

MILD AND MAD
DAY HIKES
AROUND THIMPHU



Piet van der Poel
Rogier Gruys

Overview Map

overview.ai

CONTENTS

About this Booklet	7
How to use this Booklet?	9
Glossary of Bhutanese terms	13
Books	16
Maps and GPS.....	17
1 Chagri (Cherri) goenpa and Dolam Kencho	21
1.1 Chagri goenpa	21
1.2 Dolam Kencho	21
2 Tango goenpa	25
2.1 Tango goenpa	25
2.2 Tango and Drolay goenpa loop	26
2.3 Tango Dzongkha	26
2.4 Tango Jongkha (4111 m peak)	27
2.5 Tango Jongkha to Drolay goenpa loop.....	27
3 Drolay goenpa	31
3.1 Drolay goenpa	31
3.2 Drolay goenpa loop	31
3.3 Dechhenchho'ling via Sinchula	33
3.4 Dobchula Pass and Yangchenphu High School (YHS)	34
4 Begana to Dechhenchho'ling	35
4.1 Begana to Dechhenchho'ling	35
5 Dechhenchho'ling to Sinchula ridge/Taba	37
5.1 Karbisa Loop.....	37
5.2 Taba	38
5.3 Sinchula	38
5.4 Punakha (Map 5.2)	38
6 Taba to Sinchula ridge	40
6.1 Dechhenchho'ling via Dechhenchho'ling forest road	40
6.2 Dechhenchho'ling via Sinchula	40
6.3 Hontsho via Dobchula	41
6.4 YHS via Telecom reflector (Map 12)	41
7 Dechhenphu valley	43
7.1 Dechhenphu lhakhang	43
7.2 River-left bank of Chang Chhu	43
7.3 River-right bank of Chang Chhu	44
7.4 Dui goenpa via Sanama Chhu	44
7.5 Jomkerim pass	44
7.6 Dui goenpa via Jomkerim pass	45
8 Dogtendrag (Dorjindra) goenpa	46
8.1 Dogtendrag goenpa	46
8.2 Dui goenpa	47
9 Dechhenphodrang Monastic school to Wangditse goenpa	49
9.1 Wangditse goenpa	49
10 Radio Tower to Phajodhing	50

	10.1 Wangditse goenpa	50
	10.2 Chhokhortse goenpa via Wangditse	50
	10.3 Phajodhing	51
	10.4 Phajodhing to Pumola	52
	10.5 Thujedrag goenpa	52
	10.6 The chorten on the ridge, Skeleton Mountain (aerial burial ground) and the lakes (Map 10)	53
	10.7 Bimelang Tsho	55
11	Youth Centre to Phajodhing and Pumola	57
	11.1 Phajodhing	57
	11.2 Pumola	57
	11.3 Pumola to Phajodhing	59
	11.4 Picnic spot with rock outcrops and views	60
	11.5 Thaptsa peak	60
	11.6 Thaptsa Peak to Thimphu Hospital	62
	11.7 Pumola to Tshelung nang	64
	11.8 Paro via Tshelung nang: punishment trail	64
12	YHS to Thadranang goenpa/telecom reflector	69
	12.1 Yangchenphu goenpa	69
	12.2 Thadranang goenpa	69
	12.3 Telecom reflector	70
	12.4 Dobchula and Hontsho (Maps 12 and 5)	70
	12.5 FM Transmitter on 3908 m peak	71
13	SAARC building to telecom reflector	72
	13.1 Telecom reflector	72
14	Yusipang to Thadranang goenpa	73
	14.1 Thadranang goenpa	73
	14.2 Telecom reflector	74
	14.3 3708 m peak	74
15	Dochula to Lungchuzekha/Trashigang goenpa	77
	15.1 Lungchuzekha goenpa	77
	15.2 Trashigang goenpa and Hontsho	78
	15.3 Simtokha via Hinglay La (Maps 15.1 and 16)	79
	15.4 Wangdi (Map 15.2)	79
16	Simtokha to Talakha	83
	16.1 Talakha goenpa	83
	16.2 Talakha peak	84
17	Khasadrapchhu to Thimphu hospital	87
18	Khasadrapchhu to Dardo goenpa	90
	18.1 Dardo goenpa loop	90
19	Danglok to Thaptsa Ridge	91
	19.1 Thaptsa ridge	91
20	Tshelung nang to Pumola goenpa	92
	20.1 Pumola Pass	92
21	Tshelung nang to Tshalunang goenpa/Bimelang Tsho	95
	21.1 Tshalunang goenpa	95
	21.2 Bimelang Tsho	96

22	Gida valley-Bemri lhakhang	99
	22.1 Bemri lhakhang	99
	22.2 Dongka lhakhang	99
23	Gida marble mine to Bemri lhakhang and Kharbi	101
	23.1 Bemri lhakhang	101
24	Karphu valley and Dongka lhakhang	102
	24.1 Karphu valley logging road	102
	24.2 Dongka lhakhang	102
	24.3 Bemri lhakhang and Gidakom valley	103
25	Kunzangdechhen goenpa	105
	25.1 Sisina to Kunzangdechhen goenpa	105
26	Geynikha valley	107
	26.1 Chhochhekha	107
	26.2 Talela pass (Map 26.2)	107
	26.3 Pagalabtsa pass	109
27	Chhuzom to Paga goenpa	111
	27.1 Paga goenpa	111
28	Druk Nature Club nature walks	112

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Why did I go through the hassle of writing all this up?

Several reasons crossed my mind:

- Others may enjoy the hiking and nature around Thimphu if they were not afraid to get lost.
- People leaving the country take all their knowledge about trails with them. We often had to rediscover trails that had been forgotten. Even so, some of the knowledge about walks has been lost to the Thimphu trekking community forever.
- Some of the first trails were described for visiting friends whom we wanted to send off on their own, but we did want them to return safely to Thimphu in the evening.

Why a new edition?

The first edition of this booklet dates back to 1995. It was distributed widely among expatriates in Thimphu, but never published. Since nobody made the effort to update the first edition, I had to come back to do it myself. The Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN) agreed to officially publish this edition, which will ensure wider distribution, especially among Bhutanese, and improve the chance that the information will be updated in the future. This book fits well with the RSPN objective to promote awareness of the importance of nature conservation and enjoyment of what nature has to offer. In addition to this they, not me, may even make some marginal profit.

There was one suggested route in the previous edition that has been eliminated from this edition due to reports that it cannot be managed by normal human beings. A recent survey has shown that this route can be completed by certain types of madmen, but that the chance of getting lost is so excellent that that we do not even want to suggest this route to any of you. Friends have taken me on new routes, one of which, especially on clear days, is one of the most beautiful walks around Thimphu. Others submitted new routes that they thought should also be included. Not having hiked these routes, how can I reject them?

Thanks

The unavoidable but well-meant thanks go to all those who accompanied me, showed me new routes, got me lost, as well as to those I got lost. There are too many names to make a selection from. Some will recognise themselves in the descriptions. Austin Hutcherson provided valuable additional GPS data. Bart Jordans provided the first draft of the text for the punishment trail. Kynan Bazley provided a lot of comments, even though we didn't always agree with his cultural sensitivity. RSPN staff provided some historical information on monasteries, Dr. Karma Wangchuk of the National Library translated common place names, and Tshewang Nidup provided definitions for the glossary. Special thanks go to the artists, who made this booklet a lot more presentable. All errors are my fault, but please blame the editor.

Mild and Mad Day Hikes Around Thimphu

Second Edition, April 2002. Copyright © 2002, Piet van der Poel, but if you live on a very low budget, just photocopy the hikes you like and don't tell me.

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Updates and additional information are available on-line at
<http://www.bhutan-trails.org>

Disclaimer

While we have taken the utmost care in preparing the information in this booklet, we cannot guarantee that the descriptions or maps are 100% error-free. Neither the author, editor, nor RSPN, ABTO, DOT, or DSLR will take any responsibility at all for any mishap you may encounter on any hike, not even for those described or suggested in this booklet. Thus if you get lost, bitten by dogs, gored by yak, shat on by nutcrackers, etc..., don't blame us. If you can't hack it, try embroidery.

Publishing booklets is a very slow process: manuscripts get lost, new routes to be included are found, getting maps takes ages. By that time, part of the information is outdated and a new update is required. After several cycles of this, finally a definite deadline was set and missed: September 2001 because the editor was leaving the country. Shortly before he brought the "good" news that we would get a complete set of maps. This made me wonder why we should bother about all these scribbles if we have the maps. A bit of reflection made me think that they may still be worthwhile, since:

- 99% of the users do not have a GPS.
- 50% of those who do, do not know how to use it.
- 75% of those who know, cannot read a map.
- 90% of those without a GPS cannot read a map either.

July 1999 / March 2001/January 2002, Piet van der Poel¹

Editor's notes

The first edition of this booklet lacked maps, which often made it difficult to find routes despite the extensive descriptions. I therefore decided to survey most hikes and turn this information into maps, GPS waypoints. This turned out to be a rather daunting task, delaying publication of the booklet by many months. But the maps will hopefully make it easier to find one's way home again. Aside from these changes I added sections on resources, maps, and GPSs, a brief glossary, and of course I couldn't resist adding a few new hikes.

September 2001/February 2002, Rogier Gruys²

Updates

We appreciate readers' comments and additions to hikes, which we will try to incorporate in future editions. For updates and detailed contact information, please visit <http://www.bhutan-trails.org>

1. Some books insult their readers with extended CV's about boring authors. Who cares? Suffices to say that some describe him as a definitely not-divine madman who is one of those development mercenaries that will do just about anything.
2. Another development tourist keen on the outdoors. Not as mad as the author, but still would prefer getting lost in the forest to staring at a computer screen all day.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET?

The main things you need to know to get the most out of this guide are:

- The route descriptions are numbered by their starting point and ordered more or less north-south down the Thimphu valley.
- Most trails are described in more detail going up, either to the highest point or to an obvious landmark/feature nearby. This does not mean that we don't care if you make it down safely.
- The way down is either the same route as you came up, in which case some hints about how not to get lost may be given, or a route for which the way up can be found under another route description.
- Most routes starting at one point are found under the same heading, but two different trails starting at the same point are at times considered as two separate routes. For example, the trails to Drolay goenpa and to Tango monastery are listed separately, although they start at the same spot. Don't get confused about the exceptions.
- The overview map with the numbered routes should make it easier to select appropriate hikes, and find the start of each hike.
- The hiking maps should make it easier to find the trails and features along the way.
- You should not expect to find everything the way it is described: fences and buildings appear, trees and prayer flags disappear, trails and bridges change, creeks and muddy spots dry up, and yak (just like me) look for greener pastures.

What to take?

Don't take too much. Most hikes are a long way up and gravity is working against you, and you may want your knees to hold out all the way down.

What you should take:

- This booklet (unless you know the route).
- Sufficient drinking water, for most hikes one litre would be a minimum quantity. Some people carry a water filter or water treatment tablets. Do not drink untreated water, since you never know what sources of pollution (yak, people, yetis) may be upstream. On ridges you are very unlikely to find any water, apart from rainwater or snow.
- Rain gear, preferably waterproof, and/or an umbrella. Hypothermia may set in rather quickly if conditions are windy and you are wet. Weather in the mountains is unpredictable.
- Gloves and warm hat. A warm hat will reduce heat loss by an astounding 25 – 40%. It takes energy to create heat, so by wearing a hat you can reduce your load of chocolate bars.
- Some dry and warm clothes and a survival blanket if you happen to have one.

You never know what may hit you. Four idiots³ (they would call themselves explorers) once had to turn back from Bimelang Tsho to Gidakom after heavy snow set in. Wet, cold and miserable they reached a place from where they could get transport back to civilisation only around 9:00 at night, after walking 2½ hours in the dark. What if one of them had broken a leg?

- A basic first aid kit, especially if you are planning to go on one of the longer hikes. And, more importantly, know what is in it, and how to use everything!
- Food and snacks. You burn a lot of calories hiking up these mountains. Do take plenty, even if you are trying to lose weight. And eat them!

What you could take:

- A few friends (for company, or to carry you out if you twist an ankle).
- Additional maps, if you have them (see section on maps and GPS below).
- A compass/GPS (again, see section on maps and GPS below).
- A camera with plenty film.
- A pair of binoculars, and a bird or flower book if you are in to that (see the section on resources below.)
- Sun screen lotion.
- Sunglasses.
- Lip balm if your lips chap easily.
- Gaiters (gamaschen) if there is snow on your route.
- A flashlight (torch), just in case.
- A pocket knife.
- A whistle or stainless steel mirror to attract attention in case of a mishap.
- Toilet paper + cigarette lighter to burn your paper, but of course not the forest.
- (Telescopic) walking poles: they support your knees and ankles, and you in a possible fight with dogs; and they make it easier to walk in case of snowfall.
- Somemoney.
- A comfortable backpack/daypack to put it all in.

What to wear?

- Comfortable shoes (some people seem to feel comfortable hiking the whole day, including bushwhacking, in rubber boots) and comfortable clothes; a long-sleeved shirt if you sunburn easily.
- Something on your head and/or sunglasses may be advisable. It may prevent sunburn, sunstroke and snow blindness.

When to go hiking?

Make up your own mind: Sleep in if you want to, but

- Views are usually better early in the morning
- Bad weather, especially in the rainy season, usually starts later in the after-

³ This included the author

noon

- Walking up steep slopes is easier in the cool morning than in the heat of the day, especially in the summer.
- Mild hikers tend to set off around 8 or 9 AM, mad trekkers insist on starting between 6 and 7 AM.

Which routes to choose?

This depends on all kinds of factors, such as:

- Are you acclimatised?
- Are you in bad/fair/good shape?
- Do you prefer relaxed hikes, enjoying the views, birds, trees, or are you one of these people who enjoy pushing themselves to the limit?
- What is the weather like?
- Which time of the year is it? (snow will be found at higher altitudes in late winter/early spring).
- Do you want to return to where you started?
- Can you orient yourself well?
- Are you afraid to get lost?

My advice is to wait until you are acclimatised (at least one week) before trying anything strenuous. Start with the easy ones and work your way up to the level you prefer. Even if you are absolutely bonkers don't start with the Bimelang Tsho or Thimphu to Paro treks, and definitely not within the first week after your arrival.

Distances, end points and times

- All hikes have been rated according to their level of difficulty on a scale from 1 to 10:
 - Peanuts: rating range 0-1.5
 - Piece of cake (sweet and relaxed): range 1.5-3
 - Piece of ema (moderate but spicy): range 3-4
 - Piece of chugo (hard, but not too bad): range: 4-5
 - Taxing: range 5-6
 - Exhausting: range 6-8
 - Madness: range 8-10
- There are three types of hikes: return along the same way, loops returning to the starting point along a different route, and one-way, finishing at a different point than where you started. Indicated distances and times are estimates for the whole trip, including some rest.

Caution!

Many of the hikes in this booklet take you above 4,000 m. At this altitude, there is a real possibility of altitude sickness, especially if you have just flown into Bhutan from sea-level. Remember that your susceptibility to altitude sickness is in no way related to your fitness. Even the fittest people can get altitude sickness. If you are feeling dizzy or nauseous, or are getting a serious headache on a hike, please do **NOT** continue up, but turn around and **go down!** The effects of altitude sickness quickly disappear on the way down, but if you continue to go up, you could get seriously ill, or even die!

- Starting points and other information for the described routes are described in Table 1.
- Locations and elevations for points along the way are listed in Table 2.
- Times in the headings are estimated times for average slow and the average fast hikers. The super-fit can easily do most hikes well within the indicated times. A group of lunatics walking in one day from the radio tower via Bimelang Tsho to Tshelung nang, reached Phajodhing from the radio tower in 1 hour 52 minutes. Pumola pass has been reached from the Youth Centre within 1 hour and 10 minutes.
- The totally out of shape will not even make it within the indicated slow times.
- Times indicated at the end of a paragraph in the text are only for ascending the section described.
- Vertical distances in the headings are the estimated total distances you'll have to climb up for the route. Vertical distances downhill have been ignored. Sorry, if you are the wobbly knee type.
- Going down, you probably need about half to two thirds of the time you used going up.

The maps in this booklet

All maps in this booklet have been derived from the 1:50,000 topo sheets published by the Department of Survey and Land Records (DSLRL). Trails on the maps are drawn in red, and numbered according to the descriptions. Important points along the trails have been numbered in the text; they are marked accordingly on the maps.

All routes that were surveyed with a hand-held GPS are drawn with solid lines. Hikes that weren't surveyed by GPS are dashed. Especially on those trails, don't blame us if the trail on the map doesn't coincide perfectly with reality. In a couple of instances we also don't know where the trail is; those routes are dashed and marked by 'alignment approximate'. On these hikes you are on your own to find the trail from the description.

Along some of the forestry roads, we had to edit the location of GPS-surveyed trails to fit the map, simply because the roads are drawn in the wrong place. In those locations, your GPS will generally place you a few hundred metres off the road. In the field this is not a problem, as they are large tracks that are hard to miss.

Coordinates are given in UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator). These are easier to use than latitude and longitude, because they are expressed in metres, making it easy to calculate distances. Each tick in the margin of the maps represents 1 km. UTM grids are not necessarily aligned north-south, hence the grid appears to be tilted. All maps are in UTM zone 45R.

Glossary of Bhutanese terms

We have not translated the names of geographic features such as goenpa or chorten in the descriptions, because they are also referred to as such on the topo maps, and if you need to ask the way, locals will probably use the Bhutanese terms. This glossary provides translations of the most commonly used geographic features.

Chhu	River, water
Chorten	Small religious structure/stupa, containing relics.
Dzong	Fortress, holding monastic and administrative centres
Gang	Mountain/hill
Goenpa	Temple/hermitage situated at least 1,000 yards from a village or town.
La	Pass
Lhakhang	Shrine/temple
Lam	Road, passage, track
Laptse/Latse	A heap of stones in which poles with small inscribed flags are pitched, and gods are invoked to help travellers.
Mani wall	Wall inscribed with prayer texts; another form of chorten
Thang	Plain ground
Tsho	Lake

Some other pieces of advice

- Before setting out, be sure to let someone know where you plan to go. The weather can close in fast, and even when armed with this booklet it is still possible to get lost!
- Stick to the main trails. Smaller trails are more likely to dead-end and even some bigger ones, especially if used for wood collection, may disappear as you go up.
- Bushwhacking is **not** recommended! It may be all right if you are quite sure that there is a trail not too far away, but it is slow and tiring, and you may get lost as well. What may look like an easy forest to walk through at first can soon turn into a near-vertical bamboo-covered slope, ending in a cliff. There are many examples of hikers getting into serious problems after deciding to bushwhack their way down a mountain! See the tale at the end of this section for an example of how **not** to bushwhack.
- In meadows, trails often disappear. Usually, they continue on the other side. Just make sure the trail you pick is about the same size as the one you arrived on.
- Do not use the short-cuts. They are steeper and more prone to erosion. What may at first appear to be a short-cut may turn out to be a side trail going off in a different direction. Moreover, chances of slipping and twisting ankles are higher on these cuts.

Garbage

Please **do not litter** anywhere along the trail, even if you see that others have done so before you. "Leave nothing but footsteps, take nothing but pictures" You can even help conservation efforts by picking up some garbage along the way.

- Turn back if the weather turns bad, if your trail disappears, or if your time is running out.
- Get back to civilisation before dark.
- Try not to meet or feed the bears. Of course you would like to see bears in the wild, but there is little use if you cannot recount the encounter, or if half of your face has gone missing. Bears that get surprised or scared may attack rather than flee: so, talk, make noise or sing as you walk along. Bears can be nasty too.
- Don't scare the yak, these skittish and unpredictable animals have been known to flee to slopes too steep for them to keep their footing. Above Tango Dzongkha, one walker was almost crushed under a falling yak that came crashing down through the bushes.
- Beware of dogs. These creatures have bitten several hikers including a nasty Dane and yours truly. Larger dogs may show no respect for sticks, but most Bhutanese dogs can be scared off by throwing stones at them. In some cases, even the motion of picking up a stone will scare a dog. Alternatively, carry some pepper spray to temporarily blind them.
- If you are unfortunate enough to get bitten by a dog, try to clean the wound with alcohol, and apply iodine or similar antiseptic (assuming you carried that first-aid kit!). You should pay a visit to the hospital upon your return to check on the status of rabies in the area. If needed, they have rabies vaccine on hand.
- Do not pick rare, protected or endangered flowers/plants.
- Do not disrupt wildlife or damage/destroy flora or anything else.
- Carry out the garbage you carried in.
- Avoid lighting fires. If you do, keep them small and ensure that they are completely extinguished when you leave. Every year large areas of forests around Thimphu are burnt due to carelessness. The greatest fire risk exists in the dry winter months.
- Please do not spit doma all over the place.

A lesson in how not to reach your destination was learned by five mad hikers⁴ (one Canadian, one Dutch-Canadian, one Belgian, one Indonesian, and one Brit). They managed to lose the small winding trail within fifteen minutes, but refused to give up. So they proceeded to fight their way up the steep slopes. At the top of the ridge they indeed found the trail as described, and followed it along the crest of the ridge. At a set of prayer flags they were lured by the large trail veering off to the left (rather than the smaller one described in the booklet). After about half an hour they reached a small meadow with a yak herder's hut. Several expedition members, judging it was time to return to the starting point, decided that this was a good place to drop down. A couple of them even claimed to have found a small trail downhill. They too managed to lose this trail within a few minutes, and just started to drop. This turned out to be a rather

4. This included the editor.

grave mistake, as the slope got steeper and steeper, and more and more densely covered with bamboo. By then, however, there was no turning back, so they tried to follow a creek, scrambling over slippery boulders, and fighting with the tangled bamboo. Attempts to reach more open forest failed miserably. After about three hours of thoroughly miserable bushwhacking, the exhausted group finally reached a trail at the bottom of the valley, which took them back to the starting point. The morale of the story is that whenever there is a trail leading into a meadow, there almost always must be one leading out on the other end. Never try to drop from a ridge if there is no clear trail. The slope will invariably get steeper, and creeks can turn into 50 m waterfalls! Moreover, if a mishap were to occur, the chances of being found would be slim indeed.

How to behave

Many of the hikes take you to remote temples and monasteries, and past meditation huts. The monks staying there are not used to entertaining tourists, and often do not appreciate it when large groups of muddy hikers come tramping into their monasteries. Therefore, try to be culturally sensitive.

- Dress properly. If you pass through villages or walk past goenpas or lhakhangs sleeveless shirts and short shorts are usually not appreciated. Bhutanese tend to dress up when they visit temples, and they expect foreigners to do the same. So do not enter temples or monasteries in dirty old clothes, and certainly not in anything revealing.
- You can take photos of the outside of monasteries, but **never** inside any of the temples. Please respect this rule, monasteries and temples are considered sacred!
- When passing chortens, mani walls and prayer flags keep them to your right. You should always walk around a monastery, temple, chorten or mani wall in a clockwise direction.
- When passing meditation huts, please be quiet! Do not shout, disturb them, or knock on the door to ask for directions. Many of the monks are not supposed to talk to anyone for the duration of their meditation! Only if they specifically ask you in for a cup of tea should you accept.
- Some of the monasteries mentioned in this booklet require a permit (e.g., Chagri), and others are closed all together to foreigners (e.g., Tango Dzongkha). Please do not try to force your way into a closed monastery, as the monks will be greatly offended. For permits or more information about closed monasteries, please contact the Special Commission for Cultural Affairs in Thimphu. For contact information refer to <http://www.rbhutan.bt>
- The central tower (*utze*) in monasteries is virtually always off-limits to outsiders, but caretakers may allow you into one of the other temples. Always remove your shoes and hat before going inside. Remain quiet inside, and **do not take photos**, even without a flash. It is polite to give a small offering of a few Ngultrum or some butter for the butter lamps. In return the caretaker may give you some holy water. Open your right hand, and have him pour in a bit of the water. Sip a bit of the water (or pretend to), and pour the remainder over your head. Inside the temple, move in a clockwise direction. Back rooms

behind the temples tend to be closed. Do not force your way in.

- Don't throw stones or anything else into lakes, as they are often sacred. Shouting near a lake is also considered offensive. Throwing stones or carrying sticks to fend off nasty dogs is quite acceptable.
- It is polite to say "Kuzuzangpo La" (meaning "hello") to passing locals. As for foreigners to Bhutan, it is culturally acceptable to just ignore them if you wish.

Is this all?

No, there are more trails. Using your imagination, other combinations of routes can be made.

- If you are the explorer type you can find "new" trails. Some suggestions for additional exploration have been made in several of the hikes. They may be dead ends, but you are less likely to run into other hikers. You may also end up bushwhacking.
- For birdwatchers and peanut-lovers there are also four easier nature trails set out by the Druk Nature Club. Trails are or were marked and even trees may wear nametags. Wildlife is not tagged. A brief description is given at the end of the booklet.
- For mountain bikers: you are reading the wrong book, but the MTB version has not been published yet. However, several of the described hikes can be done by riding or carrying a bicycle. For more information on biking in Bhutan, please consult <http://www.bhutanmtb.com>.

Enjoy your walks, the scenery and nature, just watch out for the bears.

BOOKS

If you are not too concerned about reaching your destination in record time, but want to enjoy your surroundings while hiking, there are a couple of books you could take along.

- For casual bird watchers, *Birds of Bhutan* by Carol Inskipp *et al.* (Helm Field Guides, 1999) is a perfect guide to carry along. It is small and light enough to not weigh down your backpack either.
- Twitchers and other bird fanatics may find *Birds of Bhutan* lacking. If you fall into this category, then lug along *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* by R. Grimmett *et al.* (Helm Field Guides, 2000).
- If you are interested in mammals, you could order the *Field Guide to the Mammals of the Indian Subcontinent* by KK Gurung and Raj Singh (Associated Press 1996). However, the chance of seeing mammals is not great.
- Butterfly fans should get *The butterflies of Sikkim Himalaya and their natural history* by M. Haribal (Sikkim Nature Conservation Foundation, Gangtok 1996). Most butterflies in Bhutan are similar to those in Sikkim.

For botanists there are several useful books:

- *Flowers of Bhutan* by S. Nakao S and K. Nishioka (Asahi Shimbun, Tokyo,

1984).

- *Flowers of the Himalaya*, by O. Polunin and A. Stainton (OUP, Delhi 1984).
- *Flowers of the Himalaya – A Supplement*, by A. Stainton (OUP, Delhi, 1988).
- *Wild Rhododendrons of Bhutan* by R. Pradhan (Thimphu, 1999).
- *Weeds of Bhutan* by C. Parker (NPPC, REID, MoA, Thimphu, 1992).
- If you are truly keen on plants, you could of course drag along the *Flora of Bhutan*. By A.J.C. Grierson, D.G. Long, and H.J. Noltie (Royal Botanical Gardens, Edinburgh, 1983-1994).
- For a good introduction to the most common trees along the trails try to find *Common Trees in the Temperate Forest of Bhutan*, published by the National Environmental Commission in Thimphu (1992).

Several of these books are usually available in the bookstores in Thimphu, or you can try to order them through the Internet.

MAPS AND GPS

Topo Maps

The maps in this booklet cover most areas around Thimphu, so you should not need additional maps for most hikes. The Department of Survey and Land Records (DSLRL, formerly Survey of Bhutan) has produced 1:50,000 topo maps of the entire country, but they usually do not sell them to the public. The DSLRL has started to produce a 1:25,000 map series as well, but they are not yet available for Thimphu.

If you are going trekking in the Dagala area or the lower Thimphu river valley, the Department of Tourism (DOT) sells a 1:50,000 trekking map for the Dagala Thousand Lakes trek, created by DOT in cooperation with the Austrian government. It is based on the same topo maps as the ones in this booklet. However, we are not very impressed with these maps, or with the information provided.

Global Positioning Systems (GPS)

GPS is a satellite-based positioning system. You carry a remote-control (or watch!)-sized receiver, which picks up signals from up to 12 satellites at a time, and calculates your location anywhere on the globe to within 5-20 metres. GPS units can come in handy in and around Thimphu, but they are pretty much useless for navigation without a good map. In fact, they can do more harm than good, as they may give you a false sense of security.

Before you can use a GPS with Bhutanese topo maps, you need to adjust its settings. This is because the coordinate reference system (*datum*) that the GPS system normally uses is different from that used on the maps. As a result, the position that your GPS calculates may be different from your real location on the map by as much as several kilometres. Better GPSs have a long list of *datums* you can select from. The datum to use for Bhutan is *Indian Bangladesh*. You should also change the display of coordinates to UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator). The UTM zone for western Bhutan is **45R**. The time zone for Bhutan is GMT+6. Check the manual of your GPS for more information on how to

enter this information in your GPS. Before setting out on a long hike with a GPS, test it around town to make sure it works properly with the maps in the booklet.

The topo sheets for Bhutan provide coordinates in degrees and an Indian military grid. The latter is not compatible with GPSs. If you want to use your GPS with the topo sheets, set the coordinate display to degrees.

Please note that some trails and roads on the topo maps are not always drawn in the right locations, and in the dense forests around Thimphu your GPS will not always work properly. Therefore, even if you know how to operate a GPS and carry the appropriate maps, ***you can't always rely on a GPS to get you back to civilization!***

For more information on using GPS in Bhutan, models, GPS mapping programs, etc., turn to www.bhutan-trails.org/gps. For the real gadget freaks, data on the routes and locations listed in this booklet are available from this website as well. With a special GPS mapping program you can copy them to you GPS, giving you some indication of how badly lost you are.

Map legend

legend.ai

Map 1

01-Chagri.ai

1 CHAGRI (CHERRI) GOENPA AND DOLAM KENCHO**1.1 Chagri goenpa (2.7 km return; 330 m up; 1½-2 hrs; rating: 1.2)****1.2 Dolam Kencho (16 km return, 1250 m up; 7-10 hrs; rating: 5.5)**

Hike 1.1 is a popular hike to a beautiful goenpa, with good views along the way; hike 1.2 leads through beautiful stands of natural forest, with some good views.

Starting Point

Cross the bridge near Begana and turn left. Drive to the end of the road in Dodena, at the covered bridge below Chagri goenpa (1.0).

1.1 Chagri goenpa

Walk across the bridge and follow the main trail that starts to go up when crossing the lower end of the deposits of a landslide. Zig-zag your way up to a chorten (1.1) which you leave to your right (to show your respect, you always walk around it in clockwise direction) and zig-zag on toward the buildings which you see every now and then above you. After reaching the first buildings, turn left towards the monastery. You may be allowed to go up and around the main buildings (1.2), but the whole area higher up consists of meditation buildings and should not be entered. You should check with the monks as to which parts of the lower monastery buildings are accessible for the public, and which parts are not. To enter the monastery, you will need a permit from the Special Commission for Cultural Affairs. The trail to the right, past two big *tsenden* (cypress) trees, takes you to a stone bath and a dead-end. The whole area above this trail is also part of the meditation area. Some people have spotted *goral* (wild goat to some of you) jumping around on the cliffs near the goenpa (45-60 min.).

Chagri monastery is considered very sacred. It contains the remains of Tempi Nima, the father of the first Shabdrung of Bhutan, and beautiful frescoes of Buddhist saints. Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal built it in 1620 in memory of his father. The monastery building built by Shabdrung Rimpoche was later converted into a nunnery (*ani-goenpa*) and even now a few nuns live here. It is believed that Guru Rimpoche (Padma Sambhava) meditated in a cave above the monastery when he came to Bhutan in the 8th century.

Since 1995, new meditation buildings have been built high above the main monastery, after considerable forest clearing. Don't try to go up there.

1.2 Dolam Kencho

From the road head, take the large trail that continues up the valley, past the sign indicating that you have entered Jigme Dorji National Park. This is the largest protected area in Bhutan, stretching up to the Tibetan border in the north, and over to Lunana in the east. Follow the trail along the river until after 1 km you reach a small clearing (1.3). The trail appears to continue to the left, past a sign warning passers-by of blasting for a new trail. The new trail has not yet been finished, so it leads nowhere, although there appears to be a winter trail that continues on the other side of the river. Instead, turn right at the sign and go a few metres up the hill. Above the clearing you will find another trail that continues up the valley. After 200 m the trail crosses a creek, and continues up the side valley. The trail soon climbs steeply out of the side valley, and follows

the main valley once more. It continues to zig-zag up the hill to a meadow in mixed broadleaf forest dominated by maples. Continue upwards to a split in the trail (1.4). The main branch continues along the slope, while a smaller trail heads steep up the hill to the right. This trail leads to a number of meditation huts and meadows high on the mountain (1.5). If you are fit and crazy you could try going up this trail and continue through trail-less meadows to the top of the ridge. From there you could go to Tango Jongkha and return to the base of Tango, if you don't get lost (see Hike 2). The "trail" along the ridge is way beyond yak-capacity and unfit for anyone with mild vertigo.

The main trail continues along the hill until after 500 m it climbs steeply around a cliff. You can choose between a staircase and muddy trail here, but they join again soon. Above the cliff the trail levels out again and continues up to a small shoulder marked by a *laptse* and some prayer flags (1.6; *1½-3½ hrs*). Continue on, cross a creek (Mirishongi Chhu) and climb up to a large meadow (1.7). Walk around the bottom of the meadow and pick up the trail on the far end, going up into the next side valley. Cross another creek (Chagonang Chhu) and continue around and up a spur. Here a smaller trail joins from the right (1.8). Turn left into the meadow. Turn right here and climb up the hill on the other side to a point with good views back towards Dodena. From here continue to the left up the hill. There are several smaller trails here, but the idea is to climb to the top of the spur. The top is marked with a *laptse* (1.9; *1½ -2½ hrs*).

From here you can continue through a pretty stand of tall juniper trees to a meadow at Dolam Kencho (1.10), the last campsite of the Jhomolhari trek with a big sinkhole and a limestone cave (*½-1 hrs*). Five minutes past Dolam Kencho there is a trail going up towards the ridge. It turns south, passes through a number of meadows and eventually reaches a meditation hut (1.5). But you may need two days if you want to return along this route.

Map 2
02-Tango.ai

2 TANGO GOENPA

- 2.1 Tango goenpa (2.5 km return, 250 m up, 1½-2 hrs, rating: 1.0)**
- 2.2 Tango and Drolay goenpa loop (7 km loop, 460 m up, 2½-4 hrs, rating: 2.2)**
- 2.3 Tango Dzongkha (7.5 km return, 850 m up, 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.2)**
- 2.4 Tango Jongkha (4111 m peak) (13 km return, 1500 m up, 6-10 hrs, rating: 5.6)**
- 2.5 Tango Jongkha-Drolay goenpa loop (15 km loop, 1600 m up, 7-11 hrs, rating: 6.1)**

Tango is a beautiful goenpa that is easy to reach. The longer hikes are harder but reward hikers with great views over the Thimphu and Punakha valleys. Abundant flowering rhododendrons higher on the ridge make the hike to Tango Jongkha even more worthwhile in spring.

Starting point

Cross the bridge near Begana (2a) and turn left. After 2 km, take the first right (2b) past the potato fields, and follow the road which switchbacks up the hill through the forest, until it dead-ends at the base of Tango near a house with three ground floor garages (2.0).

2.1 Tango goenpa

The main trail starts to the left behind the house. A steeper, not recommended, trail starts to the right, before the track crosses the creek. The main trail zig-zags up for about ½ km, when you reach a side trail going sharply up to the left (2.1). Here you can choose to go straight along the more direct route, or left along a prettier route. If you are only going up to Tango, you could go up via the prettier (slightly more strenuous) trail, and down via the direct route.

2.1.1 Prettier route

The trail zig-zags up through open oak forest, and after a further ½ km reaches a chorten. From here you have an excellent view of several meditation houses and the monastery straight ahead. Do not enter the meditation houses unless you have been invited in! From the chorten the trail climbs up steeply to the back of the monastery along the edge of a steep cliff. Walk around bottom of the main monastery building to the entrance on the far side (2.2; 40-60 min.).

2.1.2 Direct route

The direct route passes a water source with a sign saying "Please don't drink this water", good advice not only for this water but for any water along most trails. Follow the trail up, avoiding any trails that may seem easier, such as the steeper trail going down to where you started. Some 400 m further you pass some chortens and a bunch of prayer flags and soon after you reach the first buildings. Here you turn left towards the beautifully carved entrance of the main monastery building.

When returning from the goenpa via the direct route, take the trail to the right of the large prayer flag in front of the monastery and after 100 m turn right on the main trail.

Tango monastery is unique in its parallel architecture. Lama Choeji Drukpa Kinley who

came from Tibet built it in the 15th century. His descendants looked after the monastery until 1617. The monastery was presented to Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal when he visited the area. At this time, a battle was going on between the Tibetans and Bhutanese. Shabdrung Namgyal meditated at Tango in a cave as a result of which the invading forces sent by the Governor of Tsang in Tibet were defeated. It is said that the Governor and his wife died within a month. At the meditation cave, there is a statue of Rta Mgrin Tamdin, a deity with a man's body and a horse's head that is supposed to frighten the enemies of Buddhism.

In 1727, the eighth Deb Raja of Bhutan, Druk Rabgye, constructed the existing three-storied pinnacle of the monastery with twelve corners. Later, Shabdrung Jigme Chogyal built a golden roof over the monastery and a beautiful statue of Avalokiteshwara. It is believed that the Dalai Lamas are reincarnations of Avalokiteshwara. To depict his compassion he is sometimes surrounded by the manifestations of the Buddha in the six worlds: the white Buddha in the world of gods, the green Buddha in the world of Titans, the yellow Buddha in the human world, the red Buddha of the world of tortured spirits, the blue Buddha in the animal world, and the smoke-coloured Buddha of hell.

2.2 Tango and Drolay goenpa loop

From the huge prayer flag in front of the entrance to the monastery take the right-hand (lower) trail, and ignore any trails going up or down. Walk across some narrow planks along a rock face, pass a cluster of houses to some prayer flags and a house that is about to fall apart. Follow the slope past a few more rock outcrops and above a stone bath. A small trail joins from the left, just before you cross the creek (Tango Rong Chhu; 2.3). From here it is up, across a meadow full of dock (*Rumex*), with a small soccer field and the remains of an old camp (2.4). Further up, plod through some muddy spots, until you reach a larger trail along a ridge (2.5). This is the main trail leading up to Drolay goenpa (2.6). Turn left if you want to go up to Drolay, right if you've had your fill for the day. On a clear day, the views from Drolay goenpa over Thimphu and the mountains to the north are excellent. See Hike 3 for more details (50-75 min.).

2.3 Tango Dzongkha

Follow the upper trail from the huge prayer flag in front of Tango monastery, walk past a chorten, and turn left up the hill to two houses. Avoid all of the many trails going down. Turn right below the first house. Next, the trail crosses just above a small landslide, zig-zags to the left into a side valley, and goes up very steeply along and across an even steeper log skid trail. After leaving the blue pines behind, the vegetation becomes dominated by huge spruce and hemlock, prickly barberry (*Berberis*) bushes and in early spring sweet smelling *Daphne* bushes. Here, the sky is the limit. When you reach a meadow on a ridge where yak may hang out, you have survived the steepest section of the trail (2.7). On the way back, turn left just before the end of the meadow, or follow another trail from the end of the meadow to the back of Tango monastery. Turn right at the meadow, staying on the right side. For a change take an almost level trail along the

Note

There are a number of meditation huts along this route. When passing them, remain quiet and do not invite yourself inside!

slope that starts at a little knoll/ridge about halfway up the meadow. Proceed through mixed juniper, cypress and spruce forest. You could also continue to the end of the meadow, and pick up a vague trail, passing another small meadow. Eventually, you should rejoin the main trail. Amble along the slope to the gate of a house, make a sharp left turn, and zig-zag past a covered spring. Several trails crisscross through this area. Some may take you more directly to your destination, bypassing some of the features described here. Keep going up to two stone buildings. Take a steep trail up to the right, following the water pipe right behind (above) the buildings. There is another trail up to the left, which should also lead to Tango Dzongkha monastery. The right-hand trail leads to a couple more meditation houses. Turn left up the hill just before the houses and pass a stone cairn with offerings of rhodo leaves and flowers.

Soon you'll reach a ridge with a water-hose running through the oak trees. Follow this hose up past a chorten and prayer flags to Tango Dzongkha monastery (2.8). Although there is "No admission" to the Dzongkha itself, the views from outside the temple of Chagri, Drolay, Thimphu and beyond are excellent. Turning right immediately behind the first and main building will lead you to a yellow roofed-temple (75-90 min.).

2.4 Tango Jongkha (4,111 m peak)

Go up from Tango Dzongkha to the left towards a house and turn right at the gate, up a fairly steep trail. The first section of this trail once was clearly marked by a row of prayer flags and a helpful signboard indicating: "To the peak". At a junction you can chose between the steep trail to the right and a more gradual one for cattle, horses and plodders, passing just above the house. The trails zig-zag up a very steep rocky slope, finally joining and taking you back into the forest. At the top of the steep slope, turn sharply to the right. (Coming down turn sharply left; if you overlook it you will enter a large flat clearing at which point you may want to retrace your steps.) The trail will take you up and along the ridge past an area of dead pines (due to a forest fire) and some spots adorned with prayer flags (2.9). There are several small trails in the area. If you miss the main trail, just make your way up to the crest of the ridge, where you should find it again. From the prayer flags the trail continues up some steep sections, past dead and sometimes live firs, junipers and rhododendrons, below cliffs, but always returning back to the ridge. After coming out of the forest and scrub, the trail goes up to some rocky peaks before turning right (east-north-east) down into a small pass and up to the main peak, Tango Jongkha, at 4,111 m (2.10).

The peak is marked by a large stone cairn. In good weather you have great views over the Thimphu and Punakha valleys. You may even be able to see Gasa Dzong in the distance (1½-2 hrs.). From here you can either return, or try to reach Drolay goenpa.

2.5 Tango Jongkha to Drolay goenpa loop

From the Tango Jongkha peak retrace your steps for about 50 m and look for a small trail leading into the rhododendrons to the right. Follow this narrow but clear trail in a

Caution

The weather on the top of the ridge can be rather nasty - chances are that you'll find yourself in thick fog. If so it is all too easy to get lost. If you plan to go to Drolay goenpa, be **extremely careful** when looking for the trail along the ridge. If you miss it, you could get yourself into all kinds of trouble! If you are unsure of yourself, retrace your steps and return to Tango.

northeasterly direction. After 100 m you reach a junction where the left fork heads to a small meditation hut in above a small lake (2.11). You could walk northwards along the ridge and get lost in the meadows beyond. See also Hike 1.2.

A monk actually lives in the hut; don't disturb him, but continue on the right fork. Walk for about 200 m to the top of the ridge where there is yet another junction (2.12) with a small trail that follows the crest of the ridge to your right. Look carefully for this trail, as it is easily missed. If you end up crawling through rhododendrons on top of a knoll, or worse yet, going down a ridge, you have gone too far, and you are well on your way to Punakha. Retrace your steps, and try to find the trail that follows the ridge. Note that the trail on the map is in the wrong place! If you insist on trying to reach Punakha this way, take heart: after about an hour of crawling through rhododendrons you reach a clear trail. Turn left and keep going.

Once you have found the right trail along the rhododendron-infested ridge, follow it in a southerly direction, always staying on the crest. After 2 km take the clear path going steeply down into a meadow to the left (2.13). The trail along the ridge continues for a few metres, but soon disappears. Walk into the meadow and keep to your right. After a few hundred metres a large trail joins from the left. It is not on the map, but may lead towards Punakha. Continue through the meadows, generally following the ridge in a southerly direction. Eventually you reach a large, sloping meadow, fringed by rhododendrons (2.14). When they are in bloom, this is one of the prettiest meadows in the area.

From here there are two ways back to Drolay goenpa. You can continue along the ridge, through rhodo, juniper, and fir forest, and eventually meet the main trail between Drolay and Sinchula. Turn right on the main trail to reach Drolay goenpa (see Hike 3.3). This is a longer, but easier-on-the-knees route. Alternatively, you can take a more direct but steeper route down from the meadow. Look for a trail into the forest exactly in the far right-hand corner of the meadow. The trail is clear at first, but chances are you will lose it within a few hundred metres. In any case, keep walking downhill, and stay as close as possible to the crest of the ridge. If you cannot stay on the ridge, veer a bit to the left, but whenever possible, return to the ridge. From time to time you may come across trails that head in a general downhill direction. Try to follow these as long as you can. Further down, you will cross several large trails that follow the contours, and a trail leading to a large meadow on your right (2.15). Ignore these trails and keep walking downhill along the crest of the ridge. Eventually, you will join the larger trail that comes from Sinchula (3.2). From here on the trail is large and clear. Keep walking downhill until you reach Drolay goenpa (2.6). From the goenpa, follow the main trail back down to the road (Hike 2.2).

Map 3.1
03-1-Drolay1.ai

3 DROLAY GOENPA

3.1 Drolay goenpa (4.5 km return, 400 m up, 2-3 hrs, rating: 1.6)

3.2 Drolay goenpa loop (5 km loop, 550 m up, 2½-4 hrs, rating: 2.1)

3.3 Dechhenchho'ling via Sinchula (21 km one way, 1400 m up, 8-12 hrs, rating: 6.7)

3.4 Dobchula pass and YHS (30 km one way, 1650 m up, 11-16 hrs, rating: 8.7)

Drolay goenpa is simpler than Tango, but has great views. The hike to Sinchula features pristine forests and beautiful views of the Thimphu and Punakha valleys along the way.

Starting point

Cross the bridge near Begana (2a) and turn left. After 2 km, take the first right (2b) after the potato fields, and follow the road which switchbacks up the hill through the forest, until it dead-ends at a house with three ground floor garages (2.0).

3.1 Drolay goenpa

Cross the river to its southern bank, and walk up the open area to some large spruces and a huge hemlock. From the top of this field, take the muddy trail up to the right. The trail to the left goes up the valley and crosses the lower trail from Tango monastery to Drolay goenpa in the dock meadow (2.4), while higher up it joins the trail above Drolay goenpa (3.1; see Hike 3.2). The direct trail to Drolay goenpa zig-zags up through spruce forest mixed with deciduous trees and bamboo undergrowth. Ignore small side trails, unless you are a woodcutter with a permit. Further on the trail zig-zags up and along the ridge. Some people have engaged in some serious "forestry development" here, maybe to provide habitat for species favouring rotting wood. About 100 m before reaching the lowest buildings belonging to Drolay goenpa, a relatively obvious track to the left (2.5) goes to Tango monastery. When you see the lowest of the monastery buildings ahead take the left trail up or walk to the building to enjoy the excellent views of Thimphu valley and the mountains. If properly dressed you can walk into the courtyard of the monastery (2.6), or go around it. A mean dog (aren't they all?) may guard the monastery. It has been known to break its chain. My advice is to freeze and wait for a little monk to show up, who will beat the beast into submission with a rubber hose (45-60 min.).

3.2 Drolay goenpa loop

If you don't want to go back the same way, you can continue up the ridge a bit further, and loop back to the parking lot. Above the monastery, pass a hot-stone bath and take the trail passing to the left and below a couple of buildings. Cross to the right side of the ridge and pass below some more houses and a water tank, staying on the right side. The views of Thimphu are good from here. Cross the ridge again and head a short way down past a fenced water supply plot. A few hundred metres past the water tank there is a junction at the bottom of a small saddle (3.1). The trail to the left winds down through a logging area, back to the base of Tango monastery, or even to Tango monastery itself. Although it may be vague at times, as long as you keep heading downhill, you should get there. Eventually you end up at a large meadow with some remains of inhabitation. Here you can turn right to Tango Monastery (Hike 2.2 in reverse), left to Drolay goenpa (Hike 2.2), or keep going down to the bottom of the meadow. From there the trail continues downhill until you reach the bridge across the creek, near the starting

Map 3.2
03-2-Drolay2.ai

point of this hike.

3.3 Dechhenchho'ling via Sinchula

If you want to go further up the ridge towards Sinchula, keep going straight at 3.1. The trail splits several times; stay on the bigger trails. After about 500 m, there is a split in the trail. The bigger trail turns right, following the contours, while a smaller trail continues up the ridge (3.2). The left trail will take you to the top of the ridge, and eventually to Tango Jongkha, but since it is easy to get lost here, it's not advisable to go this way. The ridge and Tango Jongkha are easier to reach from Tango goenpa. See Hike 2.5 for details.

If you plan to go to Sinchula, turn right here. The trail leads through a mixed oak and spruce forest (more spruce higher up). Keep moving along, slowly going up, across a few small creeks, below some rock overhangs, across some larger creeks and a fairly open area. Go up a steeper slope, cross another creek, and pass above a cattle coral. Here cattle trails may make it hard to find the real trail, but stay on one of the major trails higher up to the left. The trail passes above a meditation hut (so shut up for a while); a bit further on is a nice spot for a break. (3.3; 75-90 min.).

Continue on up across the next few creeks through mixed coniferous forest, larch, fir, spruce, juniper, hemlock and cypress. Further on, where the trail splits, take the left turn up to a meadow (3.4). Cross the meadow, picking up a trail higher up on the other side. Continue along the right side of the ridge to a pass with a couple of cairns (3.5). The trail that goes down to the left leads to Punakha. Look for a trail to the right of the ridge. This will take you to a meadow that you pass on the high side, after which the trail continues up through fir and rhododendron forest. This trail splits many times. Keep going up, neither taking the steepest nor the flattest trail until you reach a meadow at a pass that may have prayer flags higher up to the left (3.6). Cross the meadow in the same general direction. The trail to the right could be a short-cut to Karbisa. Continue along a small ridge, past a meadow with a hut and take either the left or the right fork of the trail, up the next meadow. Pass over or just below a couple of knolls to the end of the meadow. Here, look for a trail that goes steeply down to the right (3.7). The trail that continues along the ridge into the forest only gets you to a lookout point.

The steep trail passes several rock outcrops, runs along the slope for a while, passes more rock outcrops, goes up and over a rock with a yak fence, and down another steep slope. It then turns left and goes further down through a narrow valley/wide crack, at the end of which you turn left into a fir and rhododendron forest. Cross a meadow with a hut (3.8), and find the trail at the other end, somewhat to the left of the top of the meadow. This trail goes up, down and up again to a small ridge where you continue to the left. Here bamboo becomes frequent in the undergrowth. Go down some steep steps, pass a yak gate along a rocky stretch of the trail and continue down to a pass. On the other side, climb up slowly through a moist forest of moss-covered rhododendrons, firs and junipers. The trail keeps splitting and becomes vaguer until it emerges in a meadow with a hut (3.9). Cross to the far end of the meadow, and go up a knoll. The sometimes eroded trail continues up and down to Sinchula pass, which is marked by a chorten (3.10). Note that on the topo map the pass is marked in the wrong place.

The trail down to the left takes you to Punakha, the trail down to the right to the end of the forestry track from Dechhenchho'ling, and the trail straight ahead to the end of the forest track to Hontsho. Following this road you will eventually reach Dobchula Pass above Hontsho (See Hikes 3.4, 5.3, 6.2 and 6.3 below).

To reach Dechhenchho'ling, turn right at Sinchula, and follow the often deeply eroded trail down to the forest road (3.11). Remember this spot carefully if you ever want to walk from Dechhenchho'ling to Sinchula. The trail to Sinchula is very difficult to find, and the trail on the topo map is in the wrong place! Follow the road all the way down, passing the turn off to Taba (5.1), until you reach the bridge near Pangri Zampa Lhakhang on the northern fringe of Dechhenchho'ling (5.0). In the village there are usually taxis to take you back to Thimphu.

3.4 Dobchula Pass and Yangchenphu High School (YHS)

This trek is known as the "Mike the Bike Mad Farewell Hike". Seven people (one Bhutanese, three Poms, one Cloggie, one Yank and one Kiwi) started around 6:45 at the base of Tango. Slowed down by lack of caffeine (and in Mike's case too much alcohol and insufficient nicotine), a few stretches of bushwhacking and more snow than expected they reached lunch at Dobchula Pass above Hontsho between two and three in the afternoon. At this point four people decided to quit and take a four-wheel drive vehicle back. The Kiwi jumped on a mountain bike and only two (100% of the over 40 category) continued on foot, accompanied by some nine fresh walkers. They walked along forest road to the telecom reflector and from there down to YHS. YHS was reached just after dark by most, but long after dark by a few stragglers. So, think twice before you undertake this trip. You could also follow the main track down to Hontsho, but that would only be marginally shorter and has you ending up 17 km from Thimphu. See Hikes 6 and 12 for more information on this stretch.

4 BEGANA TO DECHHENCHHO'LING

4.1 Begana to Dechhenchho'ling (6 km one way, 90 m up, 2-3 hrs, rating:1.2)

One of the easier hikes in the book through a traditional farming area. Many of the families in this area are Tibetans who came to Bhutan after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Refer to Map 3.1.

Starting point

Cross the bridge at Begana (4a) and turn right to the Central Maintenance Division (4.0). This building was originally designed as a power station for Thimphu, but was never used as such. Now the Division of Power uses it as its maintenance workshop.

4.1 Begana to Dechhenchho'ling

Follow the dirt road above the gate to the powerhouse. Bypass a gate, cross a creek and walk up between barbed wire fences and a ruin. Follow the fence past a small mani wall (4.1) into the forest, which consists mostly of oaks (*Quercus griffithii* and *Q. semecarpifolia*) and blue pine. The trail has its ups and downs as it winds along a steep slope. At a fork, take the lower trail. Pass pastures (abandoned fields), a creek with a water-driven prayer wheel, and a house. Go on along fences and willow trees and above the first few of several large ruins (4.2). Pass a creek to another ruin, follow a muddy trail and cross a creek on a large flat rock. Follow the trail above fields and houses, below oak shrubs and blue pines, and past a couple of chortens. Stay high, unless you want to visit someone in one of the houses below the trail. Cross a steep valley and follow the main trail to a viewpoint just past another split in the trail (4.3). From here you can see a row of houses at the other side of a small valley.

4.1.1 The most direct route

Take the right trail, pass between the lower houses, fences, willows and orchards, cross a valley and pass some chortens to a roofed ruin. Cross a small irrigation channel and a bridge (4.4). There are various trails in this area, passing fields, ruins, (huge old) houses and chortens. If you take the left turns at main junctions you probably end up at the Dechhenchho'ling forest road near point 4.5. Taking the right turns may get you to the forest road some 200 m before the bridge below Pangri Zampa Lhakhang. Turn right onto the road, and walk down to the bridge (5.0) and straight into downtown Dechhenchho'ling.

4.1.2 The higher and dryer route

Turn left at the split (4.3) and follow the incised trail to the upper houses of the row. Follow the trail up to a row of storage houses and a chorten with some prayer flags on a spur (4.6). This is a good spot to rest and enjoy the view. From here, walk along the hill to a couple of houses where you take the right fork, down and in between the houses (4.7). Go down to a creek where the ruins of a traditional water-driven flour mill have been turned into a prayer wheel building. Turn right and cross the creek. On the other bank turn left, climb up the steep bank, and you will emerge at the Dechhenchho'ling forest road (4.8). If you want to continue to Taba, keep going straight at 4.7 until you reach the road, and turn left there. See Hike 5 for details. Otherwise, head down the forest road until you reach the town of Dechhenchho'ling.

Map 5
05-1-dechhenchholing.ai

5 DECHHENCHHO'LING TO SINCHULA RIDGE/TABA

5.1 Karbisa loop (5 km loop, 190 m up, 2-3 hrs, rating: 1.3)

5.2 Taba (9 km one way, 750 m up, 4-5 hrs, rating: 3.1)

5.3 Sinchula (15 km return, 1200 m up, 6-9 hrs, rating: 5.1)

5.4 Punakha (27 km one way, 1250 m up, 10-14 hrs, rating: 7.3)

The Karbisa Loop is a “peanuts” walk, while the hikes to Sinchula and Taba are forest hikes. The long trek to Punakha is a good winter hike through forests and farming areas.

Starting point

Drive through Dechhenchho'ling village. After passing the centre, the “paved” road heads left up the hill. At this point take a small, even rougher road straight on (5a). Ahead you'll see a small monastery: Pangri Zampa lhakhang (5.0). Leave your vehicle somewhere in between.

5.1 Karbisa Loop

An alternative to Hike 4.1 is the Karbisa loop, perfect for new arrivals who want to acclimatize, or for hikers who are recovering from a rough night at the local nightclubs. Part of this walk is described in Hike 4.

Walk across the bridge over the Thimphu river, and continue up the Dechhenchho'ling forestry road. Continue up the road for about 1.5 km until it makes a rather sharp bend to the right. At this point you will see a line of four large pines on the hill just above the road. Take the narrow trail that heads down to the left (4.5). This is one end of the lower, more direct route mentioned in Hike 4.1.1.

5.1.1 Lower route

After following the trail for about fifty metres, take a sharp left. If you miss the turn-off, you'll end up in a barbed-wire fence. Walk down for about 200 metres, and at a small water tank turn right. Go up, past a water prayer wheel and a chorten, and turn left. Walk past one large inhabited house and two ruins, cross a tiny stream, and take the first trail to the right, going steep down the hill. At the bottom of the hill, take the right fork, which should bring you to a log bridge across a stream (4.4). From here the trail hugs the slope. It emerges in a field with two chortens and a big rock. The view up the valley from here is excellent. Continue up, in between a few houses, until you join a larger trail just before a creek (4.3). From here you can either turn left towards Begana (Hike 4.1), or you can turn right and walk back to the forest road (Hike 4.1.2). Once on the forest road, turn right, and follow the road down the hill back to the bridge.

5.1.2 Higher route

If you want to start by following the higher route, or you somehow missed the turn-off for the lower route, then keep on going up the road for another 300 m until you reach several tall prayer flags on the left hand side of the road (4.8). Right below the flags a small trail disappears into the bush, and heads down to a creek. This is the end of the higher route. Follow Hike 4.1.2 in the opposite direction; thus left is right and right is wrong.

5.2 Taba

To go to Taba, at the first split in the forestry road (5.1) follow the right track, which gets you to a flat part on the ridge above Taba (5.2). Here you have two options: turn right and descend to Taba (see Hike 6.1), or turn left, up the ridge, to Sinchula or Hontsho (see Hike 6.2). You could of course also just walk up a bit for the view and go back the way you came.

5.3 Sinchula

This trail follows the old trading route from Thimphu to Punakha. At times this is quite clear when you walk through some deeply incised sections. Despite its frequent use in the past, finding the start of the trail to Sinchula may prove to be quite a challenge. I tried it several times and failed invariably. A group of eight Japanese volunteers once spent a miserable, unplanned night in the forest below Sinchula. I only found it by coming down from Sinchula (on a mountain bike, which is a bad idea because this trail is rough and rocky). New logging roads may make this description outdated by the time it gets printed.

Cross the bridge near Pangri Zampa lhakhang and follow the logging road. After a creek crossing and a steep section consisting of loose rocks, the trail splits (5.1). To find the start of the Sinchula trail, take the left fork, cross a creek with a pedestrian bridge and pass a village and fields on your left. Cross another creek and ignore the track to the right across a creek. Also ignore any trails going off to the left into the forest. Past the next creek crossing and a short steep climb, the track splits. At first the trails run almost parallel, but soon the left track turns away and continues up the slope. Take this left track. In a large fairly open area (5.3), ignore a road to the right. Keep going up, in between a ridge and a creek. Just before the track dips into an area which is very muddy in the rainy season, scour the right side of the track for indications of a small trail (3.12). Note that on the topo map Sinchula and the trail leading there are in the wrong place!

Follow the trail up the ridge. On the way you pass one meadow with junipers, where you will have to look for the continuation of the trail near the top of the meadow on your left. (Coming down turn right!). Eventually you reach Sinchula, which is marked by a chorten and some prayer flags (3.10). The trail to the left leads to Drolay goenpa (see Hike 3.3), while turning right will take you to the end of the Hontsho forest road. If you choose the latter, note that about 300 m south from Sinchula the trail splits. The right fork will take you to the end of the forest road, while the left fork, going slightly uphill (soon steeper), may be a shortcut over the top of the ridge to the Hontsho Road as it descends to Hontsho (See Hike 6).

5.4 Punakha (Map 5.2)

From Sinchula you can continue straight to Kabesa, on the road from Punakha to Tashithang. This is a nice walk in winter, when there are no leeches. In the rainy season there are so many that even the locals run most of the way! It takes 10-12 hours (probably less in the leech season) to reach the main road some 8 km north of Punakha. You will need to arrange for transport back to Thimphu, as it is difficult to get a taxi at the end of the trail, although there is a bus at least once a week.

5.2 Punakha.ai

6 TABA TO SINCHULA RIDGE

- 6.1 Dechhenchho'ling via Dechhenchho'ling forest road (9 km one way, 750 m up, 4-5 hrs, rating: 3.1)**
- 6.2 Dechhenchho'ling via Sinchula (15 km one way, 1200 m up, 6-9 hrs, rating: 5.2)**
- 6.3 Hontsho via Dobchula (16.5 km one way, 1290 m up, 7-10 hrs, rating: 5.7)**
- 6.4 YHS via Telecom Reflector (18 km one way, 1250 m up, 7-10 hrs, rating: 5.9)**

As an alternative to the Dechhenchho'ling hike, you could start in Taba, and struggle up the hill from there. Refer to Map 5.1.

Starting point

Just after you enter Taba, there is a tarmac road to the right that leads to the Forestry Training Institute (6a). Take this road until you see an archery range on your left. This is below the caged blind bear and the Institute (6.0). Abandon your transport somewhere and find your way to the other end of the range, duck the arrows and find a place where you can step over the fence to the left. Occasionally the Institute mends its fences; either try to scale it or find your way around it.

6.1 Dechhenchho'ling via Dechhenchho'ling forest road

Follow the trail along the irrigation channel, then down to the creek (6.1), and up the other side. Forget the short-cuts. They only show the problems with waste disposal around Taba. Check out the ridge to get an idea of where you are supposed to be going. Stay on the crest of the ridge, and avoid nice large trails that run parallel to the slope, unless you are a fat heifer looking for green grass. Seeing signs of logs having been dragged down is good. After a long while the trail flattens, veers to the right, and gets wider. Finally you reach an open space where the Dechhenchho'ling forest road comes up from the left (5.2). See Hike 5.2 for a description of the hike to Dechhencho'ling.

6.2 Dechhenchho'ling via Sinchula

To continue to the Hontsho forest road, find the trail going up the ridge. Higher up it stays below the ridge for a while and then splits. Take the right trail to get back on the ridge. The left trail will probably get you to a meadow from where there is likely to be some kind of a trail up to the forest road above. The trail along the ridge will eventually emerge in a large yak meadow (6.2). At the very top of the meadow there is a rocky trail through a destroyed forest. This area was not logged by untrained forestry students, but by professional loggers, before they turned into the "forest developers" that they are nowadays. This trail will take you up to the Hontsho forest road (6.3). For those interested, this part of the trek is feasible for mountain-biking maniacs who don't mind pushing or carrying their bikes for half an hour or more.

To go to Sinchula, turn left and follow the forest road to its end. Look for a rocky trail up the slope. If you try hard you can manage to lose it, but otherwise you end up at an open ridge and shortly afterwards will run into a chorten: Sinchula. From here take one of the trails back to civilisation (see Hikes 3 and 5).

6.3 Hontsho via Dobchula (map 5 and 12)

Turning right at 6.3 will get you to Dobchula pass above Hontsho (6.4), where you have three options. Turning left will get you down to Hontsho. Follow the main road all the way down to the Thimphu-Wangdi highway. At splits choose the road going down the valley, ignoring smaller side trails. You emerge at the immigration check point in downtown Hontsho (6.5).

Turning right and almost immediately left leads you to the FM transmitter on top of the 3,908 m peak (12.7). The road snakes up the mountain through rhododendron shrubs. Just before reaching the transmitter there are some open areas; in clear weather the views from here are fantastic. The high Himalayas stretch along the northern horizon, while to the east you can see as far as the black mountains in central Bhutan. To the west the Thimphu valley lies far below you.

6.4 YHS via Telecom reflector (Map 12)

Turning right at Dobchula Pass (6.4) and right at the next junction will get you to the reflector above YHS, from where you would probably just want to descend to Thimphu. If you are motivated/crazy you could continue on and find your way to Yusipang. See Map 12 and Hike 14 for a description.

Map 7

07-Dechhenphu.ai

7 DECHHENPHU VALLEY

- 7.1 Dechhenphu lhakhang** (3.5 km return, 260 m up, 1½-2 hrs, rating: 1.2)
7.2 River-left bank of Chang Chhu (3 km return, 250 m up, 1½-2 hrs, rating: 1.1)
7.3 River-right bank of Chang Chhu (3.5 km return, 230 m up, 1½-2 hrs, rating: 1.1)
7.4 Dui goenpa via Sanama Chhu (13 km one way, 850 m up, 5-8 hrs, rating: 4.2)
7.5 Jomkerim Pass (14 km return, 1700 m up, 7-11 hrs, rating: 6.3)
7.6 Dui goenpa via Jomkerim Pass (21 km one way, 2000 m up, 9-14 hrs, rating: 8.1)

This is one of the prettiest valleys in the Thimphu area, with abundant bird life. The long hike to Jomkerim Pass leads through pristine forests and offers great views of the surrounding valleys.

Starting point

Pass through DechhENCHHO'ling and follow the main road up to the silver fuel storage tanks (7a). For Hike 7.1 you should leave your mode of transport here. For the other hikes you could also drive up the rough road up the valley for a couple of kilometres to the parking lot just below the lhakhang (7.0).

7.1 Dechhenphu lhakhang

This route is not as nice as it used to be before a road was bulldozed up to the lhakhang, but peanut lovers may appreciate it. Take an often rocky trail on the south side (the tank-side) of the creek that runs for a short while along a barbed wire fence. The trail passes through blue pine forest. Near the halfway point you pass a chorten. The trail turns to the right and crosses the creek and some wet meadows. Soon you can see a farm house higher up on the slope and a bit later the monastery appears into view just behind it. Locals tend to follow short-cuts along the road, staying on the left-hand side of the creek.

Bhutanese are only admitted in gho or kira. Foreigners should be neatly dressed, and are not allowed to enter the main altar room without a permit. Many visit the monastery just before schools start to say prayers and light butter lamps for a good school year. It may help (1½-2 hrs.).

7.2 River-left bank of Chang Chhu

Although this hike along the northern bank of the river does not lead to a specific destination, it is worth trying, as it leads through a beautiful valley, and it is easy. Moreover, in spring and summer you are bound to encounter plenty of birds and flowers. From the car park, walk up to the monastery. Pass below the main building, or walk through the courtyard of the monastery to the back entrance. Here you'll find a large trail heading along the river up the valley. After about 100 metres you'll encounter a stone bath on the bank of the river (7.1). In the dry season you can cross the river here, and continue on up the southern bank (see Hike 7.3 below). In the rainy season the river is too high, so you'll have to stay on the northern bank. (10 min.)

If you plan to follow the northern bank, keep heading up the valley past the stone bath.

The trail slowly climbs up the side of the valley, away from the river. After about 2 km the trail splits (7.2). The right fork will take you up the hill. Eventually it becomes vague, although it seems to continue steeply up the hill. It may emerge at the yak pasture mentioned in Hike 7.5. The left fork is more interesting, as it keeps following the main river. Continue up this fork until you see an opening to your left. From here you have a good view of the river, far below, and the upper Chang Chhu valley. The trail continues for another 500 m or so, but eventually it disappears in the forest (7.3). Unless you are keen to explore the forest some more, you may want to return from here (1-2 hrs.).

7.3 River-right bank of Chang Chhu

This hike along the southern bank can only be walked easily in the dry season; in the rainy season the river is often too high. You can cross the river either at the stone bath mentioned above (7.1), or you can walk down to the river from the car park, and cross it just below the road (7.4). Once on the other side, keep walking upstream. Ignore any trails heading up the hill. After about 1 km the trail crosses the river (7.5). Within a few hundred metres the trail crosses back again to the left side. From now on the track pretty much follows the creek bed, crossing the stream from time to time. Be careful here, as the rocks can be very slippery. About 400 m upstream, just before a tiny meadow on the left-hand bank, a small trail climbs steeply into the forest on your left (7.6; 1-2 hrs.). See Hike 7.4 below if you want to go on, but if you are out for an easy hike, you may want to turn back.

7.4 Dui goenpa via Sanama Chhu

Turn left at 7.6, and continue zig-zagging up the hill, parallel to the Sanama Chhu, for about an hour. The trail eventually reaches a yak pasture complete with stone bath (7.7). From here a large trail appears to go back towards Dechhenphu. You could try it to see where it leads. Alternatively, you can follow another trail higher up the hill. This path winds its way around the mountain, above Dogtendrag monastery, and eventually appears above Dui goenpa (7.8). From here you can return to the gate at the entrance of Samtenling palace (7.21; see Hike 8), or you can return to Dechhenchho'ling via the Dogtendrag trail (Hike 8.1).

7.5 Jomkerim pass

Simply start hiking up the slope above the parking lot. There are several trails heading up the hill, but make sure you stay to the right (by about 100 m) of the monastery to get on the correct path. If you veer off to the left, you'll end up bushwhacking your way up the hill. The trail may get narrow from time to time, but it is clear all the way to the top. Wind your way up the hill, and eventually you emerge in a pasture on top of the ridge (7.9; 1½-2½ hrs.). Turn left just across the pass and follow a clear trail that moves up a ridge most of the time, or is quite close to it. In clear weather the views of the rock outcrops ahead and of Tango, Chagri and beyond are excellent. If the rhododendrons are flowering it is even more breathtaking. After 45-60 minutes, you reach a set of prayer flags in a small opening with good views of the Chang Chhu valley below (7.10). At this point, there is a clear trail to the left. This trail appears to dead-end in a yak meadow a km or so ahead. Several crazy hikers once spent several hours thrashing through bamboo somewhere down this trail while trying to return to Dechhenphu, so

you may want to stay clear of it if you want to make it to the top. Instead, walk up the slope through the prayer flags, to the top of the ridge. Here you'll find another trail that continues more or less along the crest of the ridge. You pass a yak pasture with hut, and eventually emerge from the forest into an area of rhododendrons. Singing or yodeling could spare your life, since bear paw prints have been seen here. When you reach a small meadow (7.11), cross it, until at the far end the meadow slopes down. Keep to your right, and follow the trail going up to the right through junipers and rhododendrons. The trail continues to head more or less up the ridge. Pass a *laptse* (rock cairn) and a good viewpoint 100 m further up. Eventually the trail goes down to the left and passes below a huge rock face, and further up below a second one. After this, it climbs gradually up across rocky slopes with shrubby alpine vegetation. The trail may be slightly less clear here, but if you look long enough you are most likely to spot it. In any case, you should be heading pretty much straight up to the pass (7.12; 3-5 hrs.). Before getting to Jomkerim pass, you can turn right and scramble up through a side valley to the peak somewhat off to the right. From the pass, you can return, or continue to Dui goenpa or Dechhenchho'ling (see below).

Caution

For most hikers this is a long *two-day* hike, and is therefore classified as *madness*. If you are not super-fit you should be prepared to spend a night at around 4,000 m.

7.6 Dui goenpa via Jomkerim pass

From the pass, you can descend on the other side to a saddle at 4,100 m. The trail is not always clear, but it veers off to the right a bit, crosses a small dip, and climbs up over a low rise to a small cairn (7.13). A second cairn overlooks the saddle. From the saddle (7.14) there are great views to the right of Mt. Yasari and the mountains beyond, and on your left you look down into a rugged river valley. Straight ahead, behind the next ridge, is Yangtse Tsho (7.15). If you are trying to return to Thimphu in one day, you may not have time to go there, but there is a trail to the lake along the bottom of the next mountain (20-30 min.).

In the middle of the saddle there is a narrow trail that heads steeply down to the river on the left. Take this trail down, cross the river to its right bank, and follow it downstream. You may have to cross the river, and back again, but make sure *not* to head up a clear trail climbing out of the valley on the left. Stay next to the river on the right side, and follow it for several kilometres. Eventually you'll reach a large meadow with remains of a building (7.16). About 100 m past the meadow the trail meets the river. Cross back to the left-hand side. The clear trail will follow the main river for a while, and then climb steeply up the hill (7.17). After another 2 km there is a split in the trail (7.18). Take the right fork. Soon you reach a small cave (7.19). Here you descend again steeply. Pass the remains of another building, and keep left (7.20). Eventually you'll reach Dui goenpa (7.8). From there you can walk back to the road leading to Samtenling palace (7.21; see Hike 8).

8 DOGTENDRAG (DORJIDRA) GOENPA**8.1 Dogtendrag (Dorjindra) goenpa (7.5 km return, 490 m up, 3-4 hrs, rating: 2.4)****8.2 Dui goenpa (10 km return, 850 m up, 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.7)**

Dogtendrag has a beautiful temple, and Dui offers great views over the Thimphu valley. Refer to Map 7.

Starting point

At the big prayer wheel in Dechhenchho'ling turn left (8a) to the entrance of the Dechhenchho'ling Palace. Turn right at the entrance, up a wide, steep road following the walls around the palace grounds. After the road turns left, take a right (8b) and drive, walk, cycle, ride or crawl if you like, through the forest to the entrance of the Royal Grandmother's Monastic Complex (8.0). Yumkutri lhakhang and Doeling goenpa are just above it. Leave your means of transport (unless an equine or mountain bike) here at just above 2,600 m.

8.1 Dogtendrag goenpa

Take the wide track going up along the monastic complex fence for two dozen metres or so, where you take a clear trail to the right going into the village. (The big trail only takes you to the gate of the goenpa.) The village houses some 15 lamas. Keep left at the next split, staying just above most of the houses. Walk past garden fences and barking dogs (the latter may be absent or silent at times). Pass four heavily lopped pines; four others were sacrificed for a building (it may be just eight stumps by now). You have two alternatives here: the more shaded way is to cross a small stream, where the trail is turning to the right. Go around a few houses and follow the steep trail up to the left. Pass prayer flags, mud, more fences, more dogs and an electricity pole, leaving the village between two fences. About 50 m outside the village, near some prayer flags, there is a smaller trail going up to the left (8.1). Take this trail, ignoring the one going on and the one going down to the right. The trail passes two more groups of old prayer flags and keeps on going up steeply along a log drag trail. By the time you're out of breath the trail flattens somewhat (8.2). Where the trail levels out, take the left fork past evergreen prickly leafed thorn bushes (barberry, *Berberis sp.*), some small open areas and across a water channel. Join a larger trail coming up along a ridge. (Pay some attention here on your way back).

The alternative is to turn left at the stumps up the nowadays more common but steeper trail. This trail takes you closely past a house to the ridge just above the barbed wire fence above the complex. Turn left, up a steep, exposed and sweaty ridge, passing prayer flags and a few clumps of blue pine forest for the necessary shade. This slope can be slippery. Turn left when you reach a junction with a smaller trail coming out of the forest and a larger going off to your left. Follow this slightly ascending trail in the general direction of the Valley of the King. On clear days you may get a good view of the Dagala range (the high mountain range to the south).

The trail continues to go slightly up or more or less level, and passes a few wet spots which are very muddy if you miss the logs, branches and rocks that are placed there to keep your feet dry. The trail reaches a flat area, where you can have a game of volleyball

if you brought net and ball. Follow the trail across this flat area and turn down to the left following a fairly wide trail. You could also go up the little knoll with prayer flags (8.3) for a picnic, a picture, or a peak at the King's valley.

From here, continue along the large and level trail past a chorten (8.4) to Dogtendrag village (8.5). This stretch can be muddy after snow melt or rainfall. Continue through the village, mainly inhabited by monks, to the monastery on the far end. Just past the main monastery there is a beautiful temple, built below a colourfully painted overhanging rock. Grey langurs may at times be sighted in the trees/on the rocks above the village.

Below the monastery a trail leads down into Samtenling valley. Don't go down here, you will most certainly be arrested.

8.1.1 Alternative trail back to Samtenling

If you don't have a vehicle waiting for you at Yumkutri lhakhang, you can take a shortcut to Thimphu on the way back. At the chorten (8.4), take the lower, right-hand trail. This trail zig-zags very steeply down the hill along the fence that closes off the King's valley. Don't even think of crossing the fence if you value your freedom. The trail crosses an irrigation canal and eventually meets the road leading to the King's cottage. You will end up on the wrong side of the guard post at the entrance to the King's valley (7.21); this is usually not a problem.

8.2 Dui goenpa

Take a trail with steps up a ridge between the main monastery building and the temple. This trail winds its way up to the meadow of Dui goenpa, some 1.5 km further and 250 m higher (7.8). The views from this peaceful meadow, where you more often see cattle than people, are fantastic in clear weather. If you keep going you will eventually reach Yangtse Tsho, behind Dechhenphu (see Hike 7.6).

There is a trail somewhere on the slope above Dui goenpa that winds around the mountain to the Dechhenphu valley, but it may be hard to find from this side. See Hike 7.4 for a basic description.

Map 9
9-dechhenphodrang.ai

9 DECHHENPHODRANG MONASTIC SCHOOL TO WANGDITSE GOENPA

9.1 Dechhenphodrang Monastic school to Wangditse goenpa and radio tower *(3.0 km one way, 280 m up, 1½-2 hrs, rating: 1.1)*

There are good views of the upper Thimphu valley from this trail. It can also be used as an alternative starting point for trips to Phajodhing and beyond.

Starting point

Drive up to the Dechhenphodrang monastic school (9.0). This monastery was originally the Dzong of the Lhasas and was called Blue Stone Dzong. When Shabdrung conquered the Lhasas, he enlarged the Dzong and made it his summer capital. He renamed it Dechhenphodrang Dzong. In 1702, Sherab Wangchuck, the 13th Desi, built a new dzong lower down in the Valley and named it the Tashichho Dzong (the Dzong of glorious religion). When the 3rd King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, established the capital in Thimphu in 1955, Tashichho Dzong was redesigned and sections were rebuilt. It is in this form that you see the Dzong today.

9.1 Wangditse goenpa

Just before the school gate and the monks' laundry area, pass a garage to the left side of the road, and take a steep trail up to a house. Turn right immediately, pass an outhouse and continue up. Just before a small irrigation channel and some metal water pipes turn left and zig-zag up to a larger irrigation channel. Jump across the channel and go up along a wider trail to a junction. Here go straight on, ignoring the trails to the right and the left. Continue up the ridge through blue pine, rosy shrubs and oaklets, where the eroded trail exposes the red subsoil. Pass between a stone wall and a walnut tree and emerge at Wangditse goenpa (10.1). From here you can return, turn left to the radio tower (Hike 10.1), or continue up to Chhokhortse goenpa (Hike 10.2). Wangditse goenpa is believed to have been built in memory of 50 monks who were slain at the site, which previously housed a 7-storied palace belonging to the Desi.

10 RADIO TOWER TO PHAJODHING

- 10.1 Wangditse goenpa (3.7 km return, 70 m up, 1½-2 hrs, rating: 0.8)**
10.2 Chhokhortse goenpa via Wangditse goenpa (5 km loop, 380 m up, 2-3 hrs, rating: 1.7)
10.3 Phajodhing (15 km return, 1000 m up, 5-7 hrs, rating: 4.2)
10.4 Pumola via Phajodhing (15 km one way, 1200 m up, 6-9 hrs, rating: 5.1)
10.5 Thujedrag goenpa (14 km return, 1350 m up, 6-9 hrs, rating: 5.4)
10.6 Ridge above Thujedrag (and Skeleton mountain and the lakes) (15 km return, 1450 m up, 7-10 hrs, rating: 5.9)
10.7 Bimelang Tsho (33 km one way, 2050 m up, 12-18 hrs, rating: 10.0)

The hike to Wangditse and Chhokhortse goenpas is easy but rewards hikers with great views over Thimphu. Meanwhile, Phajodhing is one of the most popular hiking destinations around Thimphu because of its commanding location above the valley. Great views when it is clear. Refer to Map 9.

Starting point

Drive to, or let yourself be dropped off at the entrance gate of the radio tower (BBS) area (10.0). To get there, take the right fork at the split past the Motithang Hotel (10a), and turn left immediately after the bridge. Pass the turn-off to the Youth Centre (10b) and continue all the way up past the Takin Zoo until the end of the road. The prayer flags just before the entrance were placed in memory of some 15 workers who died during construction of the radio tower due to the collapse of an earthen wall.

10.1 Wangditse goenpa

Take a small steep trail with steps just to the left of the entrance gate to the radio tower. Stay to the right, and follow the fence protecting the tower. Just past a chorten take the trail that veers to the left past a small house, then going down a few metres to the right. From here it basically follows the contours. At the split in the trail 100 m onwards, take the right fork. Continue along this trail until you reach Wangditse goenpa (10.1). Along the way there are good views of the Dzong and the SAARC building.

If you brought along your 80-year old grandmother with a heart condition, you may want to go back or down to Dechenphodrang from here. Otherwise you could also climb up to Chhokhortse goenpa. To go down to Dechenphodrang goenpa, walk around Wangditse goenpa (always in clockwise direction!), and follow the trail that heads down the ridge (see Hike 9).

10.2 Chhokhortse goenpa via Wangditse

At Wangditse turn left, and take the trail that goes straight up the ridge. The trail that continues straight ahead follows the side of the King's valley for a while and then disappears.

The trail up soon splits into several eroded and sometimes deeply incised trails, mostly running on the left side of the ridge. Keep following the largest trails. After about 500 m the trail levels out while crossing an open ridge with a field of prayer flags. The views of the city are excellent from here. Continue up the ridge. Soon after you enter back into

the forest, a small trail winds up the ridge to the right (10.2). This steeper trail continues directly to Chhokhortse goenpa (10.5), while the easier trail to the left takes you past a farm house and some wheat fields to the ridge just above the radio tower (10.3). From there you can turn left to return to the radio tower, or right to continue on to Chhokhortse goenpa.

The trail to Chhokhortse continues up, at times to the left, then again along the ridge. It leads through open grassy areas, oak undergrowth and blue pines. Further up it turns to the right and flattens out somewhat. Here it joins the trail coming up from the radio tower (10.4). Turn left to return to the radio tower or continue straight on to the chorten and Chhokhortse goenpa or even to Phajodhing.

10.3 Phajodhing

At the radio tower take the small steep trail with steps just to the left of the entrance gate, and go up to the left into the area full of prayer flags. Walk through the field of flags and continue on the trail heading up the crest of the ridge. It splits from time to time; if in doubt, follow the trail along the crest of the ridge. The trail keeps on going up steeply or very steeply until it levels out somewhat, where it meets the trail from Wangditse goenpa (10.4). Soon afterwards you reach a chorten and Chhokhortse goenpa with some fields around it (10.5). You're about one third of the way up. On the way back, be careful not to miss the right turn at 10.4, down a steep section of the trail. If you keep following what seems to be the main ridge, you may end up at Wangditse goenpa (50-75 min.).

From Chhokhortse up to the point where the trail from the Youth Centre joins, the trail goes mostly gently up the ridge. At first the trail is sometimes off to the right side of the ridge. At some points you may have to choose between two trails. The higher one is usually the dryer one and will not get you lost. Further along, just before another steeper section of the trail there is a large, flatter trail to the right. Ignore this temptation and keep on going up. This last stretch through blue pine forest is somewhat steeper. Eventually, the trail comes to a main junction of about five trails (10.6). The two to the left take you down to the Youth Centre while the two ahead of you both lead to Phajodhing. You can take a rest in or under the big oak (50-75 min.).

From here the trail starts climbing again. The first sign that you are approaching Phajodhing is a chorten, from where you can see Phajodhing and may also enjoy good views of Thimphu (10.7). You could even take a break here. The second sign is a water-driven prayer wheel. The third sign is a larger chorten. From here, it is a short hike to the buildings of Phajodhing. Many trails run from and to the different buildings. The main monastery (10.8), which has a quite elaborate temple room, is on the right (50-75 min.).

Once Phajodhing used to be one of the richest monasteries in the country, but evil eyes fell on it a long time ago and thus it became very poor and dilapidated. Most of the wealth of the monastery has either been stolen or disappeared. In the monastery Guru Padma Sambhava is shown in his terrifying appearance with a sword in his right hand and a bowl made of a skull containing blood in his left hand.

Sakya Tenzin built the monastery in 1748 with 20 meditation huts around it. Its original name was 'Wogmin Namgyai Khangzang'. The monastery was later provided with a large painted scroll, Buddha's words in 108 volumes and statues. Later on, Je Khenpo Sherub Sange built another monastery adjoining the previous one and named it 'Wogmin Nyipa'. The main statue in this monastery is a life-size copper statue of Shakya Muni.

From Phajodhing you can return, go to Pumola goenpa/pass, climb to the ridge, or go even further.

There is a small trail from the last chorten before Phajodhing to the yak meadow below Pumola, and some claim that there is also a direct trail from Phajodhing to this meadow. This trail may continue down into the valley to meet the trail to the Youth Centre.

10.4 Phajodhing to Pumola

Walk around the closest building with a golden bell on top, which is to your left. From here, veer left and head across and slightly up the meadow. Alternatively, especially in the wet season, you could follow the existing trails up the slope until you cross a more or less level trail at the same level as the main monastery. Follow this one in a SW direction (left). It may not always be very clear, but do not go too high above the meadow. From the trail you can fairly soon see two rock spires above you, and a while later you pass right under a rock outcrop. Continue along the trail, which pretty much follows the contours, until you reach Pumola goenpa (10.9). There are excellent views of the valley below along this stretch. Just before Pumola Goenpa take a steep trail into the forest down to the left to get to the pass (10.10), some sixty metres below the goenpa. See Hike 11 for options at Pumola.

10.5 Thujedrag goenpa

Go up along the trail which starts at the top exit from the main monastery building with the yellow roof, or find a trail up the meadow until you're at the same level as the main monastery. Head for the eroded trails ahead. Follow what seems to be the main eroded trail, and in case of indecision go for the left one. This should take you around the ridge, passing above a rock outcrop, and into a small valley. To go to the campsite follow this trail across the creek and up on the other side of the valley, where you run almost straight into the campsite (10.11) and the ruins of what once was the Phajodhing trekkers guest-house, where you could sleep on the floor for a mere 50 Nu.

10.5.1 From here to Pumola

Take the lower trail immediately behind the campsite. This trail goes down, crosses a few small creeks and then joins the main trail from Phajodhing to Pumola. There is a higher trail, which is used to fetch water, and it does not get you anywhere. Even the lower trail may have vanished by now.

10.5.2 Thujedrag goenpa

Take a small trail which joins the main trail to the campsite from the right shortly before it crosses the creek. The trail heads up steeply and forks a little bit further on, where you take the steepest one up to a ridge. Here it turns to the left, leaving a building with a few prayer flags to your right. Keep following this trail up across a meadow and into an area with more juniper trees and a few large flat rocks, until it joins a larger trail coming

from your right. Turn left, and have a good look at the surrounding area, because on your way down you may want to make a right turn here (just past a fairly large cairn and right where the trail starts levelling out). You could place a rock somewhere to remind you of the place to turn, and assume that it will still be there when you come back. If, on your way back, you pass this turn you can find several other smaller trails going down to the Phajodhing area. The trail up is marked with a lot of small stone cairns and takes you directly to Thujedrag goenpa (10.12). A little chorten on a protruding rock indicates that you're almost there. The monastery is built on and into a precipitous rock outcrop (45-60 min.).

10.6 The chorten on the ridge, Skeleton Mountain (aerial burial ground) and the lakes (Map 10)

10.6.1 the ridge

Take a right turn a short while after the junction with the cairns (10.13). This fairly steep loose gravel trail is well travelled and passes plenty of juniper and rhododendron bushes. Further up, the trail splits. The right trail is somewhat longer but less steep and takes you to the ridge below a few rock outcrops where it turns left to the stone chorten at the ridge. The left trail goes up steeply across rock-strewn slopes. It is marked by some stone cairns and shows clear signs of extensive erosion, such as a juniper on a 1 m high pedestal. Zig-zag the last part of the way up across a scree slope. The top of the ridge is marked by a large chorten and prayer flags (10.14). If sunny, this may be a good place for lunch or a snack. If not, and especially if it is windy, you may get cold very fast here. Following the ridge to the left you should end up, or rather down, at Pumola pass (see Hike 11.3.3; 1¼-1¾ hrs.).

Caution

If you plan to reach the lakes in one day, look closely at the time and the weather. Even the first, shallow lake is a long way, and the weather can change quickly up here. Be well-prepared for a long hike!

If you are considering walking to Bimelang Tsho and back to civilisation in one day (32.5 km or 11-12 hours of hard walking) you have to be 1. very well acclimatised, 2. in excellent condition and 3. an almost complete lunatic. The first known attempt (a Brit, a Dutchman, a Dane and an Australian) failed miserably (and the Australian missed his own farewell party), but there were no casualties. The second known attempt (2 recidivists, another Brit, and two Americans) succeeded. They started at the radio tower around 6 in the morning and reached the road head in Tshelung nang as darkness was falling. You need to be able to reach Phajodhing within two hours and the chorten on the ridge above Phajodhing within three hours. Simkotra lake should be reached in five hours and Janye Tsho in six hours. If you are not there six hours after you left and six hours before nightfall, turn around. From Janye Tsho to Tshalunang goenpa you need about 4½ hours and from the monastery at least another 1½ hours, unless you are running. Thus, there is little time for rests or for getting lost. Taking two days may be a better idea, but this booklet is not about multi-day hikes. The whole Druk path has been walked in one day, once by two Kiwis and a Canuck, and once by an Austrian madman and his Swedish equal, but this should not be considered a day hike either since the first group ran much of the way, and the latter arrived well after dark.

Map 10
10-Bimelang.ai

10.6.2 The lakes

From the chorten on the ridge take the trail heading a short way down and then across a flat, often water-soaked, area with lots of flat rocks. The peak to your right is Skeleton Mountain, an aerial burial site, which is no longer or only very seldom used to “bury” deceased children by feeding the vultures (10.15). The trail to the peak starts on its southern side and winds its way steeply up.

To continue to the lakes, follow this rather big trail, the Druk Path, keeping cliffs and peaks to your right and the valley to your left. When you come up to the remains of a building, turn down to the left and then right, continuing on a trail between the rock outcrops and the valley. Next, the trail zig-zags up steeply, and passes through a rough stone wall (10.16). From there it goes down into a valley with a very shallow or dry lake on the right side of the path (10.17). After the lake it climbs up to the next pass with a cairn to the right and a stone wall near the top (10.18). Pass a somewhat flatter area with another shallow or dry lake to the right. Somewhere around here the trail splits (10.19). The right trail follows the ridge, while the left and main trail descends directly to Simkotra Tsho. This trail is a bit longer, but probably easier to follow. Walk through the meadow past the lake (10.20), and pick up the trail on the other side. The trail follows the contours for a while, past a viewpoint with good views of Gida valley (10.21), before crossing the ridge into the valley of Janye Tsho, a favourite yak hang-out (10.22). It descends steeply towards the lake, while becoming rough and more rocky.

Along the Druk path you may encounter a couple of groupies, attaching themselves to any hiking group. Treat these two or three dogs well. They are well behaved, polite, quiet, keep their distance and don't beg, in contrast to most dogs. They may bark if strangers approach your camp at night, and try to read your mind (e.g. time for lunch) and show you the way. They will accept any leftovers, bones, or your whole packed lunch, kindly.

10.7 Bimelang Tsho

Head for the trail that was visible while you were descending to the lake. The trail goes mostly up, crosses five or six ridges and usually descends slightly into the valleys in between. Next, it starts going down past precipices, out of the pasture and low alpine scrub zone into a rhododendron scrub zone, and then steeply down to Bimelang Tsho. The trail crosses the Bimelang Chhu where it leaves the lake (10.23). Note that this is not the trail that is indicated on the topographic map. To follow the route indicated on the map one would require excellent rock climbing skills, something yaks very seldom seem to possess. From here the quickest way back to civilisation is down the Bimelang Chhu to Tshelung nang. See Hike 21.2 for a description.

Map 11.1

11-1-Pumola.ai

11 YOUTH CENTRE TO PHAJODHING AND PUMOLA

- 11.1 Phajodhing** (11 km return, 1100 m up, 5-8 hrs, rating: 4.4)
- 11.2 Pumola** (13 km return, 1100 m up, 5-8 hrs, rating: 4.7)
- 11.3 Phajodhing via Pumola (direct route)** (15 km loop, 1300 m up, 6-9 hrs, rating: 5.4)
- 11.4 Picnic spot via Pumola** (16 km return, 1200 m up, 7-9 hrs, rating: 5.4)
- 11.5 Thaptsa peak via Pumola** (19 km return, 1550 m up, 8-12 hrs, rating: 6.7)
- 11.6 Thimphu Hospital via Thaptsa peak** (21 km one way, 1550 m up, 8-12 hrs, rating: 7.0)
- 11.7 Tshelung nang via Pumola** (13 km one way, 1100 m up, 5-8 hrs, rating: 4.4)
- 11.8 Paro via Tshelung nang: punishment trail** (29 km one way, 2000 m up, 11-16 hrs, rating: 9.4)

Many of these hikes are alternatives to those described in Hike 10. The hike to Tshelung nang leads through some beautiful sections of forest, while the Punishment Trail is a classic trek.

Starting point

Drive, ride or walk up to the Youth Centre (the old Motithang Hotel; 11.0).

Leave the Youth Centre to your left and keep going up, following the main track. You could drive up, but you can almost walk as fast. Leave the big concrete water tank to your right. Take the short-cuts if you like, which takes you almost straight to the royal bodyguard village of wooden shacks above the Youth Centre. The main track goes around the village and crosses an archery range before joining up with the trail through the village. When following the path through the village leave most houses to your left and many prayer flags to your right. After leaving the village keep going up in the same direction, keeping the creek just to your right. After a while the main track joins and a bit further you find a big dug-in and fenced-off corrugated iron roofed water tank on your right (11.1; 20-35 min.).

11.1 Phajodhing

Turn right immediately after you pass the water tank. The trail goes down into the valley and upstream. Cross the bridge and take the trail up past a fat old oak. Keep following what seems to you the main trail, passing a chorten. There are many short-cuts, but as far as known they all join up again. Halfway on your way up to Phajodhing the forest opens up at a spot where about five trails come together, under a big old oak (10.6). The one to the right goes to the radio tower, while the two on the left join up a short while further and go up to Phajodhing. (45-75 min.). See Hike 10.3 for details on the rest of this walk.

11.2 Pumola*11.2.1 Main trail*

From the water tank at 11.1, keep going straight, taking the right track when it splits. The left one has been fenced off with Royal barbed wire, but it can be circumvented to join the less used "dog bite" trail (See *alternative trail* below). Further on, it turns left through a depression and leads to a large open area, where it turns right. Once there

was a whole village with blue plastic roofs here, the next time there was only a bunch of prayer flags, now there may be nothing left. Occasionally people with ferocious yak dogs camp in this meadow. Before the track starts going down to the river ahead, look for a narrow trail heading up along a small ridge and into the forest (11.2). Although the start of the trail can be unclear and difficult to find, don't miss it. The trail heading down dead-ends soon near the river (20-30 min.).

Keep on following the main trail, which may have been trampled into muddy goo by herds of cattle. It passes through blue pine and spruce forest mixed with oaks and rhododendrons. At times the trail is deeply incised. Further along, it heads up and along the slope, climbing higher and higher above the valley to your left. The vegetation has changed into mixed conifers with mostly spruce, fir and junipers. The trail levels out and soon the creek is just beside you. About 5 minutes later you pass a big rock outcrop and reach a yak meadow with a large flat picnic rock near the creek (11.3). In winter, yak can be encountered along the trail above and even below this point. To the right, high up on the slope, is Phajodhing Monastery. There is a direct route to the chorten below Phajodhing and some people claim that there is a trail directly to Phajodhing; you could try to find it (90-130 min.).

After a rest (or not) on the picnic rock, cross the creek immediately and turn left, heading up a sometimes rocky trail which splits and joins continuously. The trail takes you across a couple of small meadows, where it is not always very clear. In any case, keep heading up the slope. The trail soon enters back into the forest. Soon you can see the chorten that stands in Pumola pass up ahead (10.10; 30-45 min.).

11.2.2 Alternative, vague, trail

This trail is easier to follow from Pumola down, but it is only described going up. There is no clear trail leading to the starting point; chances of getting lost on this trail are quite high. (Originally I did not know at all how to get there, but horse caravans, cattle herders, locals and yak dogs could find it. The poor excuse for not knowing where this trail started was that after having been mauled by two vicious yak dogs, I defied Royal barbed wire in order to get to the hospital before I started biting anyone, and that I could not find a way around this fence before my visa ran out.) From the beginning of the big meadow (11.2), turn left up a small knoll and then down into the blue pine forest following a maze of cattle trails. These congregate near the fence and within a few hundred metres you reach the start of the trail. Turn right; do not try to cross the fence! If you manage to find the trail all the way down to this point, turn left before the fence, even if it has a very inviting big hole, unless you have a Royal invitation.

Following this trail you soon have to use stepping stones to keep your feet dry. Go down to the stream (Motithang Chhu), cross it and go up the other side. Here the trail turns right and keeps going up steeply through blue pine, spruce and hemlock. Cross a creek and continue up the ridge. Where the trail splits, go left up the ridge, rather than left slightly up and into the valley. For a while you follow a wide grassy trail, which becomes vaguer as the forest opens up. Head for a birch-dominated meadow ahead. Cross it and continue up to the left through open fir, spruce, birch and rhododendron forests, along a vague trail. Just past a huge spruce the slope ahead looks half barren with trails

everywhere. Head up and look for a trail to the right. Higher up, the trail goes up a ridge and becomes more clear, but it is very rough and rocky. Cross another open area and follow a very uneven trail up a little ridge into a small valley. Here the unclear trail splits, but rejoins again. Later, pass a small meadow, continue up, and cross a small valley. Pass below a fallen birch, turn left up a small grassy ridge, and almost immediately hang a right. A bit higher up you run into yet another meadow with barberry shrubs and birch trees. Cross it from the lower end to the higher end at the opposite side. The trail crosses a few valleys with steep climbs at the other side and passes under rhododendrons and tall fir trees. After another steep zig-zag, the trail levels out quite a bit. It crosses a few more valleys, a rocky area, and a few small meadows before continuing along and down the slope through fir, rhododendron and juniper forest. Finally it emerges on the southeastern side of the chorten at Pumola pass (3-4 hrs.).

Pumola Pass

At the pass you can take a rest, or you can continue in all directions. To your right, just above the pass, is Pumola goenpa, and a trail to Phajodhing (Hike 11.3.1). The trail straight ahead on the right-hand side of the meadow descends into Gida valley. It is the trail to Tshelung nang and Paro (Hikes 11.7 and 11.8). The trail straight ahead on the left-hand side of the meadow takes you to a nice picnic spot (Hike 11.4). The trail to the left up the ridge leads to Thaptsa peak and back to the hospital (Hikes 11.5 and 11.6), and finally, the small trail that descends into the forest in a southeastern direction is the alternative trail back to the Youth Centre (Hike 11.2.2). If in doubt when coming down this trail take the trails to the left. You may end up bushwhacking, but will not be arrested for trespassing Royal property.

11.3 Pumola to Phajodhing

11.3.1 The direct trail to Phajodhing

From Pumola head up the meadow to your right. After entering the forest, follow the right trail passing under Pumola goenpa. You can also take the left trail and walk up to the goenpa and then down. Both trails meet up just to the north and slightly lower than the goenpa. This often rocky trail takes you up and down along the slope, offering nice views of Thimphu, and on clear days, of the Dagala range (the high mountain range to the south of Thimphu). The trail passes below a rock outcrop and two rock spires and ends up at the end of a meadow at Phajodhing (10.8). Now head for the lower building with the golden bell on top. Behind this you find the trail taking you past a couple of chortens back to the Youth Centre or the radio tower. See Hikes 10.3 and 11.1 for descriptions of these trails (1-1½ hrs.).

11.3.2 Trail to the campsite above Phajodhing

This is a nice trail if it still exists. Head for Pumola goenpa and take a trail going steeply up a meadow behind the goenpa. When you reach the remains of some sheds, turn right and you should find a trail at the lower end of the meadow to the right. This trail passes above a rock outcrop with some prayer flags and continues slightly up for quite some time. In clear weather you may have good views. From here, the trail slowly descends to a small side valley. Cross the creek, climb up steeply and emerge at the large meadow above Phajodhing, which is commonly used as a campsite (10.11). Going the other way,

be sure to take the right trail (not the lowest one) from behind the campsite (1½-2 hrs.).

11.3.3 Along the ridge to the stone chorten above Phajodhing

Head up the meadow in the direction of the goenpa, but after 30 m turn left towards a small rock outcrop in the forest. A small trail passes to the left of a covered overhang at the base of the rock. This trail takes you to a steep meadow. Keep going up the steepest part of the meadow, heading for what seems to be the closest peak. At times you may be following yak trails, but most of the time you are going up, while the yak and cattle trails run mostly parallel to the slope. After a long climb you reach a first knoll with possibly a prayer flag, after which you descend for a short while and start going up the next knoll, turning right across a rocky outcrop. Higher up on the slope the trail splits. The higher trail, with magnificent views, may be hard to find as the split in the trail is rather vague. It winds to the left and right of the ridge whilst avoiding the rhododendron bushes, which often reach the ridge on one side or the other. Follow the trail to the next rocky peak, which is marked by a stone cairn at its southwestern end. Climb straight up, through a wide crack in the rock to its top and follow the ridge to the stone chorten above Thujedrag. The clearer trail will eventually join the Druk Path (from Thimphu to Paro) at the base of Skeleton Mountain, a high barren rocky mountain that used to be an aerial burial ground. Here you turn right towards the big stone chorten above Thujedrag (10.14); see Hike 10 for details (2-3 hrs).

11.4 Picnic spot with rock outcrops and views

From Pumola pass, take the track at the southern lower *left-end* of the meadow and follow this trail down and up through fir, junipers and rhododendrons, across some wet spots and down to a split. Here you take the right trail going steeply down. The left one is more level, passes a meadow and emerges higher up in a less interesting part of the picnic area. Follow the right trail down, across an area with fallen or felled trees to another split at a burnt tree. Here take the more level left trail which goes down, up, and down again, passes below a big rock and emerges in an open area in between rock outcrops in a side valley. The trail down to the right fizzles out, but if you persist you could end up in Tshelung nang. The trail continues down the open area, but it may just be a yak trail, which dead-ends where the grass runs out (25-40 min.). Note that the trail on the map is only an approximation.

11.5 Thaptsa peak

This is a nice walk if the weather is fine and if you are still fit. If you are lucky even Jhomolhari may be visible. At Pumola, go up the meadow to the left, pass a row of prayer flags, and find the trail just to the right of the ridge. The first stretch is fairly deeply incised and passes under rhododendron bushes. Higher up, the trail is surrounded by dead firs, which probably expired after a dry summer followed by a severe winter in the early 1980s. Most were over-aged anyway and at the upper limit of their range. New firs are already growing up, especially in somewhat less exposed areas. Next, the trail crosses a small meadow, close to where small pieces of tourmaline minerals can be found.

Above the dead fir zone, there are more rhododendron bushes, other shrubs and grassland, providing beautiful views of Thimphu, Gidakom valley and ranges further away. After reaching a first peak (11.4) the trail heads down past some rock outcrops before

Map 11.2

11-2-Tshelung nang.ai

going up again. A rock pinnacle can be seen on the north side of the trail. Thaptsa, at 4000 m, is a grassy meadow in which the trail fades away. A structure of some sort stood at this peak until some years back. Remains of the cable support anchors can still be seen (11.5; 1½-2½ hrs.).

11.6 Thaptsa Peak to Thimphu Hospital

If you don't want to go back the way you came and the weather is still good, chances of rain or low clouds small, and you still feel fit, you may want to continue all the way back to the other side of Thimphu. This is a long but beautiful hike. From the ridge you may have spectacular views of Masang Gang, Gangkhar Puensum, Dagala, Wang valley, monal pheasants diving for shelter and soaring eagles.

Keep following the ridge, heading for some rock outcrops. You could climb over them but its better to look for a trail on the right. It runs along or just below the ridge. Further along it may vanish regularly in the meadows, but it will always reappear further down along the ridge. About 600 m further down you reach a pass, with a trail coming up from either side (11.6). The trail to the left may look inviting, but it only goes to some yak pastures. At this point your trail leaves the ridge, and continues through a series of meadows on the left hand side of the ridge. It reappears on the ridge a few hundred metres further. If you had enough or the weather turned foul, you could walk along the ridge until the next top (11.7), and from there try to find your way down to Dangklok, but there may not be a trail. See Hike 19 for a description of this route.

To continue on to Thimphu, follow the ridge until the last meadow, which may be decorated with some prayer flags (11.8). At the far end of the meadow turn left off the ridge and descend to the meadow below. Walk down through the lower meadow until you reach the ridge again (11.9). If you have to go down to Thimphu fast (I don't know why you may want to do this, but if it is almost dark you should not have been here), you could turn left on one of the trails going into the forest. But unless there is an emergency, stay away from these trails. These short-cuts have vertical sections of several metres and are often slippery. Don't even attempt them, unless you are used to doing this kind of stuff.

Continue to follow the ridge down past a yak camp and remains of a moat and old foundations, to another yak camp (11.10). Here the trail to Thimphu veers off to the left, into a pine forest that burned in spring 2001. Continue down the sometimes steep trail to a promontory that may still have remains of prayer flags (11.11). There are great views of Thimphu on the way down. To your left is a barbed wire fence. Keep going down the hill, more or less following the fence. A couple of hundred metres below you'll reach the remnants of an old chorten on a little promontory, overlooking the city. Continue down the hill, either straight down (steep) or a bit to the left (more gradual), past another chorten to the irrigation canal (11.12). Turn left along the canal. Depending on where you live or left your car, you can continue along the canal or turn right down a trail by some houses 100 m past a small temple to the fire station where you can catch a taxi. The walk along the canal offers interesting views of people's backyards and some smelly mud. It ends at the road above the hospital. From here you can see some nice gneiss rock outcrops to which on some sunny days spidermen can be seen clinging.

Map 11.3

11-3-Paro.ai

If you want to try this route in the opposite direction, which offers better early morning views than the trek up to Pumola, stay along the irrigation channel for a long time. Many inviting trails head up the slope and invariably disappear in dense blue pine forest from where only hard bushwhacking can get you to the ridge above. Stay on the trail until you can see a chorten a short way above the trail on a rather open slope. Start heading up here and keep going.

11.7 Pumola to Tshelung nang

From Pumola pass, follow the trail that descends into the Gida valley from the lower *right-end* side of the meadow. This trail first descends gradually, then zig-zags steeply down through a beautiful forest into the valley. Along the way there are great views through the trees. After about 40 minutes you join a creek, and a little later cross it. The trail now veers to the left, along the side of a steep valley. On the other side the forest has been logged extensively. About 15 minutes after crossing the creek, you'll cross another small, mossy creek. From here on, start looking around carefully, because you have just reached one of the most difficult to find turn-offs in this booklet. Just past the creek you enter a large meadow. The main trail continues straight on through the meadow, and back into the forest, but if you want to get to Tshelung nang, you need to find the rough forest road at the very bottom of this meadow. There is a tiny trail across the meadow that is virtually impossible to find, and since shrubs invade the pasture this not getting any easier. The idea is to walk to about the middle of the meadow, 50 m *before* a tall single pine with a long bare trunk (11.13). The traces of the herders hut and stone bath mentioned in earlier drafts have long since disappeared. If you find yourself going back into the forest, just retrace your steps until you find a suitable place to go down the meadow.

Make your way down, and aim for the bottom right-hand corner of the meadow. Once you get there, look for a large trail that soon meets a rough forest road (11.14). Follow this road until you get to some houses. Along the way there are a few short-cuts, which you could take to save a couple of minutes, or to twist an ankle. The valley opens up at the houses, and you get a view up the valley with more farmhouses and some fields (Tshelung nang village). High up on the ridge straight ahead stands Jili Dzong, your next destination if you are going to Paro. Walk down to the river and cross the bridge (11.15). If you had enough, or the weather turned foul, you can turn left at the bridge, and walk down the road until you find some transport to take you back to Thimphu. Be aware that you may have to walk another 1-2 hours before finding anyone willing to take you back! If you are planning to return the same way, see Hike 20 for a description of this hike in reverse.

11.8 Paro via Tshelung nang: punishment trail

The walk to Paro is usually considered a two-day hike, but it can be done in one if you are in for punishment. If you want to break some Kiwi record, try to complete it in less than 7 hours and 50 minutes (run-

Note

Before deciding to undertake this trek in one day, please re-read the section "Which Routes to Choose" in "About this Booklet". This route has been rated as *Madness!*

ning allowed).

During the third King's rule this trail had a special function. If members of the Royal Body Guard failed in some task they were sent by foot from Thimphu to Paro on the same day the King had to go to Paro. The King would travel by jeep on the rough gravel road between Thimphu and Paro, and the Royal Body Guard who was sent by foot had to reach Paro before the King reached it! Hence, the name "punishment trail".

11.8.1 Tshelung nang to Jili Dzong

After crossing the bridge in Tshelung nang, turn right, walk around the mani wall and climb up a steep path behind it. About 15 minutes later this trail brings you to a small village with three big, old houses and a Rural Water Supply (RWS) tap (11.16). This water is fairly safe, but check with the RWS office in Thimphu if you can drink it. At the tap, turn left, up to a chorten just above the village. Pick up the trail here again, and head for the forest above you. At the edge of the forest the trail rounds a spur, and flattens out. A small mani wall is hidden among the trees just above the trail here. On the other side of the valley there are three big houses slightly higher than you are; this is Jidekha, your next destination. The trail contours around a ridge up the valley, crosses the creek (Jidhekha Lum Chhu), and climbs back up the slope on the other side. Soon after crossing the creek you cross a spur and emerge in abandoned fields. Jidekha is just ahead. Walk to the village along one of the trails through the fields, and look for an old water prayerwheel above the houses (11.17). Turn sharply right at the prayerwheel and head up the side valley. The trail is good, but after about 50 m, behind the first rise, leave it be and turn left up another meadow. The main trail probably goes to some yak meadow.

Walk up the meadow and look for a good trail at the top end. Follow this up into the forest, until you reach a large intersection on the crest of a ridge about 10 minutes later (11.18). Turn right, following the ridge. After another 5 minutes you will reach the Gidakom Forest Management Unit logging road (11.19). Don't take this road, but cross it and continue straight up the spur on a good, sometimes very wide trail, through the forest. A few minutes after crossing the road you pass through a large area that has been logged recently. Loggers used cables to transport the logs to the nearest road; the paths that were cleared for the cables are still clearly visible.

About half an hour later you enter back into untouched forest. Five minutes after re-entering the forest, the trail splits (11.20); take the right hand fork to reach Jili Dzong. The left hand fork probably goes directly to the pass, just below the Dzong. All of a sudden you emerge from the forest into an alpine meadow, with Jili Dzong just 100 m above you, the highlight of the trek (11.21). After a steep climb up to the Dzong you can look down into the Paro valley. When the weather is clear you have magnificent views over the mountains, including Jhomolhari to the north.

11.8.2 Jili Dzong to Paro

Now, there is only a 1300 m descent left. From the Dzong, follow a clear path along the ridge down to Jili pass (11.22). From the pass you can turn right to go down to Paro, or turn left to a yak pasture that is being used as campsite for the Druk Path trek, which you have just joined. Assuming you don't want to camp, turn right at the pass and walk

down a spur. After about 100 m the trail descends into the forest to the right of the spur. The large and sometimes heavily eroded trail winds its way down through mixed coniferous forest. You soon pass a massive fallen tree; take the trail on either side. About 500 m onwards, just after crossing a wet meadow and a small creek, there is a split in the trail. Turn right onto the trail that heads down, although the trail going straight may join again later. Another 1 km further you reach a large meadow with a long mani wall (11.23). Here you leave the forest and reach the first houses and orchards. Soon the trail hits the end of a dirt road (11.24). You can continue along the road, or take the many short-cuts to the paved road just above the National Museum (which will probably be closed if you are trying to do this as a day hike). You can follow the road until it dead-ends just above the Dzong, or take another short-cut directly to the Dzong. The map shows some of the short-cuts you can take. In any case, make your way to the covered bridge across the river below the Dzong (11.25), and walk to town for a well-deserved drink and transport back to Thimphu.

Map 12
12-Thadranang.ai

12 YHS TO THADRANANG GOENPA/TELECOM REFLECTOR

12.1 Yangchenphu goenpa (2.5 km return, 230 m up, 1½-2 hrs, rating: 1.0)

12.2 Thadranang goenpa (8.5 km return, 950 m up, 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.6)

12.3 Telecom reflector (8.5 km return, 1100 m up, 4-7 hrs, rating: 3.9)

12.4 Dobchula Pass and Hontsho (18 km one way, 1400 m up, 7-11 hrs, rating: 6.2)

12.5 FM Transmitter (3908 m peak) (18 km loop, 1800 m up, 8-12 hrs, rating: 7.1)

The climb from YHS can be hot on sunny days, but Thadranang goenpa is beautifully situated. The upper sections of the hike lead through subalpine vegetation, and offer good views.

Starting point

Walk or drive up Yangchen Lam and park your means of transport somewhere near or above the YHS (Yangchenphu High School) buildings (12.0).

12.1 Yangchenphu goenpa

At the end of the tarmac road, turn right onto a dirt track to the right just above the last school building and take the second trail to the left. The first leads to a house, where they may not be expecting you for tea. Head for the little knoll with an electricity mast at the top. Pass the mast and a short while later you can either take a small, not so clear trail to the right, or continue on up the ridge you are on. The trail to the right passes a valley and goes through the young blue pine forest to the ridge on which Yangchenphu goenpa is located. Upon reaching this next ridge turn left and pass the ruins of several buildings.

If you keep on going up the ridge you are on, keep following the zig-zag trail through blue pine forest, and soon you will emerge on the above-mentioned next ridge well above the ruins. (If, on your way down, you miss these two turns to the right, you can keep on following the ridge down and end up near the goenpa hidden in the steep-sided valley below Yangchenphu. Eventually you will hit the main road about ½ km from YHS.)

Continue up, following one of the many trails which lead up to the goenpa buildings. Turn left just before the buildings through an area littered with plastic dalda bags and then turn right and pass to the left of the monastery complex. A bit further on the trail splits (40-60 min.).

The trail going more or less straight into the valley takes you via an overgrown trail to the ridge trail from YHS to Thadranang goenpa. The one going up to the right (almost in the opposite direction) goes to the top of the monastery complex (12.1). From here you can also join the trail to Thadranang by following a very steep trail up the ridge. Near the end of this ridge the trail splits. The left trail joins the YHS Thadranang trail, the right one passes through a shrubby area and joins the trail near point 12.3.

12.2 Thadranang goenpa

Start near the end of the tarmac road, past all school buildings. From here follow a trail up passing to the left of a big water tank, in between fenced vegetable gardens, past

houses, sheds and shacks. Water pipes and some rivulets may indicate that you are still going in the right direction. Past the open cement water tank you run into a newly erected elephant fence (12.2). Medium sized and small people can squeeze through the fence somewhere to the right where the bars have been bent for the purpose. Others have a good chance of finding a loose part of the fence where they can walk through or alternatively should carry an adjustable spanner. Above the fence, start zig-zagging your way up the slope ahead. This trail is fairly clear, but steep. Forget about the shortcuts as you wind your way up the ridge through blue pine with an undergrowth of young blue pine and poplars. You pass a side trail to the right, which takes you to Yangchenphu goenpa (40-60 min.).

Continue up the ridge past several fields of prayer flags. The more gradual trails are generally to the left. Higher up, the trail crosses over to another ridge to the right and turns left at a point where the very steep trail from Yangchenphu goenpa joins from the right. The vegetation is still mostly blue pine with poplars in the undergrowth. When the trail starts levelling out, a ridge and a trail from the right join the ridge you are on (12.3). The trail makes a sharp left turn, and both trails run parallel for a while before joining. Remember not to miss the turn to the right on your way down, otherwise you may end up in Lungtenphu, a couple of kilometres up the main road from YHS. (40-60 min.)

The larger trail is often used to drag poles along. It soon splits and rejoins, and passes an old ruin of which the thick stone walls and parts of a tower (?) are still standing. Further on, the trail is at times deeply incised. Next, it passes along a narrow ridge and turns to the right. The trail going straight on is used to pull logs. It is less clear, very steep, and deeply eroded, so leave it alone. Follow the right trail which goes up and later a bit down through blue pine forest with some oaks, until a muddy spot and a pit dug in the trail. At this split near the pit (12.4), the right fork goes to a compound with prayer flags and the left fork to Thadranang goenpa, passing above a few more buildings until it reaches the walled compound of the goenpa (12.5). From the goenpa you can return, or you could continue on to Yusipang (see Hike 14).

12.3 Telecom reflector

At the split (12.4), turn left, up a small steep side trail just before the first buildings with the prayer flags. Pass a ruined building on your right, while more spruce and fir appear. Past some dead fir, oak trees, and shrubs, the trail emerges on the forest road some 10 metres before it dead-ends, right below the square telecommunications reflector (12.6; 45-60 min.).

12.4 Dobchula and Hontsho (Maps 12 and 5)

Turn left at 12.6 and follow the logging road. It first goes slightly down through oak and mixed conifer forest and then slowly climbs up for a few hundred vertical metres, mostly through fir forest. Just before reaching the pass there are two splits in the track (6.4; 1½-2 hrs.).

The first road to the right leads to the FM transmitter on top of the 3,908 m peak (12.7; See Hike 12.5 below). The second road that turns left 100 m further goes towards Sin-

chula pass, where it ends above Taba and Dechhenchho'ling. Going straight takes you across the pass and eventually down to Hontsho (6.5). See Hike 6.3 for details on the forest roads.

12.5 FM Transmitter on 3,908 m peak

From the end of the forest road (12.6) walk up to the Telecom reflector, and go around the wall. Continue going up the ridge, where you will find a trail past prayer flags and some rock outcrops. An often muddy trail off to the left will take you around the lower peaks. You could also follow the ridge up along a small trail which takes you to the first peak (3,708 m). From here you can descend and climb the next peak, just over 3,800 m., or you can turn right and follow the grassy ridge towards Yusipang (see Hike 14.3). A microwave repeater adorns one of these peaks. There may even be an access road or trail to the repeater.

From here go down and up to the next peak at 3,890 m, and down and up again to the highest peak at 3,908 m. Bhutan's main FM transmitter occupies the top of this peak, and the compound is closed off by a tall fence. You can walk around the fence to the end of the forest road (12.7). From here you can return (along the forest road may be easier than the way you came), or you could walk on to Hontsho (6.5), Taba, Dechhenchho'ling or even Drolay goenpa if you're mad. See Hikes 6.3 and 3.4 for details.

13 SAARC BUILDING TO TELECOM REFLECTOR**13.1 Telecom reflector (8 km one way, 1100 m up, 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.8)**

This trail can be walked in combination with Hike 12. However, it is not one of the most exciting ones and can be very hot on sunny days. The trail does not seem to be used a lot, so it may be hard to find. See Map 12.

Starting point

Leave your vehicle or get dropped off at or near the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) building (13.0). This building was originally built for a SAARC meeting in Thimphu, but the meeting was never held. Now it houses the National Assembly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Planning Commission Secretariat.

13.1 Telecom reflector

Start walking up the ridge next to the bus stop opposite the SAARC building. Pass under the fence around a reforestation plot and go up past prayer flags and electricity masts. Look back for a nice view of the Dzong. Leave the plot past the remains of the barbed wire fence. If you need some barbed wire, request city corporation for a salvage permit. The poles may make fair fuel wood. Continue up the slope, along a gullied trail, through oak and blue pine shrub. Stay mostly close to the ridge. Cross above or through a small valley, continue up the ridge, and cross a narrow ridge above another valley. Along the way, the trees and shrubs slowly get taller and poplars become more abundant. At times the trail becomes unclear as it is overgrown by oaks, blue pine, *Gaultheria fragrantissima* (shrubs with blue berries, which I believe are edible) and rhododendrons. Pass above the head of another valley to the right and keep on going up the ridge, mostly through open shrub vegetation: poplars, blue pine, bracken, oak, with some big blue pines. Pass a flat stretch above a group of prayer flags to the right (1½-2 hrs.).

Keep on going up, passing the head of another valley to the right. Now the trail, which is incised and overgrown with bamboo grasses, goes up very steeply. It becomes clearer when it enters a blue pine forest with bamboo undergrowth, but it does not seem to be used much. Higher up it passes some old eroded trails and spruce and oak trees become abundant. Finally, the trail emerges at the logging road some 175 metres north of its dead-end below the telecom reflector. (12.6; 1-1½ hrs.).

From here you can return, or consult Hike 12 for other options.

14 YUSIPANG TO THADRANANG GOENPA**14.1 Thadranang goenpa (11.5 km one way, 750 m up, 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.6)****14.2 Telecom reflector (12 km one way, 850 m up, 5-7 hrs, rating: 3.9)****14.3 3708 m peak (13 km one way, 1100 m up, 5-8 hrs, rating: 4.6)**

This is a good alternative to Hike 12, as it saves you the long climb from YHS. There are several excellent viewpoints along the way. See Map 12.

Starting point

Take a taxi or let yourself be dropped off in the centre of Yusipang (14.0; Eulsipang on the map).

14.1 Thadranang goenpa

Walk up the paved road which starts in the bend in the main road. Ignore the turn-off to the left. Continue up the dirt road when the tarmac road turns down to a huge windowless ventilated potato storage hall. At the next junction (14.1), take the left track and rock-hop across the stream flowing across it. Continue up to the goenpa past some spots that may be very muddy. Pick up a small side trail to the right in the bend just before the goenpa gate (14.2). Follow the fence, cross a small creek and go up along a valley. If you cannot find it, you could ask somebody to take you to the trail, since walking permission-less through people's backyards full of barking dogs, through their kitchen garden and apple orchard and climbing over their fences may not be particularly appreciated. The trail takes you through an orchard and up along a field, just left of the steep valley, to a small house. Continue to the top of the field, where you will find a small trail to the left along the forest edge (14.3). Cross the barbed wire fence using some pine tree stems that have been placed against it to prevent you from ripping your nice hiking clothes.

Zig-zag on up, first through a shrubby, then blue pine and oak forest. Pass a trail which joins from the right, then walk steeply up past old logs and some more open stretches into a more southerly exposed, blue pine-dominated area. On a clear day, you can see Gangkar Puensung (7541 m) towering over Dochula to the east. Just after the view point, the trail splits; turn right up the hill. The trail that continues straight on is clear at first, but appears to lead nowhere. A bit further up the hill the trail becomes clearer. Pass the remains of a cow or yak shed, and cross a side valley. Next you run into what seems to be a bigger trail (14.4). Turn left here. If you come down this way from Thadranang goenpa, look carefully for the smaller but clear side trail to the right below a stone retaining wall and obstructed by a tree trunk. The upper trail does not go very far; it gradually becomes more and more overgrown, switches back and eventually rejoins the trail down to the goenpa.

The trail continues its way up, crosses some open areas with maybe some muddy spots. In the forest, spruce have joined the big blue pines and the dense undergrowth of blue pine, roses, barberry, and *Piptanthus*, a yellow leguminous shrub that even yak find unpalatable. Next you reach a grassy ridge, Tagidhing (14.5). Going somewhat down and to the right gives you beautiful views down the Thimphu valley.

If you don't want to take the detour via the 3,708 m peak (Hike 14.3), continue along the

trail, which splits after five minutes (14.6). The upper trail leads to the Telecom reflector (see Hike 14.2 below). To go to Thadranang goenpa, take the left trail down, continuing in the same direction as before. This takes you through spruce forest, across a large meadow (14.7) and below a smaller one, and across many wet and muddy spots. Pass below three chortens, above a monastery building and through a few small side valleys with oaks to the main building of Thadranang goenpa (12.5). Pass above the goenpa or through its courtyard full of barking dogs to a big chorten and the main gate.

From here you can walk down on a trail to the left which most likely takes you to the Royal Bhutan Army camp in Lungtenphu. But why join the army if you can also descend past Yangchenphu High School (YHS)? To reach YHS pass in between other monastery buildings, apparently called Tshamkhang, past chortens and a group of prayer flags. Just past the prayer flags, about 300 m from the goenpa, the trail to YHS turns left, down the hill (12.4); the other trail continues up to the Telecom reflector (12.6). Do not forget to take the right turn (12.3) shortly after passing the walled ruin. See Hike 12.2 for details on this part of the trail.

14.2 Telecom reflector

At 14.6, take the right trail which goes slightly up through spruce forest, across logs, and along a short zig-zag to climb above a rock outcrop. From here, walk past or through several very muddy stretches, through juniper-dominated spruce and oak forests. At one or two junctions take the largest trail, if undecided the one going up. Pass below a monastery building built into a rock outcrop and through a blue pine forest to the telecom reflector, standing above an area littered with dead fir trees. From here you can return along the same route, or descend to YHS, as described in Hike 12.2 and the hike above.

14.3 3,708 m peak

From the grassy ridge at 14.5, take a rather overgrown trail going up the ridge to the right. It crosses a small pass and ends up at the 3,708 m peak on the main ridge (14.8), from where you can either descend to YHS (Hike 12) or continue up to the FM transmitter (12.7) and on to Hontsho via the logging road (Hike 6.3).

Map 15.1
15-Lungchuzekha.ai

15 DOCHULA TO LUNGCHUZEKHA/TRASHIGANG GOENPA

15.1 Lungchuzekha goenpa (7 km return, 470 m up, 3-4 hrs, rating: 2.2)

15.2 Trashigang goenpa and Hontsho (10 km one way, 550 m up, 4-5 hrs, rating: 2.8)

15.3 Simtokha via Hinglay La (21 km one way, 600 m up, 7-10 hrs, rating: 4.9)

15.4 Wangdi (21 km one way, 550 m up, 7-10 hrs, rating: 4.7)

Lungchuzekha goenpa is one of the best destinations around Thimphu: beautiful forest, and a spectacular view from the goenpa. The loop to Trashigang is easy and pretty. You can even get an earlier start (and better views) if you spend the night in the “busy” hotel just above Dochula pass.

Starting point

Park your transport or get dropped off at the large chorten in the middle of Dochula (15.0).

15.1 Lungchuzekha goenpa

Walk to the far end of pass, just south of the mani wall and chorten. Find the trail that goes uphill. If you cannot find it, head up the ridge, following some of the cattle/horse/yak trails until you find a recognisable *Homo sapiens* trail. Follow it up the ridge, then down and up again through a forest of hemlock, birch and rhododendrons. The trail follows the north side of the ridge and then heads back to the ridge into a small meadow with some junipers. After crossing or joining the ridge a few more times, it passes to the left of a knoll on a stretch of trail that can be very muddy. Next it enters a large meadow, where yak herders camp in winter (15.1). When returning, head for the lower side of this meadow.

Go to the end of the meadow, on your left. Here the trail continues on the right side of the ridge through a moss-covered red rhododendron forest with some gigantic hemlocks, junipers that may look like cypresses, and bamboo undergrowth. The trail continues up. Occasionally, some smaller trails head up to the ridge and rejoin later. Eventually it passes a yak fence and crosses a main ridge. Here it turns left, while going slowly down the other side of the ridge. Soon, the trail joins a larger one coming from Trashigang goenpa (15.2). About 100 m further, a smaller trail goes up to the left to Lungchuzekha goenpa (15.3), surrounded by prayer flags, a barbed wire fence, heavily logged slopes, some friendly monks, a cookie-begging cat, and an unfriendly barking dog, which becomes very friendly once you start feeding it your lunch.

On clear days the views from the goenpa are fantastic; after Talakha Peak probably the best in the Thimphu area. All major mountains of Bhutan can be seen: to left the summits of Jhomolhari (7,314 m), Kang Bum (6,500 m), and Gangchhenta (Great Tiger Mountain, 6,840 m; the shape of a tiger) appear above nearer mountains. Straight ahead, Masang Gang (7,165 m; the peak shaped like a trident) towers over Gasa Dzong (2,700 m), a tiny white speck in a sea of green. Further to the right are the high peaks of Lunana: Tsenda Kang (7,100 m), Teri Kang (7,300 m), Jejekangphu Gang (7,300 m), Kangphu Gang (7,212 m), and Zongphu Gang (Table Mountain, 7,100 m; the very long flat

mountain). Further to the northeast Gangkar Puensum, Bhutan's highest mountain and the highest unclimbed mountain in the world (7,541 m), dominates the skyline. Behind these mountains lie the plains of Tibet. The Black Mountains stretch along the eastern horizon. To the south lies Hinglay La, while the Dagala range fills the view to the southwest.

From here you can return to Dochula, continue to Trashigang goenpa and Hontsho (see Hike 15.2), return to Simtokha via Hinglay La (Hike 15.3), or continue on to Wangdi (Hike 15.4).

15.2 Trashigang goenpa and Hontsho

When descending from the goenpa, do not turn right at the trail to Dochula (15.2), but take the left fork instead. This very pleasant trail slowly descends through spruce, rhodo, hemlock and juniper forest, iris meadows and blue pine and oak forest all the way to Trashigang goenpa (15.4). Do not try to visit the first couple of buildings you come across, as they are meditation houses, and your presence will not be appreciated. Instead, head down to the main part of the settlement.

At the temple in the middle of the settlement (with beautiful new murals inside), turn sharply right and leave the village in an northeasterly direction. The trail that continues straight most likely goes to Yusipang. On the other side of the valley below you is Hontsho and the road to Thimphu. About 15 minutes outside of Trashigang is a good lunch spot overlooking the entire valley. After finishing your lunch, follow the trail down to the bridge at the bottom of the valley. From here take the main track up to Hontsho (15.6). There is also a shortcut along a ridge starting at the second bend in the track. Both end at the road, on the opposite side of the Younten teashop cum bar. In the third bend (15.5), past the chortens and mani wall, there is a side track along the slope that crosses the creek coming from the Hontsho checkpoint. This logging track eventually dead ends near a creek, from where two trails continue. A pleasant albeit muddy trail follows and crosses the creek several times until it reaches an open area with a bridge. Here the trail up to the left gets you to the road, the muddy trail along the valley to Dochula, the trail up ahead nowhere and the main trail to the right possibly to the trail from Dochula to Lungchuzekha. The trail that goes straight up the ridge from the end of the track keeps going up very steeply for a long time. After half an hour it gets a bit vaguer, but if you persist you may end up somewhere on the ridge south of Dochula.

If you plan to walk this hike in reverse, then leave your transport at the beginning of Hontsho. Take the trail between a teashop and a small valley at km marker 535. The trail continues down along a ridge with prayer flags, barbed wire fence and an electricity line. It joins a larger track somewhere below a mani wall. Follow this track down to the river, and up the other side after crossing the bridge. Take the left track when it splits. Here the trail becomes more of a creek in the rainy season. Where the track turns left, a small trail heads up a steep slope at a small land slide. Take this trail, cross an irrigation channel and zig-zag up past two forestry demarcation poles through mixed forests of oak, blue pine, spruce etc. Eventually you will reach the buildings of Trashigang (15.4).

A well-aged Scot and somewhat greener Kiwi once led a large group of walkers on this

hike. From Lungchuzekha they sped ahead and ran all the way down to Hontsho in 50 min. When the others arrived they realized that part of the group got lost along the way. So the two went back to Dochula, and ran the entire hike once more in 2½ hours! They never found the lost hikers, as they were unwillingly surveying a new route to Simtokha via Hinglay La.

15.3 Simtokha via Hinglay La (Maps 15.1 and 16)

At the side trail up to Lungchuzekha goenpa (15.3) continue along the trail to Wangdi for a few hundred metres, and turn right at the small chorten (15.7). If you went up to the goenpa, you could also drop down straight to the chorten. Ignore the larger trail down to the left at the chorten. The trail you want follows the ridge in a southerly direction. Follow this trail, ignoring any smaller side trails. It may not always be clear what is the main trail and if you keep taking the right hand forks too many times you will end up in a meadow and further along on a ridge way above Hinglay La. But nothing to worry about, just keep on following the trail down the ridge, passing two yak herders camps until you reach the forest road, about two km from the point that you would have hit it if you were coming down from Hinglay La. Actually one thing to worry about is the yak dog in the second camp. It is huge and very unfriendly. If you had made the right choices at the forks, you will eventually reach Hinglay La, marked by a chorten and some prayer flags (15.8). When reaching the main trail at the pass, turn right - if you turn left you'll end up in Wangdi. After about 1 km, the trail leaves the valley into a muddy meadow. After another 500 m turn left onto the forest road (15.9). This road takes you back to the prison at Chamgang. There you make a sharp right turn (16.5) and walk along the rough dirt road until you reach the main Thimphu-Paro highway just below Simtokha Dzong. If at point 15.9 you turn right and almost immediately left you can follow a shortcut horse trail along a creek to Chamgang village. There may even be an old trail that leads directly to Simtokha.

15.4 Wangdi (Map 15.2)

From the chorten at point 15.7, take the left trail down. This trail should descend into the Wangdi valley and meet the main trail from Hinglay La to Wangdi just below the village of Thangkha (15.10). Alternatively, you can follow hike 15.3 to Hinglay La, turn left, and descend along the main trail to the feeder road near Nahi. Continue walking down through farming areas to the main highway from Wangdi to Chirang and Gelphu. You will probably need to arrange some transport to pick you up from there.

Note

Before you attempt to walk to Wangdi, be aware that:

1. You need a road permit for Wangdi, as on the way back you have to pass the Wangdi immigration checkpoint.
2. In summer the trail lower down is probably crawling with leeches.
3. The first trail hasn't been checked out yet, so don't blame us if you get lost.

map 15.2
15-Wangdi.ai

Map 16
16-Talakha.ai

16 SIMTOKHA TO TALAKHA

16.1 Talakha goenpa (9 km return, 700 m up, 4-5 hrs, rating: 3.1)

16.2 Talakha goenpa to Talakha peak (17 km return, 1350 m up, 7-10 hrs, rating: 5.9)

16.3 End of forest-road to Talakha peak (12 km return, 1050 m up, 5-8 hrs, rating: 4.3)

The trail to Talakha goenpa is hot on sunny days, but the views from the goenpa are excellent. Hikers who reach the peak on a clear day are rewarded by the best mountain views in the entire Thimphu area; virtually all mountains between eastern Nepal and central Bhutan can be seen from here.

Starting point

If you start near the main road you have a long way to go and you better be fit. If you arrive by bus get out at the bus stop in Simtokha. Follow the road, or the steep concrete path to the Dzong from the road head (16a). If you follow the road, turn up the road to the right at the junction past the forestry checkpoint. Pass the Dzong and continue to the ILCS, the Jambeling Institute for Language and Culture Studies. Go around the building and a short way up the track behind it. The clear trail to the left should get you to Talakha goenpa. If you plan to go to Talakha peak, you can also drive to Talakha monastery, see Hike 16.2.

Simtokha Dzong is the oldest dzong in Bhutan. When Shabdrung Rimpoche was subduing demons in the Thimphu Valley, a demon disappeared into a big stone here. In 1629, the Shabdrung constructed a dzong at this site which was called Sinmo Dokha (demon in the stone). Today it houses the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies (16.0).

16.1 Talakha goenpa

At an archery range, turn right and left near some houses and gardens. Keep going up and don't cross the creek to your right. At an almost vertical stretch look for a gentler trail to the left. The trail that goes directly up from the archery range along barbed wire fences joins somewhere here. Continue up the ridge through blue pine and poplars, following a water pipe, ignoring trails that do not follow the ridge. Near an electricity mast climb across a fence, and continue up to the left (not to the next set of styles, which only gets you into an orchard). Turn right and stay above the orchard fence until you run into a maze of deeply eroded trails exposing red soil (16.1). Do not forget to turn right here on your way down: if you run into the end of a tarmacked road from the left just before an electricity mast, turn back up and follow the fence around the orchard. Following the ridge down will take you into the Dantak area after climbing a few fences.

Turn left at 16.1, follow this maze up through blue pine and oak forest, scale the large fence across up through blue pine and oak forest, scale the large fence across the trail by means of the provided ladder (16.2), and after about another half an hour emerge at the motorable track (16.3). Turn right onto the track, and immediately left again, up through

Note

Several large fences have been built across the trail between Simtokha and Talakha goenpa at or below 16.2. The ladders across the fence may fall apart in the future, or the route could be closed. Ask around to find out if the trail is still passable.

blue pine forest, across an open stretch and past a chorten. From the chorten continue to the entrance of the Talakha goenpa (16.4). You need a permit to enter the temple, but the views over Thimphu from the area in front of the monastery are excellent. After enjoying the view you can return, continue to Talakha peak, or follow the forest road down.

16.2 Talakha peak

A good four-wheel drive vehicle can get you up to Talakha monastery. However, the trail is terrible, especially in the rainy season. Take the road to the power substation, which starts at the main road near the big chorten below Simtokha Dzong (16a). Go east up the road past the forestry checkpoint and the Chamgang-Helela FMU office. (This should have been your firewood supplier but they logged a bit too effectively and now you're advised to use electric heaters instead). Ignore the right-hand, somewhat tarmacked road to the Dzong and continue past the power substation, a saw mill and a bridge, straight into Chamgang. At a junction just past a couple of houses (16.5) go straight, although the track is not as good as the main dirt road, which turns left and takes you towards Hinglay La. Chamgang "houses" a prison, which you probably should not try to visit: do not turn right across the creek. Continue straight on, cross the river higher up and keep going upstream. Ignore the track to the right which takes you to the community school. Further up there is a disjointed junction (16.6). The track to the left, down into the river and up the other side takes you to the track above Talakha monastery. To go to Talakha goenpa turn right up a winding road that becomes muddier all the time. Park when you have reached the highest point, marked by a sign in Dzongkha pointing to the goenpa (16.3). It takes a few minutes to walk from here to the goenpa above you (16.4).

If you want to drive up as high as possible and you have the best four-wheel drive in town, then you can turn left at 16.6. After crossing the river, keep going up the bad track, past the last cleared areas. Ignore even worse side tracks. Higher up you cross the river again. Keep going up. At a junction, take the right track (16.7), past some rock outcrops and a few rockfalls (You may have to clear the road), across three small creeks of which the middle one has some major rock overhangs. Going up along this slope you pass a rock face and soon you run into another junction. Park here or turn right again. Some way down the track you run into (or stop just before) a fallen tree blocking the track. This is the end of the trail for any four-wheel vehicle, and the end of the track itself is not too far off either (16.8).

The trail continues up the ridge behind the monastery. The dog that is tied up behind the goenpa is probably the most ferocious beast in the valley; although its chain looks solid, you wouldn't want to be anywhere nearby if it ever broke. To avoid a confrontation, you could go out the gate again, turn left, pass a house and emerge near a tap-stand above the monastery. The trail now goes slightly up for a while. Stick to the right trail through blue pine and oaks, across an open stretch. A bit further, take the left fork. Enjoy the next almost flat stretch through spruce forest. When it goes up again there are two splits; take the main trail up to the right at both places. For a while you may be hiking an old, eroded trail. Take any of the multiple trails as long as they go up, the steeper the better. Continue along the ridge through spruce forest with bamboo undergrowth until you emerge at the upper forest road (16.8). If you reach the road below its

end, turn right onto the road, and follow it until it dead-ends on the ridge (50-75 min.).

Cross the end of the road and continue going up through spruce forest with an undergrowth of bamboo. The trail is at places deeply incised, sometimes muddy, and is often used by cattle and yaks. Further along the spruce gives way to fir, mixed in places with birch trees. The bamboo is replaced by thorn roses and barberry shrubs and higher up, where the majority of the fir trees are dead, by juniper and rhododendrons. Follow the biggest trail up, first steep, later on flatter, then steeper again. Several times this trail stays below the ridge to the right, just to save you from some extra climbing across several knolls. You rejoin the ridge a couple of times and cross several meadows, giving you good views of the surroundings and mountains further away, including Jhomolhari when clear and Kanchenjunga when very clear. Finally, the fir trees thin out and are replaced by alpine shrub and meadows. After moving through a sandpit ("the beach"; 16.9) you cross a meadow. Talakha peak is straight ahead, only a few hundred metres above you. Take a moment to enjoy the views over the Thimphu valley and the mountains beyond (75-100 min.).

As you move up, the slope to your left below you is covered in low alpine shrubs. Keep on following the ridge up or take the biggest trail moving in the same general direction. The trail gets steeper and stonier again. You may have to climb across a stone and brush wall, which supposedly serves to keep the yak from wandering too far off into the alpine meadows. The trail takes you up and around a little knoll. Ahead you see a peak with a prayer flag (16.10). This is your first aim (45-60 min.).

In clear weather the views of the high Himalayas from here are stunning - the best in the Thimphu area. You can see most of Northwestern Bhutan from this spot. Straight ahead the rounded cone of Jhomolhari, Bhutan's most sacred mountain (7314 m), the sharp pinnacle of Jichhu Drake (6989 m), and Tserem Kang (7000 m) guard Bhutan's northern border. 150 km to the west, on the Sikkim-Nepal border, massive Kanchenjunga (8598 m) towers over the lower mountains of Paro and Ha, and if it is truly clear, you can look far into Nepal, where Makalu (8481 m) and possibly Mt. Everest (8848 m) are just visible against the western horizon. Further to the east the high Himalayas of Lunana and the Black Mountains dominate the skyline (see the description of Lungchuzekha goenpa in Hike 15.1 for a list of mountains). From here you can also plan your next Thimphu hike, as you can see almost all of them. The urban sprawl of Thimphu deep below you seems a world away.

You can continue along the main trail to a small cairn in the saddle just behind the peak (16.11). Below you is the Geynikha valley, while the ridge to the left drops into the Wangdi valley. The Dagala Thousand Lakes trail snakes along the barren alpine slopes straight ahead, into yak land. Talakha peak itself (4,278 m) is about 500 m off to your right. Follow the ridge in southwestern direction, past some rocky peaks and across a boulder field, to reach it (16.12; 30-45 min.). From the cairn you could descend to Geynikha, but that would be madness, and you'd have to arrange transport from there. See Hike 26.2 for details.

Map 17.1

17-1-Khasadrapchhu1.ai

17 KHASADRAPCHHU TO THIMPHU HOSPITAL**17.1 Khasadrapchhu to Thimphu hospital (15 km one way, 240 m up, 5-7 hrs, rating: 3.0)**

An easy hike through the farms along the Thimphu river. The entire hike is quite long, but you can start or leave the trail at any of the three bridges along the way.

Starting point

Get dropped off at the bridge across the Thimphu river in Khasadrapchhu (17.0). Alternatively, you can start at the bridges in Danglok (17.3), Rama (17.5), or Debtshig (17.7).

17.1.1 Khasadrapchhu to Danglok

Cross the bridge over the Thimphu Chhu. Turn upstream (right) and follow a rocky trail hacked out of the rockface. This trail takes you to a fence which you need to climb if you want to continue. Pass just above a few small houses in an apple orchard and head up a hill which is being undermined by the river. Climb over another fence and follow the trail across a small valley. At the start of the next agricultural area (17.1), turn left immediately after the houses. The trail to the right takes you to a bridge, and back to the road. The main trail follows the contours and an irrigation channel, above the fields. If you are in doubt, ask for the trail to Danglok (Danglu on the map). There are other, bigger trails lower in the valley, but to get back on the right trail you would have to crawl through a hedge of thorny bushes and wade through a branch of the river or climb up a steep rocky slope. If you end up at this “dead end”, the recommendation is to climb up unless you have very bad vertigo.

At the end of the fields the trail veers up a bit over a rocky promontory, because the channel here is heavily overgrown and difficult to follow. In a small valley on the other side the trail joins the channel again. If you are coming the other way, look for a trail up the hill just as a barbed wire fence crosses the channel.

Continue following the channel until you reach the fields of the next village, Danglok. After climbing over another fence across the channel, you can either turn right and reach the village through small trails between the fields, or continue along the channel for a while, before turning right into the village. Whatever you do, do not barge through the middle of the farmers’ fields. If you came the lower route, you will see a large crumbling farm house on your left at the beginning of the village. (17.2; it will be to your right if you came the higher route). It is said to be the house of Khendum Sonam Peldon, who was the consort of Lama Phajodrugom Zhingpo, a famous lama from Tibet who introduced the Drukpa Kajupa school of Buddhism in Bhutan in the 13th century. Hence the house cannot be torn down, although there is a lack of funds to properly restore it.

Walk through the village, and look for a large trail heading for the bottom of the hill with Sengang goenpa. If you are tired already, you could turn right on the far side of the village, cross the bridge (17.3) and hitch a ride back to Thimphu.

Map 17.2
17-2-khasadrapchhu2.ai

17.1.2 Danglok to Debtshig (Maps 17.1 and 17.2)

The main trail continues around the bottom of the hill with Sengang goenpa. If you are up to it, you can climb up to the goenpa for a good view over the valley. Walk through the village; just past a wooden shack turn sharply left and keep going uphill. A disused irrigation channel is located just above the trail. It was abandoned around 1980, when one or more of the communities that were responsible for its maintenance were displaced. Danglok itself could not manage and is left with registered wetland that has not been irrigated for 20 years.

Keep zig-zagging up to the goenpa, and avoid all trails which are more or less level. The field in front of the goenpa (17.4) makes for a good picnic spot with excellent views over the entire valley. To get back to the main trail, walk around to the back of the goenpa, and look for the trail that follows the contours to the right. After following the hill for a while, it drops steeply into the valley before joining the main trail far below.

Continue along the trail through the fields just above the river to the bridge near Rama (17.5). If you have had enough, cross the bridge and hitch a ride back to town. Otherwise, continue along the main track through the orchard, past some houses and out a gate. Past the next bluff you can take the left fork that passes under a water pipe and follows the hill, or you can try to follow a lower, more direct trail. Either option should get you to the village of Debtshig, where the two trails meet again at a chorten in the middle of the village (17.6). The trail takes you to a suspension bridge (17.7), another place to leave the trail.

17.1.3 Debtshig to Thimphu hospital (Map 17.2)

If you want to continue, follow the trail between the river and the fenced compound, and watch the birds (ruddy shelduck, common merganser, cormorants) near the Babesa sewage treatment ponds. About halfway down the second pond, look carefully for a trail heading up the hill towards Tshali goenpa (17.8). If you continue along the river, you'll end up far below the goenpa, and have to climb a steep hill covered in thorny shrubs to get back on track. Walk up to the goenpa (17.9), and enjoy the view over the upper part of the valley.

Just past the goenpa, you'll find the irrigation channel again. Follow it around the corner, high above the river. Around the corner you can either take a large trail down the hill (17.10) and walk to the road at Lungtenphu, or continue along the irrigation channel. After climbing over one more fence, the channel takes you past the backyards of a Thimphu neighbourhood to the road above the JDW referral hospital (17.11).

18 KHASADRAPCHHU TO DARDO GOENPA**18.1 Dardo goenpa loop (11 km loop, 750 m up, 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.5)**

This hike is a pretty alternative to the first part of the Khasadrapchhu-Thimphu hike with good views over the Thimphu river valley. It may even be nicer the other way round as the hike up from Danglok is not as steep. Refer to Map 17.1.

Starting point

Drive to Khasadrapchhu and cross the bridge. Continue on the road into the Gida valley, and leave your transport by the power station or be dropped off at the place where the road turns right into the Gida valley (18.0).

18.1 Dardo goenpa loop

Find a trail up the ridge; the main trail heads up just past the water pipe. Ignore any trails following the contours. If you encounter a set of large old water tanks 10 minutes above the road, turn right to the crest of the ridge, where you should find a reasonable trail going up. Follow this trail up until you encounter the end of a dirt road (18.1). Cross the road, and continue going up to another large water tank and an old water supply channel for the power station. Look for another trail up the ridge. There does not appear to be a real trail, but there are a number of small animal tracks. Continue heading up the ridge, ignoring the nice and level water supply channel. Even where there is no trail, the route is easy to follow as the hillside is grassy with a few clumps of shrubs and blue pines. Continue going up, until you reach a group of trees with some prayer flags about 200 vertical metres higher (18.2). There are good views over the valley from here.

Continue climbing the hill until it levels out near an old chorten (18.3). By now you should have found the trail again. Continue to follow the trail along the crest of the ridge, until you reach Dardo goenpa, which is being reconstructed, about 1 km further (18.4).

To return to Danglok (Danglu on the map), walk past the goenpa, and find the trail that heads down the ridge on the right. Continue down the ridge all the way to the bottom, until you reach a junction with a larger trail just before the creek (18.5). Turn right and walk into Danglok village. From there you can either cross the bridge and catch a bus or Tata truck back to Thimphu, or walk back to Khasadrapchhu along the river; see Hike 17.1.1.

19 DANGLOK TO THAP TSA RIDGE**19.1 Thaptsa ridge and Thimphu (14 km one way, 1500 m up, 6-10 hrs, rating: 5.7)**

This trail is not recommended on hot sunny days, and even worse with a hangover on a sunny day. Refer to Map 17.1.

Starting point

Cross the suspension bridge downstream from Namseling, about 15 km from Thimphu (17.3).

19.1 Thaptsa ridge

Cross the irrigation channel and walk up to Danglok village (Danglu on the map). After the first house turn right and start going up the hill with Sengang goenpa. Just past a wooden shack turn sharply left and keep going uphill. Cross the old irrigation channel which, some 20 years ago, used to deliver water to the fields above Danglok. Keep zig-zagging up to the goenpa, and avoid all trails which are more or less level. (17.4; 30-45 min.).

Pass the goenpa and keep going up the ridge for a long, long time through open blue pine forest (or meadow with some pine trees). The trail becomes less and less clear, but as long as you are close to the ridge you're going in the right general direction. After another hour of climbing up you may find a field of prayer flags.

Keep on following the ridge up, where poplars become more popular. Next, the forest to the left of the ridge is dominated by oak, while the forest to the right consists mostly of blue pine, indicating dryer conditions. As the trail keeps fading and reappearing, the oaks take over more and more of the forest. Blue pines are replaced by spruce and rhododendrons. Keep on heading for the ridge, although the trail may no longer be visible.

More and more blue or grey sky becomes visible and fir trees become more abundant when you finally reach (if you follow the same ridge as we did) a slightly more pronounced ridge with a trail recognisable as such. When coming out of the forest into an area with larch trees, stunted blue pine and subalpine scrub, there is a rock outcrop to your left. Once you have reached the top of the ridge (11.7), look for a trail on, or just behind, the crest. If you follow the ridge in either direction, you should run eventually into the trail. Here you can turn right along the ridge to return to Thimphu, or left to continue on to Thaptsa Peak and Pumola. See Hike 11.6 for a description.

20 TSHELUNG NANG TO PUMOLA GOENPA

20.1 Tshelung nang to Youth Centre via Pumola (13 km one way, 1,000 m up, 5-8 hrs, rating: 4.4)

This is Hike 11.7 in reverse; see also the description for that hike and Map 11.2.

Starting point

Drive to Khasadrapchhu along the Thimphu to Paro road, and cross the bridge. Continue up the Gida valley until the end of the paved road, ignoring a good paved road going up the hill through a gate. Behind the gate is a cement block plant, one of only two factories presently established at this five-year old industrial site, which used to consist of good agricultural dryland and orchards.

Continue on the rough dirt road, cross the bridge across the river (22a), and drive on until the track splits about 1.5 km past the bridge (22b). A sign high on a tree directs you to a primary school straight ahead. Follow the road past the school to the bridge across the Bimelang Chhu. Four-wheel drives can easily navigate the road, but small Maruti cars loaded down with eager Sunday hikers have been known to get stranded a couple kilometres before the bridge. If your transport reaches the bridge, get dropped off near the mani wall, rather than plunging through the rickety bridge (11.15).

20.1 Pumola Pass

Cross the bridge and follow the logging track up the valley past chortens, dryland fields and fenced meadows, through mostly blue pine forest. The track crosses the river and then becomes part of it. When the track leaves the river it makes a few zig-zags and after the second zag, opposite a double stemmed spruce, search for a small side trail disappearing into the bushes above the track on your left (11.14). The trail is about 4 m above the road on a small ledge. If you get to a split in the track you've gone 50 m too far. In the mid-nineties, this area was heavily used for charcoal production (1-1½ hrs.).

20.1.1 How to get lost

Most people following the forest track to its end get lost. Although you could follow the river for a few hundred metres and then climb a short distance up the north slope of the valley opposite a heavily eroded slope to join the main trail, it does not look like an enjoyable stroll. To get lost, cross the creek and follow minor trails steeply up the slope, crossing small side valleys and finally emerging in a major disaster area strewn with cut and fallen trees and remains of a few shacks. If you are not yet lost you will be soon, but you can just bushwhack up through dense rhododendrons and juniper to a clear trail, where you turn left and pretty soon emerge in the pasture of Pumola pass (1-1½ hrs.).

20.1.2 How to actually reach Pumola Pass

The trail starting a couple of metres above the road soon enters a large meadow. Once upon a time there was a trail that climbed to the top, but this has pretty much overgrown. The idea is to climb up to the middle of the meadow, all the time looking for a good trail that runs along the contours. You could look for a large single pine with a long, bare stem; the correct trail runs along here. Once you found the trail, turn right onto it, and follow it into the forest (11.13). Cross a creek, take the left trail, and after a

short steep climb turn right at a T-junction. Cross a rather open forest slope and an old bridge, and take the left trail along the cascading stream into the forest. Climb steeply up through an oak and hemlock forest to a lookout point. Further along the trail splits, but rejoins, passes another lookout rock, runs along a small creek and emerges in the Pumola meadow (10.10; 1½-2 hrs.). From here you have several options to return to Thimphu, see Hike 11 for details.

Map 21

21-Tshalunang-goempa.ai

21 TSHELUNG NANG TO TSHALUNANG GOENPA/BIMELANG TSHO**21.1 Tshalunang goempa (11 km return, 450 m up, 4-5 hrs, rating: 2.7)****21.2 Bimelang Tsho (26 km return; 1700 m up, 10-14 hrs, rating: 8.2)**

A relatively easy hike through farms and forests in a beautiful valley. Although trying to go to Bimelang Tsho and back in a day is madness, it is a pretty hike.

Starting point

Somehow get to the bridge across the Bimelang Chhu near Tshelung nang on the rough logging road which runs from Gidakom up along the river (11.15). See starting point of Hike 20 for an explanation on how to get there.

21.1 Tshalunang goempa*21.1.1 Along the east side of the Bimelang Chhu*

Cross the rickety bridge across the river, and walk a couple of hundred metres up the road to the east (Pumola). Cross a small bridge to your left across the side creek, Zonglung Chhu (21.1). This trail, which goes slightly up, turns left and crosses a small bridge (or in the other order) and takes you past a small chorten, near which you make a right turn. The trail goes past and over rocks and through and along fields towards a couple of houses in Tshelung nang village.

The route passes above these houses and goes downstream past an old water-driven grain mill. Cross the creek over a plank and continue along a stone wall to a chorten. Follow the trail through fields and across field water drains, up to the next house with a big *Tsenden* (cypress) tree. Pass above the house and the watchdog, then down and up to the next couple of houses and a chorten. Some of the dogs here do not just bark, but occasionally bite stray consultants, preferably great Danes. His boss had the right attitude for a hiker: he dumped the great Dane in the nearest hospital and rushed back to join the rest of the group. Pass above the lower two houses and below the ruin of another house. Just past the second house, turn left, pass a waterfall, and cross the creek (21.2). Walk past another water-driven grain mill and two chortens, fields, stonewalls, bushes and fences. Ignore side trails into the fields. The trail passes into the forest and goes down to the river, which you cross with a bridge (30-45 min.). The trail goes steeply up to a meadow. Cross the meadow and take the trail between the creek to your left and some fields. The alternative steep route, described below, joins here from the left.

21.1.2 Along the west side of the Bimelang Chhu

If you like to start off with a steep climb, there is an alternative trail that stays on the west side of the Bimelang Chhu. The trail starts along the river, just past the mani wall, passes below a few rock overhangs and goes up, steeply zig-zagging up a ridge. Once on the top, it levels out for a little while, passing in between dryland fields. Next, the trail turns left and goes steeply up again toward some houses. Possibly, you could take the trail to the right just before the houses, but there is no guarantee that you would not get lost in the fields. Go up between the first two houses to a chorten and a tap-stand (11.16). Turn right here, past the back of the second and the third house. The trail veers

somewhat to the left, but then goes to the right again, leading to a house.

The trail gives a good view of the fields below and on the other side of the river. Turn left just before the house and go up, then turn right and down into a channel/trail. Do not go on past the gate. Continue past fences, fields and meadows into the blue pine forest. Pass under a fallen tree and cross a creek. Just before this point a small trail joins from the right; this may be connected to the trail that leaves the main trail just before the first houses. The trail continues down the slope and comes out of the forest above a fenced-off meadow. In the next meadow it seems to disappear. Just go up and slightly to the left toward some houses. Pass a ruin, some dogs, two houses, another ruin, and continue across a creek, where you turn left and join the other trail (21.3; 30-45 min.).

21.1.3 Tshalunang goenpa

After the junction, go up (straight on coming from the first trail and left from the second trail), then turn right after a stone wall, and follow a slightly ascending trail in between the fields. Do not turn left towards the houses. On the way back, keep going left and down. Cross another creek and stay on the highest trail. Go on up along one of several cattle tracks to a trail just below the highest field. Soon you are in a blue pine forest. The trail passes a big flat rock and forestry pole FD 9. (On the way back, take the trail down to the left between pole FD 9 and the rock.) Cross two creeks and go up along a deeply incised trail. Further on, the trail passes a big chorten (21.4; 30-45 min.).

After the trail crosses a creek, it forks. As usual, take the largest trail (left), which passes a fallen tree and a wet, muddy spot. From here to the monastery the trail winds up through mostly deciduous forest dominated by oaks and rhododendrons. It passes three stone piles with heaps of twigs on top (add yours too), and crosses a big creek across a flat stone slab. After crossing the creek you reach a meadow with prayer flags and some big rocks (21.5).

Guru Rimpoche meditated in the cave below the first couple of rocks, the Thunderbolt cave. To get dirty clothes but cleansed of all your sins, enter the cave from the top and exit at the bottom without getting stuck.

Continue along the trail to the left of the rocks which takes you to the monastery (21.6). First you pass a newer building; for the temple go up the hill towards the gate. 11 is the lucky number here if you enter and throw the dice (about 25-35 min.).

21.2 Bimelang Tsho

At the monastery, go down to the bridge and cross the river. Follow the trail past rocks and a few small meadows, and cross a side stream over a two-beam bridge. The trail continues up and down through some muddy places before crossing back to the left side of the river (21.7; 30-45 min.).

Caution

Before deciding to continue to Bimelang Tsho, please re-read the sections "What to take" and "Which Routes to Choose" in "About this Booklet". This route has been rated as *Madness*. For milder hikers it would make a good overnight hike instead.

Be aware that the weather at the lake can turn nasty very fast. Be prepared!

Follow the incised and often muddy trail and ignore a smaller trail to the right. Just before a meadow a large trail climbs the slope; don't take this, but turn right into the meadow (21.8). The trail to the left may go all the way to the top of the ridge. If you are adventurous, you could try to climb the ridge from here, and return to Tshelung nang via Jili Dzong.

On the other side of the small meadow with an old tent frame, the trail goes up fairly steeply, and ends up quite high above the river. After passing a creek there is another trail to the right: it is not clear where it will take you. The main trail crosses some muddy spots while the undergrowth is dominated by bamboo. It continues up into fir forest mixed with rhododendrons, crosses several streams toward a chorten, just below which you climb across a stone wall on a trunk-ladder. Follow a trail or stream beds and go down again, fairly close to the river. Then the trail goes up again, crosses a stream, heads up a ridge and further along goes down again to the river. Upstream from here, the river is quieter, before it plunges down into the forest (21.9; 1½-2 hrs.).

For the remainder of the hike, refer to Map 10.

The trail crosses the river once, twice, thrice, four times. At the first spot it may be hard to find a dry way across. You may want to try to stay on the left side of the river because the trail crosses back fairly soon. The third crossing (21.10) you better make because the main trail stays on the right side of the river for quite a while, before crossing back with a bridge (21.11). After a short distance, the trail goes steeply up a rocky slope past a waterfall (21.12) and across a moraine, past an often dry, shallow lake. Soon it descends to Bimelang Tsho, where it meets the Druk path (21.13; 45-60 min.).

From here you should return the same way; it is considered extreme madness to walk to Thimphu in one day. Two Kiwis once managed to return to Tshelung nang from here by way of Jili Dzong, but they arrived at Tshelung nang well after dark, and ran part of the way. If you get stuck here and are forced to spend the night, a bit further up the valley there is a yak herders' shelter without a roof that is used by trekking groups (21.14).

Map 22
22-bemri.ai

22 GIDA VALLEY-BEMRI LHAKHANG

22.1 **Gidakom forest road to Bemri lhakhang** (4.9 km return, 330 m up, 2-3 hrs, rating: 1.6)

22.2 **Dongka lhakhang** (14km return, 700 m up, 5-7 hrs, rating: 3.8)

There are at least three ways to reach Bemri lhakhang. This is the easy way; the other two, described in Hikes 23 and 24, are much more difficult. Although it is a long drive to the starting point (depending on road conditions it takes 2-2½ hours), this is one of the most rewarding hikes in the area: short, easy, and with a fantastic view at the top.

Starting point

See Map 11.2 for the access road.

Drive to Khasadrapchhu along the Thimphu to Paro road, and cross the bridge. Continue up the Gida valley until the end of the paved road, ignoring a good paved road going up the hill through a gate. Continue on the rough dirt road, cross the bridge across the river (22a), and drive on until the track splits about 1.5 km past the bridge. A sign high on a tree directs you to a primary school straight ahead. At this point, take a sharp left, up a side valley (22b). Drive up the road until 5 km later you encounter another split (22c). The road that continues up the valley leads to a logging area above Jidekha. Once again take the sharp turn to the left. Take a look at your odometer here; continue up this road for another 5.8 km. By then the road should round a corner into a side valley with a large yak meadow complete with herders hut just below the road. Park your transport in the bend of the road above the meadow (22.0).

22.1 Bemri lhakhang

Find a small but clear trail heading up the hill just past the bend in the road. Zig-zag your way up for about 15-20 minutes to the top of the ridge (22.1). Turn left, up the trail that pretty much follows the crest of the ridge. After about 1.2 km the trail splits. Take the left hand trail that continues to climb the ridge gradually. A few minutes later you pass through a small meadow, and enter the forest again. Soon you emerge into a larger meadow, from where you can see the lhakhang for the first time, on the crest of the ridge ahead. Continue to follow the trail in the direction of the lhakhang. Eventually a trail from the left joins your trail (22.2); turn right here. On your way back, do not miss this turn-off; the other trail leads to the top of the ridge but then disappears.

A couple of minutes afterwards you reach the small lhakhang (22.3). This lhakhang was reconstructed in 1996. When the weather is clear, the views of the Dagala range to the south, and the high Himalayas to the north are fantastic. Far below to the left is the Thimphu river valley, and to the right the Paro valley. The ridge straight ahead leads to Dongka lhakhang. You could continue on to this lhakhang (Hike 22.2), or return the way you came.

22.2 Dongka lhakhang

Look for a trail that descends on the northern (Paro side) of the ridge just before reaching Bemri lhakhang. If you retrace your steps from the lhakhang towards the forestry road for about 50-100 m, you should see a trail going down the hill on your left. The trail heads down the hill for about 100 m, and then veers to the left towards the crest of the

ridge running towards Dongka lhakhang. Follow the large trail that runs along the crest of the ridge. On the right side you look down into the Paro valley, on the left nearly straight down into the Karphu valley. After about 1-1½ hours, the trail momentarily veers to the right side of the ridge, and then climbs back to the top. Soon after this you reach a junction (22.4); the trail to the right descends towards Paro, while the trail to the left takes you to the lhakhang. Turn left (On your way back, make sure to turn right here), pass a chorten, and continue for another 10 minutes to the lhakhang (22.5). From here the views are excellent as well. This lhakhang is special because a mummified hand has been preserved in the temple. The story goes that one night a thief stole a religious relic from the lhakhang. As he ran away the sun spontaneously began to rise, exposing him and his crime. To avoid being seen by the locals he went to throw the relic away. Much to his dismay he found that the relic was stuck to his hand. In desperation he hacked his hand off to rid himself of the relic. Monks later found the relic and the hand and took them back to the lhakhang. It would be appropriate to make some offering.

After enjoying the view, you can retrace your steps, or if you don't have any transport waiting for you on the forestry road, you could continue on to Geonsakha goenpa and Kharbi; this is hike 24.2 in reverse.

23 GIDA MARBLE MINE TO BEMRI LHAKHANG AND KHARBI

23.1 Gida mine to Kharbi via Bemri lhakhang (17 km one way, 1350 m up, 7-10 hrs, rating: 5.9)

This is a description of a walk done with a crazy Kiwi at the end of 1995. Note that this trail probably involves quite a bit of bushwhacking, and thus is much harder than its rating suggests. Go ahead if you're mad or a lunatic. If you start at the bottom of the valley, it is definitely madness! See Map 22.

Starting point

You can start at the bridge across the Thimphu Chhu in Khasadrapchhu, but if you are being dropped off by a four-wheel drive vehicle you can save yourself a lot of effort (but cause a lot of pollution) by driving up all the way to the marble mine. Whichever your means of transport, cross the bridge to Gidakom valley, go down river past the Forestry Range Office and tree nursery and turn right into Gidakom valley. Cross the first bridge to your left (23a) and start your way up past the marble factory and a long abandoned animal husbandry project. Gidakom marble has a high calcium carbonate content and is well-suited for industrial uses, such as filler in toothpaste. However, the first owner insisted on producing marble tiles, on each of which he was certain to make a loss, until he went bankrupt. Anyway, keep following the rough road up to the mine at 2,720 m (23.0). Make sure not to be blown up when any blasting is going on. They may have red flags around if they are doing this.

23.1 Bemri lhakhang

Follow a small trail up the ridge above the mine. This trail may at times be vague and will get vaguer as time drags on. At some point it is more or less gone and the ridge above you has turned into a cliff. This is the right time to start bushwhacking or following some animal trails through the forest to the right. Keep going up a bit and aim for anything that looks like blue sky, or grey if you picked a wrong day, at the end of the forest. After climbing over fallen trees, hanging on to small shrubs and dragging yourself through mud there should be a meadow. And at the edge of the meadow there may even be some kind of trail. Keep on following the small trail further up and at some point you notice a small lhakhang somewhere to the left; this is Bemri lhakhang.

To continue on to Dongka lhakhang, follow the clear trail along the ridge straight ahead; see Hike 22.2. From there you can follow Hike 24.2 in reverse to reach Kharbi.

24 KARPBU VALLEY AND DONGKA LHAKHANG**24.1 Karphu valley logging road (10.5 km return, 850 m up,; 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.7)****24.2 Dongka lhakhang (15 km return, 1750 m up, 7-11 hrs, rating: 6.6)****24.3 Bemri lhakhang and Gidakom valley (19 km one way, 1850 m up, 8-13 hrs, rating: 7.4)**

The first hike is a short forest walk, while the second hike takes you to the monasteries on the ridge above the Karphu valley. See Hikes 22 and 23 for other ways to get to these monasteries. Use Map 22.

Starting point

Drive or be driven to the small suspension bridge at Kharbi along the Thimphu-Paro road, 3 km past the bridge at Khasadrapchhu (24.0). Leave your vehicle along the side of the road, or if you are brave, you can try to drive down to the river on a tractor road. There is a rickety car bridge across the river too, but it's not advisable to risk life and car.

24.1 Karphu valley logging road

Cross the suspension bridge and follow the tractor road up the valley. In the rainy season the trail turns into a creek, but you should be able to find a way through the water. The road continues past farm houses and secondary growth to Karphu, 2½ km up the road (24.1). Here you'll find a repair workshop where they are constantly repairing the little Kubota tractors used to haul logs out of the valley. At Karphu the main trail turns right, and continues up the valley. After another 1½ km you'll come across a small logging camp (24.2). From the logging camp the trail continues another 2 km up the valley. Although there is some logging activity in the upper valley, the forest is still quite beautiful. About 1½ km from the logging camp, the road suddenly becomes much better, and is paved with crushed rocks. A bit further uphill it crosses a small stream and splits. Take the right fork; the left fork ends in a logging area. The right fork curves up to the left, continues uphill for about a kilometre, and stops in the middle of the forest (24.3). According to loggers, somewhere along this last stretch a path should split off to the right and lead up to Bemri lhakhang, but we couldn't find it.

24.2 Dongka lhakhang

Cross the suspension bridge and follow the tractor track for about 100 m, until a foot track climbs up the left hand bank (24.4). Follow this trail up until you reach a mani wall among the fields and houses of Sakenang. Keep climbing up the ridge, past some prayer flags; head for the ruins on the ridge ahead. The main trail passes to the left below them. Zig-zag up the main trail through blue pine and some young poplars, ignoring a small trail to the right. After about 1 hour the path levels out somewhat, and soon afterwards, crosses over a small saddle (24.5). Pass an old chorten and the ruins of the burnt-down Geonsakha goenpa (24.6). From here, follow the trail up to the ridge, from where you can look down to Chhuzom and into the Paro valley (24.7). Ignore the side trail to the left which will take you down there.

Turn right and continue heading up, first along the side of a steep slope, and later on the crest of the ridge. Keep going straight, ignoring any side trails. The trail continues to

pretty much follow the crest of the ridge. There are excellent views in all directions along this stretch. Eventually you pass a chorten, and 10 minutes later you reach the lhakhang. See Hike 22.2 for the story of the preserved hand inside the temple.

From here you could return, or, if the weather is good, it is not too late and you are still (very) fit, continue to Bemri lhakhang. Bemri is the small white dot on top of the ridge off to your right.

24.3 Bemri lhakhang and Gidakom valley

To get to Bemri lhakhang, take the trail past the lhakhang, and follow the ridge around the Karphu valley; see Hike 22.2 for a description.

After you have enjoyed the excellent views at Bemri, it is time to decide how you will get back to civilisation. If the caretaker is there, you could ask him the best way down. If he's not there, you'll have to find out yourself. The easiest way down is to the Gidakom forest road (Hike 22.1), but assuming you don't have a vehicle waiting for you there, you'd have to walk at least 16-20 km along the road before finding some transport back to Thimphu. Lower down in the Silinang Chhu valley there is a good trail along the north bank of the river (24.8), but it may only be a cattle trail which disappears as cattle spread out into the forest to browse on the plentiful bamboo. The trail reaches the road near Bjimenang (24.9; Jhazipang on the map). There is a small bar here, sometimes even a taxi. So one could try to bushwhack down, but you may encounter cliffs, waterfalls, impenetrable bamboo and/or other obstacles!

A group of eight maniacs once ended up at the end of the forest road late in the afternoon, and bushwhacked all the way down to Bjimenang. They were lucky not to end up spending the night on top of a high cliff. Other adventurers suggest that you follow the ridge down from the peak behind Bemri to Kharbi, but this may include some serious rock climbing. There is also supposed to be a track down to the end of the logging track from Kharbi (see Hike 24.1), but if so, it is not clear where it would be. Don't try to go this way if you haven't been shown where the trail is, as there are many cliffs in the area! Finally, there is a possibility to make it down to the marble mine, but it appears better to try this the other way around, starting at the mine (see Hike 23).

Caution

It is notoriously difficult to get back to Thimphu from Bemri lhakhang if you don't have a vehicle waiting on the forestry road. So far, all our attempts to go down have involved major bushwhacking!

Map 25
25-kunzangdechhen.ai

25 KUNZANGDECHHEN GOENPA

25.1 Sisina to Kunzangdechhen goenpa (10 km return, 750 m up, 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.5)

A rather easy hike through apple orchards and open forest to an isolated goenpa.

Starting point

Drive or take a taxi towards Khasadrapchhu on the Thimphu to Paro road. You may want to take a look at your odometer here, because there are several similar side roads along the next stretch of the highway. Exactly 6 km after Khasadrapchhu, a rough dirt road heads up the hill (25.0); leave your transport here. If you have a four-wheel drive you could even drive up the dirt road, but it is rough, and you set out to do a hike, so why not walk up.

25.1 Sisina to Kunzangdechhen goenpa

Follow the dirt road until it ends in Selekha. From time to time there are short-cuts, which you could take to save some time. The road ends in a large, wet meadow, marked by a tall prayer flag and a small irrigation channel running across the field (25.1). Walk into the field and head for the barbed-wire fence along the left-hand edge. The trail that goes straight veers to the right and ultimately gets lost in the forest.

Find your way across the fence; there should be a notched pole to help you scale it. Follow a small trail up to the rather new, large house that looks more like a holiday home than a farmhouse. Walk around it, hoping that no ugly dogs are around, and continue up the hill through the apple orchard. Keep climbing up, aiming at a small cabin at the top of the orchard. Leave the cabin to your right, cross the irrigation channel, and pass through a hole in the fence above the orchard (25.2). On the other side turn right on the reasonably good trail, and walk up to a row of old prayer flags which may have disappeared by now (25.3). From here you should head up to the top of the ridge (25.4). From time to time the trail may not be clear, but it should be easy to make your way up to the crest of the ridge (30-90 min.).

Once you reach the top of the ridge, turn right, and follow its crest. You should come across a good trail that continues up along the crest; the trail on the map is in the wrong place. From here the trail is clear, and easy to follow. Continue along the trail for about 2 km, all the way up to the goenpa (25.5; 1½-2½ hrs.).

The goenpa is interesting in that it does not have the traditional red band below the roof, and that it looks more like a farmhouse than a goenpa. It is maintained by a friendly elderly couple, who will gladly show you around. Note the impressive weaponry in the temple room. The views from the balcony on the third floor are impressive.

It is easiest to return to the road along the same way.

Map 26.1**26-1-geynikha.ai****26 GEYNIKHA VALLEY**

- 26.1** Geynikha to Chhochhekha village (11 km return, 750 m up, ; 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.5)
26.2 Talela pass (26 km return, 1700 m up, 10-14 hrs, rating: 8.1)
26.3 Pagalabtsa pass (24 km return, 1850 m up, 9-14 hrs, rating: 8.2)

The first hike is easy, and leads through traditional farming communities. The latter two hikes are more strenuous, but offer some good views.

Starting point

See Map 25 for the route to the starting point.

Along the Thimphu-Paro road, 8.5 km past Khasadrapchhu, a rough dirt road climbs the hill to the left, across the road from a shop (26a). When coming from Thimphu make a very sharp left turn up to a chorten which announces Geynikha primary school to be somewhere up the track. Although the track is generally good, you will need a four-wheel drive with high clearance to negotiate some of the rocks along the way. Take a long drive up this track past the school and a big chorten at the beginning of Geynikha. Continue past the school, ignoring any tracks heading down the hill to the right. About 500 m past the school the main track climbs up the hill towards a lead/zinc mine, while the track going straight turns into a narrower tractor trail (26.0). Park your vehicle here. It may take you 1-1½ hour to get there from Thimphu.

26.1 Chhochhekha

Follow the narrow trail into Geynikha, about 500 m further (26.1). Try to find a high and dry trail through Geynikha, which can be extremely muddy, and continue in the same general direction. About 500 m past the village, turn right just after a large chorten (26.2). Take the trail, which doubles as an irrigation channel, down to a creek (Chhokotsen Chhu) and follow it towards the main river. It crosses an irrigation channel, passes through mixed oak/conifer forest and past a chorten to suspension bridge across the river (Geynitsang Chhu; 26.3).

To go on to Zamto, stay on the same side of the river, go up some rocky steps through broad-leaved forest, and then down again. Ignore any trails that head up the hill, even if they appear larger. Continue along the river to the lhakhang in Zamto village (26.4; 1½-2 hours).

From here, continue along the main trail that follows the irrigation channel just below the lhakhang. Soon the trail re-enters the forest, crosses a side stream and climbs the hill to the next village, Chhochhekha (26.5). There are excellent views of the entire valley from here.

26.2 Talela pass (Map 26.2)

If it is still early and you have plenty of energy left, you can continue towards the end of the valley. Continue walking up the valley along the main trail out of Chhochhekha, until you reach the junction of the two main rivers about 1½-2 hours later (26.6). Here the trail veers towards the left, following the left branch of the river. About 30-45 minutes later, the trail splits (26.7); the right hand fork descends to a bridge across the river,

Map 26.2

26-2-zamto.ai

and returns to the main river. Most likely it eventually joins with the Dagala Thousand Lakes Trek at the end of the valley.

The left-hand fork continues up the valley of the Gangri Chhu. To reach the pass, continue along the trail up the Gangri Chhu. Follow the main trail along the river, ignoring any side trails going up the hill. Eventually you'll climb out of the forest into sub-alpine shrub, and reach the pass at 4,090 m (26.8). The trail that descends on the other side of the pass continues towards Wangdi, while the path along the crest of the ridge is the Dagala Thousand Lakes trek. If you turn left here, you'll reach Talakha peak. Although it is possible to return to Simtokha via this route, it is still another 5-6 hours away, so it would probably better be done in two days.

Caution

If you were planning to reach Talela pass, take a look at the weather, the time, and your condition, as it is still another 2-2½ hours from the bridge at 26.7.

26.3 Pagalabtsa pass

If you prefer to go up steep and high, you can climb up to Pagalabtsa pass, on the ridge south of Geynikha. This is the first part of the Dagala Thousand Lakes trek. Follow the trail from Geynikha to the suspension bridge across the Geynitsang Chhu (26.3). The meadow near the river is often used as the first campsite for the Dagala trek. Cross the bridge, and turn right, following the river for a few hundred metres. Ignore a trail going steeply up the hill immediately after the bridge. Cross the side creek across three beams, then cross an irrigation channel, and keep on going up on the crest or to the right of the ridge. This stretch leads mostly through oak forest. After about 1-1½ hours you reach an open spot with a great view over the lower Geynikha valley (26.9). Half an hour further up, the path reaches the crest of a side ridge and veers to the left (26.10). The second campsite for the Dagala Thousand Lakes trek is in a clearing just below this spot.

Keep climbing gradually, while the forest changes to blue pine and later to spruce, dead fir and larch. Finally, you enter meadows dominated by low shrubs, from where you can see the trail traversing the slope ahead. Soon the trail curves to the right, passing below some rock outcrops, above dead fir and birch trees. It runs in and out of small side valleys, across creeks, and in and out of birch/rhododendron forests. The trail finally turns left into a shallow valley, passing a small knoll with fantastic views of the Geynikha and Paro valleys (26.11). Eventually you emerge at a wide, grassy pass, Pagalabtsa (26.12). From here you can continue to the left to the lakes and Talakha, or straight on to Dagana if you have sufficient equipment and permits. If you are on a day hike, you better turn around and get back to your vehicle. If the weather turns nasty and you need shelter for the night, there is a yak herders hut in a small valley along the trail to Talakha to the left, about 1 km from the pass (26.13).

Map 27

27-paga.ai

27 CHHUZOM TO PAGA GOENPA

27.1 Chhuzom to Paga goenpa (10 km return, 650 m up, 4-6 hrs, rating: 3.1)

A relatively easy hike along the dry slopes above Chhuzom that leads to a goenpa hidden in a green valley. The hike follows part of the old trading route to Phuentsholing. Paga was already mentioned as an important settlement on an eighteenth century map by Samuel Davis.

Starting point

Drive along the road from Thimphu to Paro, until 10½ km after Khasadrapchhu (1½ km before Chhuzom). Park your car about 100 m past a house on the right hand side of the road (27.0).

27.1 Paga goenpa

There should be a small trail leading up the hill on the left-hand side of the road. If you are lucky, you'll be able to walk straight up the hill to the main trail leading towards Paga. If you have a hard time finding the trail, walk along the road towards Thimphu until you find a trail that takes you up the hill above the road. To the left above you are the houses of Liuza. Look for a small hut in the fields about 700 m SW of the settlement. Take one of the trails towards this hut, and turn left up the hill by the hut (27.1). If in doubt, ask someone "lam Paga goenpalu gathey ley mo?", and follow the indicated direction.

Once you are on the right trail, gradually climb up to the chorten on the spur above Chhuzom (27.2). Sadly, the chorten appears to have been raided and the relics stolen. Below you the Thimphu and Paro rivers join at Chhuzom (=confluence) and continue towards India as the Wang Chhu.

Continue on the large trail that follows the hillside. This was the main trading route to Phuentsholing before the road was built. Cross the large electricity line that brings power to Thimphu from the hydroelectric plant at Chhukha. There are a number of trails here; on your way down, take care not to veer off to the left. About 20-30 min. past the chorten the trail splits, marked by a small pile of rocks (27.3). The right fork leads to the villages ahead, while the left fork will take you to Paga goenpa. Take the left fork and follow it for about an hour through rather dry terrain. You pass a couple of chortens (27.4), and suddenly emerge on a shady ridge with *Tsenden* (cypress) trees. In front of you is a small green valley with a few fields, surrounded by forest (27.5). Paga goenpa is on your left. On the edge of the valley is a chorten from where you have excellent views over the valley below. The road to Ha snakes along the hillside on the far side. A few kilometres downstream, on a spur jutting out above the Wang Chhu is Dobji Dzong, a former prison.

To return to the road, retrace your steps along the same trail.

28 DRUK NATURE CLUB NATURE WALKS

The Druk Nature Club has established four nature walks. The first three loops take about an hour to walk. The fourth one takes about 15 minutes, but you are supposed to take more time as you are invited to watch the birds, smell the flowers, and inform yourself about the names of various plants. Arrows were placed to reduce the chance of you getting lost. However, many of them have disappeared, and Druk Nature Club has started to paint trees red. A number of trees have been tagged for your information, since it may come in handy to be able to distinguish a *Quercus griffithii* from a *Castanopsis sp.* Birds have not been tagged and you are advised to take a bird book and a pair of binoculars. A number of garbage pits have been dug, but if you can, just take your garbage home, since wild winds may blow the garbage out of the pits.

The four nature walks are:

- 1 **Cherri (Chagri) Monastery:** Start near the covered bridge (Starting point Hike 1).
- 2 **Radio tower:** Up the ridge and down to the left (Starting point Hike 10).
- 3 **Dochula:** Up the ridge to the right and down to the left to the large picnic area above the road (Starting point Hike 15).
- 4 **Thimphu sewage treatment lakes:** To watch the birds; not to go swimming. The consulting firm involved in the construction claims that the out flowing water is fit for drinking. Don't trust these guys, I have worked for such a firm. (Starting point 28.4 on overview map).

Table1.xls

Table1.xls

Table2.xls

Table2.xls