## BOKPI CHHAM

In Zobel village, a unique tradition exists whereby upon the completion of a series of mask dances, maize flour is sprinkled on the heads of the spectators. This peculiar event takes place on the fourth month of the Bhutanese calendar. The locals believe that this episode is a reenactment of Guru Rinpoche subduing evil spirits by sprinkling flour on the faces of the malignant spirits who were temporarily blinded and could not run away. This sequel is today called Bokpi (flour) Chham (dance).

This dance is often followed by yet another bizarre carnival where dancers perform using wooden phalluses. The dancers adorn themselves with garlands of phalluses made from banana plants and radish that whimsically dangles over their necks as they swirl and jump about in sync with the melody of drums, clarinets and cymbals.

It is a unique bon festival that is revered much by the locals and is enacted only in these remote and scattered rural communities.



Photo Courtesy: bl0ck.de

## PHAIDRUP - (CONSECRATION OF NEW HOUSES)

An interesting ritual performed as part of consecration of new houses entails erecting phallus symbols at the four corners of the eaves of the house and one inside the house. It involves raising a basket filled with wooden phalluses to the roof of the house to fix them at the four cardinal corners. Groups of both men and women get involved in raising the basket to the roof. While the men pull the basket up with a rope tied securely from the roof, women try to pull it down. During this process, ribald phallic songs are exchanged.

A mock exercise is enacted by the men as if they have failed to lift the basket and the basket is dropped to the ground. The intention is to get free alcohol from the owner of the house so that they get energised to raise the basket again. Following the free drinking binge, the men finally raise the basket to the roof. The phalluses are also tied with daggers (reldri) carved of wood and painted in five different colours which is said to connote the five divine expressions. The popular belief in fixing these symbols is that it wards off evil influences and draws luck and prosperity into the new house.

# HISTORY & CULTURE



Photo Courtesy: bhutan.travel

## MANI GOENPA LAKE & KORSHING FESTIVAL

For the small community of Mani Goenpa in Zobel gewog, the lake above their village is the source of their sustenance as well as spiritual refuge. The villagers depend on the lake for water and, in return, they perform rites annually to appease the deity of the lake. It is believed that the lake's deity is a benign mermaid who helps them by ensuring that the water level in the lake does not drop even during the driest of seasons. The lake's deity is invoked with rituals and offerings to quell diseases and misfortune in the community. The people also ensure that the lake is not polluted or defiled.

The village also organizes a festival called Korshing once every 12 years at a designated open arena marked with circular lines. During the ritual, effigies of Dakinis (Khandroms) and various animals made from dough are offered to the local deities which is said to safeguard the community from famine, disease, pestilence, wildlife depredation, and other forms of misfortune.





## Other Attractions

# HISTORY & CULTURE



Photo Courtesy: thebhutane.bt

## KHOTHAGPA GYPSUM

Located in Khothagpa village, about five kilometers away of Pemagatshel town, the Khothagpa gypsum mines have a total area of 27.50 hectares (67.95 Acres). Mining of gypsum began in the early 1980s managed by the Department of Geology and Mines and subsequently by the Penden Cement Authority.

Apart from helping boost the local economy, the mine is also one of the primary platforms for employment for the locals with hundreds of truckers and miners engaged in the operations. Today, it is operated by State Mining Corporation Limited, a company under Druk Holdings and Investment.

Gypsum is exported to India, Bangladesh and Nepal, and a small amount supplied to meet domestic demands.



Photo Courtesy: Fb, Dungsam Cement Corporation Limited


## DUNGSAW CEMENT

The cement plant is located in Dungsam Pemagatshel, under Nganglam Dungkhag, and has an installed capacity to produce 3,000 metric tons (MT) of clinker and 4,130 MT of cement a day. It is the largest cement manufacturing industry in the country and one of the largest in the region.

The company produces three types of cement: Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC), Portland Pozzolana Cement (PPC) and Portland Slag Cement (PSC), which are sold in both domestic and export markets. 40 percent of cement produced is exported to India while 60 percent is sold in the domestic market with the major portion supplied to the various hydro power projects in the country.

It is also one of the major employers of the local communities and has helped boost the region's economy to a great extent ever since operations began about a decade ago.





*Ngangmalang under Zobel gewog, Pemagatshel is one of the remote places in Bhutan connected with farm road and electricity though.*

Photo Courtesy: Fb, Real Sonam D Ramsey









*View of Pemagattsel*

# Accommodations

Photo Courtesy: Fb, heavenlybhutan.com

# HOSPITALITY



## Dungsam Guest House

Pemagatshel

Mobile: +975 17119909

E-mail: drukdeothjung@gmail.com

### Amenities/facilities

- Airport transfer
- Bar
- Mini library
- Wi-fi (free)

### Restaurant

- Bhutanese, Chinese, Continental and Indian

### Rooms

Standard Deluxe Room 2

Executive Suite Room 2

- Air conditioned rooms
- Attached bath
- Room heating

- Distance from Trashigang town (in kms): 2



*Zhanag Nga Cham (mask dance) at Khar Tsechu.*





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