

explore PemaGatshel

The Blissful Land of Lotus

The district of PemaGatshel is located in the south eastern part of Bhutan. Known as the 'Blissful Land of Lotus', PemaGatshel offers an inviting blend of cultural richness, spiritual significance, and breathtaking scenery. Despite Bhutan's tourism spotlight predominantly shining on its western and central regions, PemaGatshel promises an enriching journey through Bhutan's lesser-explored realms. The name PemaGatshel was bestowed upon the region by His Eminence Dudjom Rinpoche during a blessing ceremony in 1969. The name 'Blissful Land of Lotus' is inspired by the valley's lotus-like ridges encircling the majestic Druk Migyur Dechen Dzong, a fortress emblematic of the lotus's inner bloom. This evocative name reflects the natural beauty of the area, and rightly, heralds its promise as a haven for cultural and spiritual tourism.

HIGHLIGHTS

1. *PemaGatshel Tshechu (November 8-11)*
2. *Nganglam Tshechu (February 16-18)*
3. *Lotus Valley Eco Trail for trekking and bird watching*



The allure of PemaGatshel

PemaGatshel is adorned with a constellation of cultural and religious landmarks - a cornerstone of the dzongkhag's Community Based Tourism (CBT) initiatives. The dzongkhag's commitment to sustainable tourism is a holistic approach to uplifting local communities and preserving its rich cultural heritage. By focusing on CBT, PemaGatshel aims to enhance the economic status of its rural populace—particularly youth and women—while safeguarding its rich traditions and natural beauty.

The Dzongkhag boasts numerous cultural and religious heritage sites, alongside breathtaking natural landscapes and diverse flora and fauna—all integral to CBT experiences. Some of the notable sites include Shalikhhar Dzong (in ruins), Yongla Goenpa, Jashar Goenpa, Dungkhar Goenpa, Khawar Goenpa, Yurung Tsho (lake) and others, accessible via the Lotus Valley trail, offering visitors a panoramic view of the Druk Migyur Dechen Dzong at Denchhi.

Cultural treasures and local delights

Beyond its spiritual landmarks, PemaGatshel is a treasure trove of local products and traditional crafts. Visitors can explore the district's artisanal offerings, such as *Tshatshi Buram* (sugarcane jaggery), *Thongsa*

Kamthangma (cotton products), and *Tsharzo* (cane products). The region also boasts unique textiles like Yurung Bura and is known for producing one of the best religious instruments - *dhuung* (horn) and *jaling* (trumpet) - in the country. These local products not only contribute to the district's economy but also offer a tangible connection to its cultural narrative.

The district's culinary landscape is equally compelling. From traditional Bhutanese dishes to locally crafted delicacies, PemaGatshel invites visitors to savor flavors that are as diverse as its cultural heritage. Folklore, traditional music, and dance further enhance the visitor experience, offering a glimpse into the vibrant cultural life of the region.

Tourism development and community impact

The vision for PemaGatshel's tourism development is deeply intertwined with its community and environment. By fostering the growth of local businesses, such as guesthouses and eco- lodges, the district aims to create sustainable employment opportunities in fields like hotel management, tourism, culinary arts, and information technology. These developments are expected to bolster economic activity, mitigate rural-to-urban migration, and empower local women and youth by providing avenues for skill development and entrepreneurship.

Here are some of the major tourist attractions and destinations in PemaGatshel Dzongkhag:

Druk Migyur Dechen Dzong

The newly constructed Druk Migyur Dechen Dzong is a modern architectural marvel right in the heart of the district, serving as a spiritual and administrative center. The Dzong houses the office of civil administration and monastic community. The construction of this Dzong began in June 2012. His Holiness the 70th Je Khenpo, Trulku Jigme Choeda, blessed the new Dzong with the name ‘Druk Migyur Dechen Dzong’. Completed in 2021, the Dzong was consecrated by His Royal Highness Gyaltshab Jigme Dorji Wangchuck on September 22, 2023, with religious ceremonies presided over by His Eminence Tsugla Lopen Karma Rangdrol Rinpoche.



Yongla Riwo Pelbar Dargeychhoeling Goenpa

Perched majestically atop a mountain, Yongla Goenpa is one of Bhutan’s most revered and picturesque monasteries. Visible from the national highway between Samdrup Jongkhar and Trashigang, this sacred site holds great spiritual significance. A half-hour drive from the Tshelingore junction leads to the monastery, built by the second Yongla Lam Dorji Jamtsho in 1736. It was founded based on a prophecy by Khedrup Jigme Kuendel, who identified the location following his master Rigzin Jigme Lingpa’s vision.

Lam Khedrup Jigme Kuendel, hailing from Darlung Kha in Thimphu, was guided by a vision from his master, Rigzin Jigme Lingpa, to find a site that mirrored the sacredness of Tsari in Tibet. Upon reaching Yongla, accompanied by Khandro Dechen Gyalmo, he inquired if this was indeed the prophesied location. The Khandro’s affirmative response “Yong Yong”, which translates to “Yes, Yes”, led to the site being named Yongla. Lam Khedrup Jigme Kuendel meditated there, attracting disciples and establishing a meditation center and nunnery.

The Yongla Phurpai Drubchen, a significant ritual, began with him but was revitalized in the 1960s by Lam Sonam Zangpo and later by His Eminence Dudjom Rinpoche in 1970.



In 2009, a devastating 6.1 magnitude earthquake inflicted severe damage on the monastery. However, under the Royal Command of His Majesty the King, the monastery was meticulously restored to its former splendor, blending historical significance with contemporary resilience.

Historically, Yongla Goenpa also played a strategic role during the Duar War. It served as a base of operations for Trongsa Poenlop Jigme Namgyel, father of Bhutan’s first king, Ugyen Wangchuck. From this vantage point, Jigme Namgyel orchestrated raids against British troops advancing from Dewangiri (now Dewathang, Samdrup Jongkhar), adding a layer of military significance to its storied past.



Khangma Choeten

The exact year of construction of the Samdruptse stupa remains unknown. According to an inscription on a stone in front of the stupa, it was built during the ‘Wood Female Snake Year” of the Bhutanese calendar. The construction was initiated by Tshewang Samdrup, who was a carpenter by trade, with the assistance of his co-workers Samdrup Wangzom, Tsewang (his father), and Wang Lhamo (his mother). Named Samdruptse, the stupa was dedicated to the well-being of all sentient beings and to honor Kagyu lamas.

Legend has it that during the construction, Samdrup faced significant challenges of finding suitable stones. According to local lore, he received a prophetic dream directing him to a site where perfectly shaped stones were hidden. These stones were used in the construction until they mysteriously vanished. Consequently, ordinary stones were employed for the upper layers of the stupa, which are now distinguished by different shapes and sizes of stones.

Locals believe that a live mithun was placed within the stupa’s base as per the prophecy, and the mithun’s distinctive mooing lasted for a week. Some locals believe that its call can still be heard on auspicious days. Others claim to have seen a bright light, believed to be the presence of dakinis, illuminating the area around the stupa.

The stupa is also known as Monangsa chorten, named after a curse placed on the land by Dungsam Jadrung’s wife following his murder by Pel Thongley Buchung. The site, historically linked to the ruined fort of Dungsam Jadrungpa, is being developed as a cultural interest spot for tourists. Since 2014, annual Mani Dungrup ceremonies have been held every winter at the stupa, led by Gonpo Trulku Rinpoche, who named the site Riwoo Drupziling.

Samdrup Choeling Jarung Khashor Chorten

Perched on the majestic hill of Tsebar Ngangrey, overlooking Khar and Dungmin Gewog, the Samdrup Choeling Jarung Khashor Chorten mirrors the iconic Boudhanath stupa of Nepal. The inspiration for this stupa came from Lama Sangay Dorji Rinpoche and his consort, Sangay Wangzom, who envisioned creating a small but spiritually potent replica of Nepal’s Jarung Khashor Stupa (Boudhanath stupa) for the well-being and benefit of all the sentient beings.

In pursuit of this vision, blessings and guidance were sought from His Holiness the Fourth Doderupchen Rinpoche, a revered figure considered the human embodiment of Guru Rinpoche. His Holiness affirmed that the stupa could be built successfully and would greatly benefit all beings.

With these blessings, the groundbreaking ceremony took place on April 15, 1995, which aligned with the 15th day of the second Bhutanese month in the Wood Pig Year. The stupa was completed and consecrated on February 25, 1999, corresponding to the 10th day of the first Bhutanese month in the Earth Rabbit Year.

Inside the stupa are sacred relics gifted by esteemed Buddhist Masters from India, Tibet, and Bhutan. These relics include ritual garments, religious hats, hair, medicinal substances, and sacred texts. The stupa also houses precious jewels, sacred statues, and over 900 volumes of the Buddhist canon, known as the *Kanjur*, along with countless religious items made of gold, silver, and bronze.



Jashar Goenpa

Jashar Goenpa has deep roots in Tibetan spiritual tradition, linked to the reincarnations of the revered Drubchen Saraha. Among his numerous reincarnations was Togden Shakya Shri, who had many notable disciples. Among many disciples, nine of his disciples were considered extremely learned. Among these learned disciples, Anim Woesele Choden stood out to be extraordinarily gifted. Born in 1921, she devoted her life to meditation and in 1958 established the JaShar Woong Drubdey, a meditation center with a modest community of 15 to 25 disciples.

By the time of her passing in 1982, the structure housing the monastery and its residents had fallen into disrepair. Responding to appeals from the community, lay monks, and nuns, His Eminence Gyeltshen Trulku took on the responsibility of revitalizing the Goenpa. Under his guidance, the monastery was renovated and expanded to include a meditation hall, guest accommodations, and additional facilities.



Dungkhar Goenpa

Dungkhar Goenpa, situated to the south of Druk Migyur Dechen Dzong, is believed to have been constructed in the 16th century by Yab Mipham Tenpey Nyima, the father of the revered Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Yab Tenpey Nyima, a key figure in Bhutanese history, had a son whose significant role under Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel is well remembered.

The monastery was built on a ridge shaped like a conch, which inspired its name — Dungkhar—meaning ‘conch’ in Bhutanese. Today, it is maintained by the local community. Responding to requests from the community, His Eminence Gangtey Trulku Rinpoche has appointed Lama and Lopon from Gangtey Goenpa to oversee the monastery and support its monks.

The Monastery hosts the annual Tshechu, featuring sacred mask dances performed by both the Khar community and the resident monks. Revered for its spiritual significance, Dungkhar Goenpa is renowned for its unwavering blessings and protection.

Lotus Valley Eco-campsite

Nestled at Yurungzampa, just three kilometers from Denchhi in PemaGatshel, the Lotus Valley Eco-Campsite offers a tranquil retreat for trekkers and visitors. The campsite features a range of amenities, including a Menchu (medicinal) hot stone bath, renowned for its soothing effects on tired muscles and its unique cultural experience.

With its serene surroundings, the Lotus Valley Eco-Campsite provides a perfect haven for relaxation and rejuvenation. The facilities are designed to help visitors unwind after their journey and prepare for the next leg of their adventure. Whether soaking in the healing waters of the Menchu bath or simply enjoying the peaceful environment, trekkers find the campsite to be a brief refreshing stop or night halt along their route.



Gongribali Eco-lodge

Located in the serene Norbugang Gewog, the Gongribali Eco-Lodge provides a range of immersive experiences for nature enthusiasts. Guests can explore scenic eco-trails, enjoy boating, and camp amid stunning natural beauty. The lodge offers breathtaking views of the Manas River and opportunities for bird watching, making it an ideal destination for those seeking a deep connection with nature.

Lotus Valley Eco-Trail: A journey through culture, heritage, and nature

The Lotus Valley Eco-Trail is a meticulously crafted trekking experience that immerses travelers in the rich cultural heritage and pristine natural beauty of PemaGatshel Dzongkhag. This 55.4 km trail, divided into two phases, starts from the historic Jashar Goenpa in Zobel Gewog, and concludes at the Lotus Valley Eco-Campsite in Yurungzampa, offering an unforgettable journey through sacred sites, traditional villages, and lush landscapes.

The first phase of the trail starts from Jashar Goenpa under Zobel Gewog to Dungkhar Goenpa in Khar Gewog. It passes through the ancient salt route where people of PemaGatshel and other neighboring Dzongkhag used to import salt from neighboring state of Assam. The second phase of the trek takes trekkers from Dungkhar Goenpa to the Lotus Valley Eco-camp at Yurungzampa passing through the craft village of Tsebar, which is renowned for producing the finest religious instruments - *dhuung* (horn) and *jaling* (trumpet) – in Bhutan. Trekkers can also visit Tsebar Ngangrey Jarung Khashor Choeten, Yurung Tsho and Khangma Choeten on the way before descending to the Lotus Valley Eco-camp.



Annual PemaGatshel Tshechu

PemaGatshel district is known for its unique local festivals and folk culture. The most notable folk song in PemaGatshel is 'Ausa', which is sung during farewells to family, friends, and relatives. The annual Pema Gatshel Tshechu (festival of mask dances), which began with the construction of the old Dzong in the 1980s, is now held at the newly constructed Druk Migyur Dechen Dzong.

Spanning three days, the festival features a variety of mask and folk dances that are believed to confer blessings upon the onlookers, safeguarding them against misfortune and warding off evil influences. People believe that one gains merit just by witnessing the religious mask dances performed during the tshechus. The festival also serves as a major social occasion, allowing locals to gather and celebrate with family and friends amidst vibrant religious ceremonies. People from all over the district come to the Dzong where the festival is held. All public offices remain closed for three days starting from 8th-11th October.

Annual Nganglam Tshechu

The annual Tshechu at Nganglam was instituted in 2018 for the people of Norbugang, Dechheling and Choekhorling Gewogs under Nganglam Dungkhag. Held in February from 16th-18th, the festival offers religious and cultural blessings to those unable to travel to distant tshechu events. It also draws many visitors from nearby Assam, fostering strong connections between the communities of Nganglam and Assam.