

TREKKING IN BHUTAN

**22 MULTI-DAY TREKS INCLUDING THE JHOMOLHARI,
DRUK PATH, LUNANA AND DAGALA TREKS**



About the Author

Originally from the Netherlands, Bart Jordans has been guiding and exploring treks and (trekking) peaks in the Himalayas, Karakorams, Hindu Kush, European Alps, Kilimanjaro, Damavand in Iran, Simien mountains of Ethiopia and Moroccan Atlas mountains since 1984. He has also led treks in Bhutan since 1994, and took the opportunity of getting to know the Bhutan Himalayas in greater depth when he lived in the country with his family for four and a half years from 1999. His appreciation of the beauty of the Bhutan Himalayas and its people encouraged him to write a trekking guidebook to share his great love for this part of the eastern Himalayas.

Besides writing this guide Bart has contributed chapters to several other Himalayan trekking books and produced the first ever trekking map of Bhutan.

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DRUK PATH, LUNANA AND DAGALA TREKS**

by Bart Jordans

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*To the friendly, colourful and magical people of Bhutan, to Laura
and Max with love and also to HRH The Gyalsen Jigme Namgyel
Wangchuk (born February 2016), wishing that he may enjoy
as many outdoor adventures in Bhutan as I have done.*

In memory of Robin Pradham.

Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/919/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL, United Kingdom.

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The first edition of this book, *Bhutan – A Trekkers' Guide*, was a finalist at Canada's Banff Mountain Book Festival in 2006.

Front cover: Tsho Phu Lakes and Jitchu Drake (6850m) – seen on Trek 3, day 3 and Trek 4, day 5

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






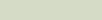





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Map key

	ridge		ropeway
	trek		river/'chhu'
	road		lake/'tsho'
	dirt track/feeder road		unmapped area
	international boundary		hot spring/'tsachu'
	village/town/building/ other landmark		viewpoint
	campsite		bridge
	col/pass/'la'		international airport
	summit		domestic airport
		5043	height in metres

Warning

Mountain walking can be a dangerous activity carrying a risk of personal injury or death. It should be undertaken only by those with a full understanding of the risks and with the training and experience to evaluate them. While every care and effort has been taken in the preparation of this guide, the user should be aware that conditions can be highly variable and can change quickly, materially affecting the seriousness of a mountain walk. Therefore, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, neither Cicerone nor the author accept liability for damage of any nature (including damage to property, personal injury or death) arising directly or indirectly from the information in this book.

Warning: This guidebook will make you want to go the outdoors and stay there.

Map of Bhutan
showing trek start points





TASHICHHODZONG

THIMPHU, BHUTAN

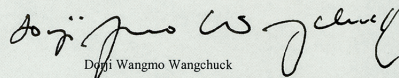
October 16th 2004

Foreword

HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

I welcome Bart Jordan's guidebook focusing exclusively on trekking routes based on his experiences as a guide for nearly ten years in Bhutan. The guidance provided by this book starts to come into use where travellers leave their cars behind and use their legs instead. There is useful information on woods, passes, rivers, and villages on what a walking-traveller will come across in the numerous enchanting treks described in this book. Some of the routes are described for the first time and adds more insights into the beautifully serene reaches of the land. At the same time, the book should inspire readers to visit other places in Bhutan beside the more popular trekking routes, and help sustain the uses of relatively more obscure routes.

The trekking routes detailed in this book are but a fraction of the footpaths and mule tracks connecting different localities in Bhutan, both near and far flung. I have travelled most of the routes included in this guidebook and have realised how important the routes are to the pattern of positive relationships amongst our communities. The tracks on which people and livestock trod for centuries were a testimony of their meaningful interdependent relationships. People in each locality were drawn into interaction both at the personal as well as economical levels along such tracks. Trade and exchange amongst our mountain people, though cut off from the rest of the world, was forged with the continual use of trekking routes. The reorientations of traffic towards motor highways bring changes that make hundreds of footpaths and mule tracks obsolete, pushing the locations of the smaller and remoter communities to become unviable and causing their residents to migrate. Bhutan is marked by countless networks of trekking routes that could still benefit the communities that grew along them as they did in the past with more appreciative trekkers seeking out these near forgotten routes.


Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck
Her Majesty the Queen of Bhutan

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION: A TREKKING DESTINATION BEYOND IMAGINATION



The Kingdom of Bhutan is a landlocked country comprised of mountains and forest and offering all the beauties of the Himalayas. The Bhutanese people have travelled through their country on foot for centuries, developing many routes through valleys and over passes. Over time these routes witnessed many different faces from many different places, each with their own story to tell. The majority are still in use; however, the building of roads to access more and more remote places in the Kingdom has caused the disappearance of several routes (only a few decades ago there were no roads in Bhutan).

Having had the unique opportunity of living in Bhutan for more than four years (1999–2003), and leading treks there since 1994, I felt that it was time to write a trekking guidebook for Bhutan. When we approached Paro airport in 1999 my daughter Laura (then 2½ years old) looked out of her window and said, 'Look, Papa's mountains'. This book is intended to share my love and respect for the Bhutan Himalayas and its hospitable people.

The information given is as accurate as possible, but with many different – and sometimes hard to access – sources, details are always changing. Deriving details from local people, reading different maps, studying various (old) sources didn't make the process easier, but it was very interesting. Accuracy is important in a guidebook, but as more information comes in I am sure that changes will need to be made, names re-spelled, and so on. I always welcome comments and updated information from readers.

This guidebook unfolds many routes throughout the Kingdom in detail. Some routes have been described earlier in other sources (such as in accounts from explorers); some routes are described here for the first time, with perhaps a lesser degree of detailed information. Every trek description starts and finishes where transport is left behind or met.

The book should inspire the reader to visit places away from the more popular routes, and opens up some remote valleys. Travel around with respect so as not to spoil the environment for either the people living there or for future visitors. Many valleys have hardly been visited by foreigners and are pretty well unmapped. You may feel that writing a guidebook might give the adventurer too much information, but don't worry: there is plenty left! I collected material for more than 65 treks – and probably



Chumhari Kang (or 'Matterhorn of Bhutan') (photo: Robin Boustead)

many more routes exist throughout this mountainous country.

One of my favourite treks, the Ramena trail leading to Lunana, couldn't make this edition. I have to apologise to everybody who contributed text and can't find it here, especially seven-year-old Beth Dutson. Be assured that your contributions will be handed out as background information to trekkers joining me – a special treat.

Bhutan has been closed to outsiders until recently, with a few exceptions; the first paying tourist group visited the country in 1974. Trekking started in western Bhutan in 1978, and in central Bhutan in 1982, and the trekkers make up only 10 per cent of total tourist numbers (just over 7500 tourists in 2000). The Bhutanese believed for a long time that a thunder dragon protected the country and its people from any trespassers or evil spirits. The independence Bhutan has known for so long

is highly treasured. For generations past the country has isolated herself from the outside world in her attempt to preserve successfully her civilisation. Only a few foreigners visited the country.

This book is written for both the experienced and inexperienced trekker. Treks at both levels are described. After some practical information the treks are described, following a general line through Bhutan from the west to the centre and finally the east.

Treks in Bhutan are guided: from arrival until departure the visitor is accompanied by a Bhutanese guide (sometimes assisted by one from outside the country). Treks are accompanied by a group of staff. Overnight accommodation is in tents, with luggage carried by pack animals.

Bhutan offers other activities too such as whitewater rafting, mountain biking, rock climbing, family trekking, birdwatching, meditation and retreat

centres, textile tours, festivals, stone baths, motor-bike tours and golf, or the chance to just relax and do nothing at a pleasant place like Bumthang. Activities which could develop include high-altitude trekking (including crossing technical passes), border-crossing treks, paragliding and ballooning. Mountaineering is not permitted at the present time, since the mountain people petitioned the king to put a stop to it, for fear of disturbing the mountain deities. There could also be mushroom tours, traditional medicine tours and cooking courses. Skiing has been attempted but the terrain is not really suitable.

GPS measurements are not included in this book because repeatedly measuring and getting different results on the same trek led me to conclude that they are not yet very useful (for me!). Swiss altimeter and altimeter watches work perfectly but you do need references, which are hardly available for Bhutan. The altitudes quoted in this book must be taken with a pinch of salt: there are simply too many different altitudes derived from different sources and measurements.

Detailed trekking maps of Bhutan are still unavailable. Missionaries and diplomatic missions visiting the country

in the past have produced some maps; more recently, data has been collected, but maps not yet been printed. For more recent maps that are available see 'Available Maps'. The maps used in this book are based on my own sketch maps, and whatever I could glean from the Survey of Bhutan. It has not been an easy process, but the outcome should be reasonable. Names of places, rivers, mountains and so on are spelled in endlessly different ways, making it almost impossible to arrive at one uniform spelling. These uncertainties just add to the level of adventure!

Bhutan receives less than 1000 trekkers each year. You will be well looked after, and the country has a good infrastructure to back this up. However, bear in mind that due to factors outside your control – a delayed flight, impassable road, high passes blocked with snow, unreliable pack animals – itineraries will have to be altered. This can be frustrating, but also brings new surprises. Pack a flexible attitude in your luggage and I am sure you will have an experience to remember for the rest of your life.

Tashi Delek!

*Bart Jordans, 2005 –
Thimphu & Copenhagen*

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since the first edition of this book was published (2005), economic development in Bhutan has continued to expand at a rapid rate. Physical infrastructure is improving, with more roads and bridges (mainly for farmers) being constructed, and talks taking place about possible additional airstrips and even a domestic airline. More tour operators (281 in 2006), hotels and restaurants have opened for business. The tourism sector in general is growing (9249 tourists in 2004, 13,626 in 2005, and 17,344 in 2006), although the number of trekking visitors has remained stable over the last few years (in 2006 766 visited Bhutan exclusively for trekking and another 1723 combined their cultural itinerary with a short trek).

The pace of development is a challenge to Bhutan's environmental managers and, along with climate change and its possible impact on glacial retreat, is one of the main threats that the country's policy-makers are well aware of. All tourists need to keep the unique environment in mind when they come to Bhutan.

In this second edition of the book, new roads and bridges are taken into account as well as an outline of the international border change (from 2006). The latter change does not actually affect the trekking routes described in this guidebook, since none is located near the border area in question.

There are some minor changes to the treks, such as where new feeder roads are replacing some parts of trekking routes. Some treks described in the

first edition have been left out because they have either still not been opened or have been substantially changed. In four cases they have been replaced by new treks, as described below.

In western Bhutan the trekking/rafting route (Haa – Amo Chhu – Phuentsholing) has been replaced by a newly opened trek in Haa. The Gangte trek – which is slowly being replaced by a feeder road – has been summarized in the book, and a new trek in the area has been added (there are plans to make the original Gangte trek the first lodge-based trek in Bhutan).

In central Bhutan, the new Nabji-Korphu route has been included. This trek has been designed so that local communities obtain benefit from it. Finally a trek in the far east of Bhutan (Brangzungla Alpine Trek) has been replaced in the second edition by a route in central Bhutan, called the Royal Heritage Trek, which follows the route travelled by the royal family between Bumthang and their winter palace south of Tongsa.

My heartfelt thanks go to those who helped me with updating this new edition. I have mentioned their names in Appendix F.

I would like to finish this preface by congratulating the Kingdom of Bhutan on reaching 101 years of monarchy in 2008. I wish the country all the best for the forthcoming coronation, the first democratic parliamentary elections and implementation of the constitution.

Bart Jordans, 2007 – Hanoi

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

Kuzuzangpo la – it is my pleasure to present the third edition of this guidebook. As noted in the preface to the second edition, Bhutan is rapidly developing, with the number of visitors growing from just over 17,000 in 2006, to almost 210,000 in 2016. Of these, trekkers accounted for 766 in 2006, and 3338 a decade later. The numbers keep growing, mostly through visitors from neighbouring countries, and day hiking is also becoming more popular. Yet, despite many plans to make the area more attractive, eastern Bhutan still sees very few tourists. Urbanisation is an ongoing process, but this means, of course, that it is quieter in the mountains! Dirt roads are being constructed everywhere as part of the government's aim to connect all districts with the rest of the country.

One result of this road building is the effect it has on trekking routes, with some routes being reduced in length, and some disappearing altogether. While there are definite benefits to some remote areas being connected to electricity, the greater availability of mobile phone coverage threatens a once-treasured sense of remoteness, and

in a recent issue devoted to the country's modernisation, the Bhutanese policy publication *Druk Journal* asked: 'Are we driving change, or is change driving us?'

Yet, despite all this, Bhutan retains the ability to excite, uplift and inspire all who go there, and offers a unique trekking experience that cannot be compared with any other Himalayan destination. An official list includes no less than 42 treks – 22 of which are described within this guide. In 2015 (the latest statistics available) the most popular were the Druk Path Trek, the Jhomolhari Bonte La Trek, the trek from Laya to Gasa, the Dagala Trek, the Lunana Trek, and the Bumthang Owl Trek. My trekking map of western Bhutan (a first for the country) has now been published, with others due to follow, for who could possibly trek in this land of exquisite beauty without dreaming of returning? This book, I hope, will both feed those dreams and help to make them come true.

My heartfelt thanks go to those who helped me with updating this new edition. Their names are mentioned in Appendix F.

*Bart Jordans, 2018 –
Copenhagen & Marrakesh*

Haa valley has a couple of interesting places to visit: the Haa (or Wangchulo) Dzong, Yangtong Gompa, the most secret place in the valley, Kargye Nang Monastery, Trana Monastery, Tenchen Monastery; and, if allowed, the golf course.

In winter, many people migrate south to warmer districts.

THE HAA VALLEY

◀ Haa valley, located in western Bhutan at an average altitude of 2740m, is opening up slowly to trekkers. Haa and the surrounding areas offer a number of trekking routes.

At the end of the 18th century this area belonged to Sikkim. Haa valley is the ancestral home of the Dorji family, from which Bhutan's Queen Mother descends. The whole region is connected to the legend of Terton Sherab Mebar, his conflicts with the deities of the lakes, and the revealing of treasures from the lakes.

Haa valley has many villages, sturdy-looking farmhouses, monasteries, seven schools, a military training centre, a military hospital, three basic health units, a rather big army centre, a Bank of Bhutan, a petrol station, a couple of shops, bars and hotels. Many buildings in Haa town are built by – and used by – the Indian Military Training Team and the Bhutanese army, as is the golf course. The major cash income is generated from apples, potatoes, oranges and cardamom grown in the south, and other vegetables such as broccoli. Haa produces a famous cheese called chukho. The yaks of Haa provide the best-tasting meat in the west of the country; Haa yaks graze for a longer time than others at altitude, and they also eat more medicinal plants, giving the meat a special flavour. ◀

Haa valley, along with Paro, celebrates New Year on a different date than the rest of Bhutan, on the 29th of the 10th month of the Bhutanese calendar. It is the same day as celebrated in Sikkim. This festival is worth the visit (check with travel agencies when these dates are).

TREK 1

Haa Planters' Trail

Start	Yangtong (2735m/8971ft)
Finish	Balakra Chhu (2640m/8659ft)
Distance	23km (14 miles)
Grade	Easy
Time	2–3 days
Altitude gain	1008m (3306ft)
Altitude loss	1140m (3740ft)

▶ The name of this 2- to 3-day trek harks back to the time when it was used by rice planters from Haa on their way to help people in Paro who relied heavily on their labour during the planting season (mainly May to June). In return, the people of Haa were given red rice after the autumn harvest.

This trek is easy, passing through villages in the Haa valley and dense forest on the Paro side. The ascent is on good trails through forest and meadows. The descent is on a steeper trail with loose boulders, so be careful. The trek ends at the road near Drugyel Dzong. You could travel from Paro, crossing the Jilay La down into the Haa valley, and start the trek the same day.

DAY 1

Yangtong to Khadey Gom

Start	Yangtong (2735m/8971ft)
Finish	Khadey Gom (3235m/10,611ft)
Distance	8km (5 miles)
Time	4–5hr
Altitude gain	500m (1640ft)
Altitude loss	None
Note	If you prefer to make this a three-night outing, Yangtong could be your first campsite.

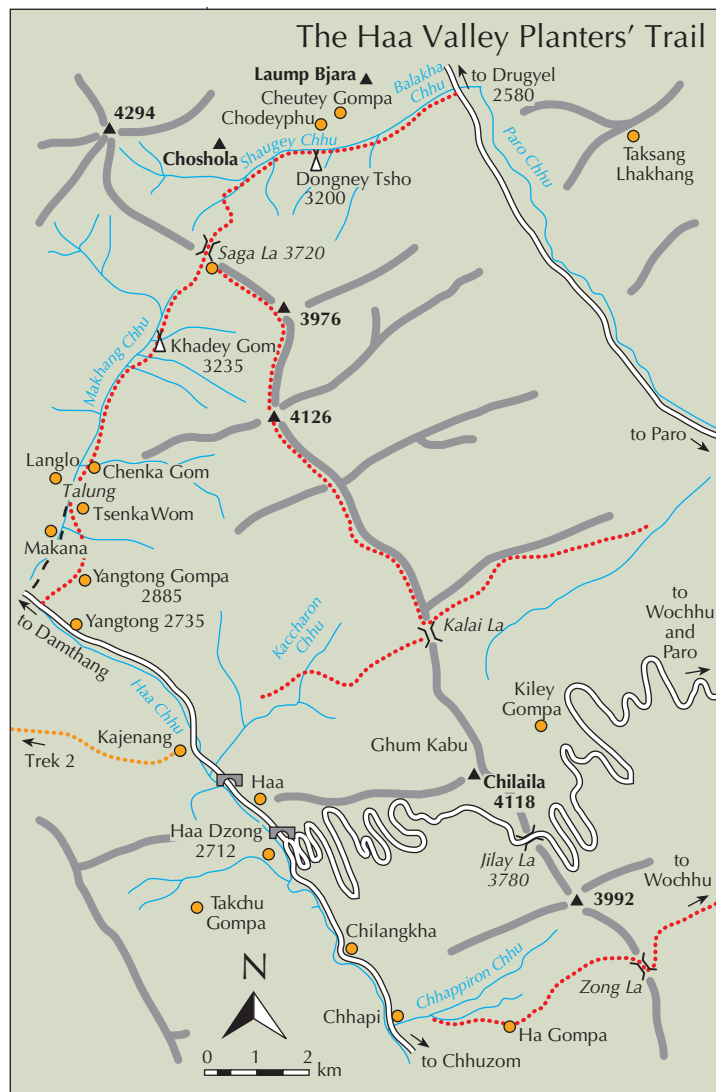
▶ **Yangtong** camp is located in a meadow next to the Haa Chhu; there is a chorten with a flag hoisted in honour of the local protecting deity, 'the Powerful Chhundu'.

A dirt road bypasses Yangtong Gompa and goes direct towards Talung village. From Yangtong a steep climb (150m) leads to **Yangtong Gompa** (2885m), set on a hilltop right above camp. The big temple, surrounded by a few houses, is about 300 years old and dedicated to Guru Rinpochey and his eight manifestations.

A more-or-less level trail through pines brings you back to the main trail to the valley below Saga La. Here the **Makhang Chhu** flows through the area called **Talung**. Talung has three beautiful villages – **Chenka Gom**, **Tsenka Wom** and **Langlo** – about 80 households in all.

Haa valley is worth a visit and this trek could be combined with one night in a hotel.

Yangtong is a 20min drive from Haa town.



Haa valley, Khadey Gom camp

The trail winds around farmlands fenced with piles of stones to protect the fields from deer and wild boar. Climb to a wooden bridge, Chagdo Zam ('iron bridge'), so-named because locals claim that the 14th-century saint Thangthong Gyelpo (the iron bridge builder in Bhutan) constructed the original one. Cross more meadows and some forest until you reach a rock with twin eyes and a distorted mouth. This is the Nyela Doem (Nyela Demon), who was subdued by the saint Thangthong Gyelpo using the Sword of Ignorance (*ray-dee*) to slash the demon's mouth and turn it into a rock. Ever since then travellers using this ancient trail have walked in peace without fearing this ferocious demon. This holy rock is located in the **Khadey Gom** (the upper Khadey) meadow, where tonight's camp is situated.

DAY 2

Khadey Gom to Dongney Tsho via Saga La

Start	Khadey Gom (3235m/10,611ft)
Finish	Dongney Tsho (3200m/10,496ft)
Distance	8km (5 miles)
Time	5hr
Altitude gain	485m (1591ft)
Altitude loss	520m (1706ft)
Passes	Saga La (3720m/12,200ft)

It is customary to take a gift for the pass; either pick up a rock or break off a twig or flower to pile it on the mini stupa (chorten) built by thousands of former travellers.

Today the climb to Saga La is on the programme. A gradual hike for about 1hr through meadows and coniferous forest is followed by the 2hr climb to the pass. ◀ Once on top of **Saga La** (3720), shout 'Lhagyelo' ('May God always win over evil') and you will be blessed.

On a clear day there is a fantastic view on both sides of the pass. The view towards Paro (east) includes sacred Jhomolhari (7315m), Chaterake (5570m), and below in the valley the Drugyel Dzong and the sacred Taktsang monastery. Looking to the west the peaks of Haa forming the border with Tibet can be seen.

From the pass it is all downhill. Beware of loose gravel and boulders on the trail. A good 2hr downhill hike through mixed conifer forests and rhododendrons will bring you to the camp in an open meadow at **Dongney Tsho**, surrounded with tall firs. To the left is the black **Choshola** mountain: a holy place from which a lake is said to have somehow disappeared.

DAY 3

Dongney Tsho to Balakha Chhu

Start	Dongney Tsho (3200m/10,496ft)
Finish	Balakha Chhu (2640m/8659ft)
Distance	7km (4 miles)
Time	3hr
Altitude gain	None
Altitude loss	620m (2034ft)

The first part of today's hike is steeply downhill for about 1.5hr until you reach the Genchu Zam (bridge). The hike is through thick vegetation, and laughing thrushes, magpies, nutcrackers and pheasants are often seen.

There is a beautiful hamlet comprised of eight households and a temple on the left side of the trail – **Chodeyphu** – set picturesquely at the base of the mountain **Laump Bjara** ('Foggy Mountain', inhabited by mountain goats). Another 1hr from this village will take you to **Balakha Chhu** where the ancient Haa Planters' Trail ends. ◀

Drugyel Dzong (2580m) is an 10min drive northwest from here.

TREK 2

Nob Tshona Patta Tsho and Rigona Tsho

Start	Haa town (2712m/8898ft)
Finish	Lukha (2712m/8898ft)
Distance	Not available
Grade	Moderate–Demanding
Time	6–7 days (including a rest day)
Altitude gain	2574m (8443ft)
Altitude loss	2612m (8567ft)

This trek starts at Haa town (or a little further north at Kajenang) and takes a westerly direction for three days, followed by a three-day return journey that ends at Lukha village just south of Haa. There are seven passes to be crossed, ranging from 3900m to 4256m. The lake of Nob Tshona Patta Tsho is the point of return, and a rest day there is recommended. Several routes lead to this lake.

Day 1: Haa valley to Tsokam, 4–6hr

From Haa town (2712m) drive/walk to the starting point near the village of **Kajenang** and start climbing (480m) to **Bjanadingkha** (Dragnag Dhingkha Lhakhang, 3230m). Continue climbing to **Tsokam** (3536m), where tonight's camp is located.

Day 2: Tsokam to Wanjithang, 5–7hr

A gradual ascent on a good trail leads to the passes of **Chozu La** (3900m) and **Tsabjo La**. The route passes near a huge meadow called **Yulo** (3840m); this is the last camp on the way back to Haa. At Yulo meadow several trails come together: from the north a trail descends from another pass, called **Tsabjo La North** (the route taken on the way back). To the west lies the pass for today, **Tsabjo La West** (4107m), which leads to the second camp, **Wanjithang** (3688m), in a huge pasture area.

Day 3: Wanjithang to Nob Tshona Patta Tsho, 6–8hr

Cross more high pasturelands with yaks to reach **Gongche La** (Ganche La, 4231m), the first pass, then follow a steep