

# Eastern Bhutan



Even though it is the most densely populated region, eastern Bhutan remains the kingdom's hinterland. Roads reach the major towns, but most settlements are hidden in the steep hillsides of remote and isolated valleys, some of which are home to minority ethnic groups comprising less than 1000 people.

The dominant language here is Sharchop (language of the east), although there are many local languages and dialects. Sharchop is different enough from Dzongkha that people from eastern and western Bhutan usually have to use English or Nepali to communicate. If you visit a particularly remote village your guide may have to resort to sign language.

Eastern Bhutanese love their home-brewed *arra* (rice wine) and locally grown green chillies. Because of the slash-and-burn system of shifting cultivation called *tseri*, the forest cover at lower elevations is less extensive than in other parts of Bhutan. The lower altitudes mean that spring and summer here are hot, humid and sweaty.

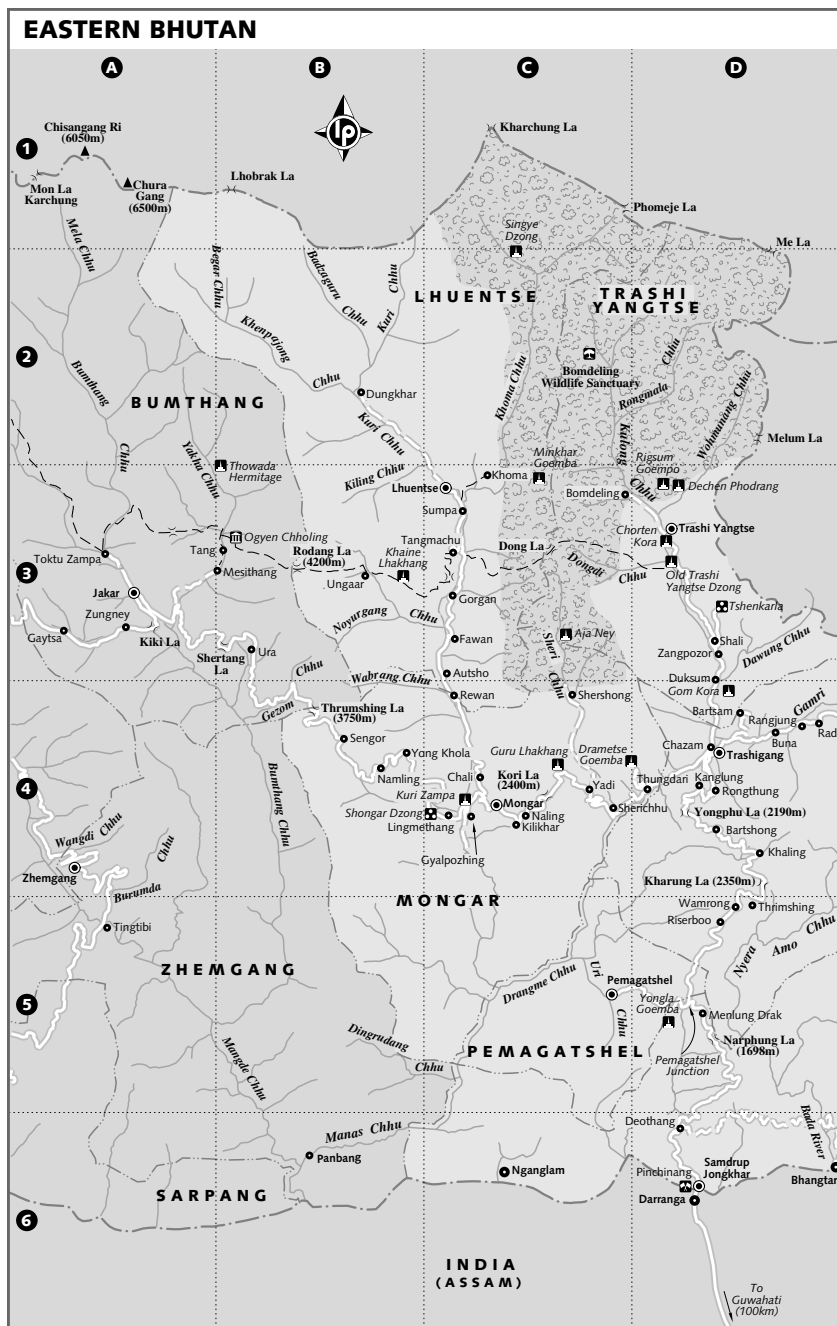
The general quality of hotels, food and service in eastern Bhutan is lower than it is in Thimphu and Paro. Don't venture into this part of the kingdom unless you have a sense of humour and are able to take a possible lack of hot water and Western toilets in your stride.

It's a *looong* drive out to the far east. The good news for tourists is that the border crossing at Samdrup Jongkhar is once again open to foreigners (though for exit only), so you can avoid the winding three-day drive back to Thimphu, with Guwahati and direct flights to Bangkok just a two-hour drive away.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit **Trashigang** (p190), one of the most attractive and lively towns in Bhutan
- Fasten your seatbelt for the dramatic cliff-hugging road over the 3750m **Thrumshing La** (p184)
- Take the picturesque drive up to **Lhuentse Dzong** (p187) in the remote and ancient region of Kurtoe
- Watch some of Bhutan's finest cloth being woven at the remote and traditional weaving village of **Khoma** (p188)
- Check your sin levels at the picturesque pilgrimage spot of **Gom Kora** (p193)
- Walk around the impressive Chorten Kora and watch handicrafts made at the National Institute for Zorig Chusum in remote **Trashi Yangtse** (p195)





### Geography

Eastern Bhutan is separated from the rest of the country by a large and extremely steep chain of hills that runs from the Tibetan border almost to the Indian border. The road from Bumthang crosses these hills over the Thrumshing La (3750m). Other than trails, this one road is the region's only link to the rest of the country.

The Manas river system, Bhutan's largest river and a major tributary of the Brahmaputra, drains most of eastern Bhutan. The Kuri Chhu (with its headwaters in Tibet), the Drangme Chhu (with part of its source in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh), and the Kulong Chhu (which drains the Trashiyangtse valley) all flow into the Manas. Just before it exits Bhutan, the Manas is joined by the Mangde Chhu, which drains Trongsa and most of central Bhutan.

### History

In ancient times eastern Bhutan was ruled by a collection of separate petty kingdoms and an important trade route between India and Tibet. Goods flowed via Bhutan through what is now Singye Dzong in the Lhuentse district to the Tibetan town of Lhodrak.

The most important figure in this region's history was Chhogyel Mingyur Tenpa. When he was *penlop* (governor) of Trongsa he led his armies to eastern Bhutan to quell revolts in Bumthang, Lhuentse, Trashigang, Mongar and Zhemgang. His efforts were responsible for bringing eastern Bhutan under the rule of the *desi* (secular ruler of Bhutan) and went a long way towards the ultimate unification of the country. Mingyur Tenpa built the dzong at Trongsa and was responsible for the construction of most of the dzongs in eastern, as well as central, Bhutan. In 1668 he was enthroned as the third *desi* and ruled until 1680.

## MONGAR DZONGKHAG

The Mongar district is the northern portion of the ancient region of Khyeng. Shongar Dzong, Mongar's original dzong, is in ruins, and the new dzong in Mongar town is not as architecturally spectacular as others in the region. Drametse Goemba, in the eastern part of the district, is an important Nyingma monastery, perched high above the valley.