

Rebgong (Tongren) རེབ་གོང་། 同仁县, 热贡



Above Rebgong

REBGONG COUNTY (TONGREN) རེབ་གོང་། 同仁县, 热贡

Famous for its *thangka* paintings (the valley is the major production center for the entire plateau, and an entire school of art is named after the region), Rebgong (Tongren in Chinese, and also known by the name Rongwo རོང་ལོ་ (ch. Longwu 隆务, 2600m) is a lively trading town and religious center for the surrounding valleys and grasslands. Overlooked by terraced ridges and looming grassy mountains, two of which are considered important protector deities, Rebgong stretches out from north to south along a terrace above the Gu-chu (Ch: 隆务 Longwu) river. The Tibetan section of town, which stretches south (uphill) from central Zhongshan Lu, is distinct from the newer Han and Hui-dominated neighborhoods to the north, where many new high-rises are going up. The center of town is the “big intersection” 十字路口 (shizi lukou), the intersection of Dehelong Lu (Tib: Taklung Lam) and Zhongshan Lu at the end of the massive white bridge spanning the valley.

Sights

Fronted by a large square with a statue of the goddess Tara (Drolma), the **Rongwo Gonchen monastery** རོང་ལོ་དགོན་ཆེན། (隆武寺, Longwu Si) is the main reason (other than shopping) that people from the surrounding region come into Rebgong. If you appear foreign, you may or may not be asked to buy an entry ticket (60元 adult, 30元 student/kid/old; tickets avoidable at the north gate) to this sprawling complex, which has a particularly impressive assembly hall. You can also do a *kora* around the monastery, where you will walk alongside mantra-chanting elderly pilgrims as you spin hundreds of prayer wheels.



Debate at Rongwo Gonchen

Other impressive monasteries nearby include the **Sengeshong monasteries** མེན་གེ་གཞོན་དཀ། (**Wutun** 吾屯寺), whose **upper** (yarngo gonpa ཡར་མགོ་དགོན་དཀ།, shang si 上寺) and **lower** (Sengeshong marngo gonpa མ་མགོ་དགོན་དཀ།, xia si 下寺) incarnations can be found in the eponymous *thangka*-painter-infested town located 6km downvalley across the river from Rebgong town. These monasteries, known for the quality of the *thangkas* they produce, contain especially ornate artwork. Interestingly, the inhabitants of Sengeshong village speak their own distinct language (not dialect, language) – a blend of Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian. Xining hostels and travel agents can arrange homestays in this village.

One kilometer across the valley lies **Gomar Gompa** ལྷོ་དམར་དགོན་དཀ། (国玛尔寺, guomar si) with its fabulously painted chorten outside. This village, along with **Nyentok** ལྷེན་ཏོག་མགོ། (Nianduhu, 年度乎, near the northern end of Rebgong town) and several others scattered across this section of valley, are also famed for their painters.

Around Town

Rebgong is a fantastic place to wander. As a major regional center, you'll see (and meet) lots of people from the surrounding farming and nomadic areas who have come to town for any number of reasons: buying and/or selling goods, going to the hospital, trading, visiting relatives, government/official business, visiting the monastery, going to school. The southern side of town is the best place to people-watch.

Good places to wander include: all of Dehelong Nanlu, especially the Himalaya Market (喜马拉雅市场 ximalaya shichang); the Zhongshan Market (中山市场 zhongshan shichang), and the small alleyways that make up the former villages of Sakchi (四合吉 siheji) and Rongwo (隆务 longwu), which hug the western hillside immediately north and south of the monastery respectively. Also worth a wander is the traditionally Muslim lower town, centered on the street that runs immediately parallel to the Gu-chu river. In recent years, the area has been re-oldified with surprising taste for China: all the buildings have been fronted with elaborate wood carvings skillfully executed by local artists, and streets have been

cobbled (rather than paved) with stones taken from a nearby quarry. Additionally, there are some truly old houses, shops, and small temples hidden back here – take a look! The currently-under-construction mosque is also worth a quick gander.

Hiking

The prefecture is your oyster; go out and explore. Just to the south of town is the beautiful Maixiu Forest Park (see separate section below) with no facilities or maps but gobs of breathtaking scenery and interesting village monasteries. From Rebgong itself, you can also hike up two major mountains, each home to important protector deities for the region: **Amnye Taklung** ཨ་མྱིས་སྐྱག་ལུང་, the 4000 meter peak that looms above the eastern side of the valley, and **Amnye Shachung** ཨ་མྱིས་བྲ་བྲུང་, the region's most important protector deity, which rises to 4767 meters just over the hills to the west. For a dayhike up **Amnye Taklung**, head to the south end of town, cross the river and ask locals the way to Gyelwogang རྒྱལ་བོ་གངས་ལྷོ་གངས་ལྷོ་གངས་། (Jiawugang 加吾岗) village (or find your own way – it's at top of the terraced pyramid hill southeast of town). From Gyelwogang, head uphill to a path that curves upwards to the right around the mountainside (or just work your way up the slopes). If you take the path, be mindful that you might run into nomad encampments on the ridge plateau above. From there, strike out on a well-defined path which runs the length of the long ridgeline, past several pools and finally up the summit pyramid for spectacular views which range from Jianza to the grasslands of Garze and Ganjia, as well as the Shachung range and beyond.

Amnye Shachung can be done as a day trip from a road which leads up the valley above Nyentok (年都乎) township, or as a long day trip/overnight from other (more convenient) starting points. For the day trip: take a taxi up the road leading westward up the side valley from Nyentok; the road will pass Shabrang village and then start to switchback uphill. The road will reach the top of a ridge and then wind across the mountainside for awhile before crossing a pass into an entirely different drainage. At the pass, you'll see a major motorcycle trail continuing straight ahead; this is your trail. Walk up the trail and eventually walk uphill to the right above a major fork in the valley. You'll start to see religious sites (*bsang* burning platforms, *tar-chok*, etc.); this is how you'll know you're going the right way. The Shachung peak is the pointed mountain directly ahead; make your way there via the pass to the left of the peak.

For a longer approach to Shachung, take a taxi/shared car up the Nyalung/Yalang ཉ་ལུང་ 牙浪 valley, or up the valley above Chuku རྒྱལ་ལྷོ་གངས་། 曲库乎 township (south of town), or really up any valley leading west – and from there strike out westwards, over hill and dale, across a small flattopped plateau and down another drainage (head west!) until you find yourself on top of the highest peak in quite a ways (I'm not going to give details; this is a somewhat complex trek and you should be good at routefinding to attempt it). **NB:** Many of Shachung's peaks are nearly the same height and it is quite easy to get confused in the mazelike upper valleys; unless you feel like getting lost and ending up in the next county, do satellite-map scouting before you go.

For more information about hiking in the Rebgong region (or just to the south), see the section on the **Maixiu Forest Park** below.

Lodging

Unlike Xiahe across the mountains to the east, Rebgong really has no foreigner-friendly, English-speaking accommodation. There is, however, a new hostel of sorts: the **Dreamland Hostel** 梦土, (dorm 60 RMB, private room approx. 200 RMB) located on the east side of the river (across the river from most of town). This is a beautifully designed place with several levels of decks providing spectacular views of the town, monastery, and river below. There is also a good restaurant and bar serving Tibetan food (along with a few western items), as well as a community library and (soon to come) a small, outdoor gym. Despite its inconvenient location, this become a sort of gathering place for the local community, and can be a good place to meet locals.

The best options for most, however, are usually the small, Tib-run guesthouses on Xiaqiong Lu (夏琼路, or Shachung Lam), the road which runs along the base of the mountain above town (from the main crossroads, walk in the direction opposite the bridge until the road ends at a T intersection; turn left). Good options here include the **Yangzom Hotel** གཡང་ཚོམ་གྲོང་ཁང་། 杨增宾馆 (Tib: Yangzom Drongkang, Ch: Yangzeng Binguan) **Rongwo Hotel** རོང་ལོ་གྲོང་ཁང་། 隆务宾馆 (Tib: Rongwo Drongkang, Ch: Longwu Binguan), with excellent and quietish locations immediately north of the monastery (100-120/room/night). Opposite the Rongwo is the cheaper, if slightly less classy **Snowland Peaceful Hotel** སེལ་མེད་ཀྱི་འཇམ་མཁའ་ལྷོ་ཁང་། 雪域和平宾馆 (Ch: Xueyu Heping Binguan), run by a delightfully friendly woman and her son, who is still a young whippersnapper but already a professional thanka painter. Nearby are other good options; anything that looks new will be nice. Farther down the road is another cluster of small hotels including the **Xueshan Binguan** སེལ་མེད་གྲོང་ཁང་། 雪山宾馆/**Gangri Drongkang** གང་རི་གྲོང་ཁང་། and a few nameless guesthouses.

Another decent option is the **Prefecture Party School Hotel** ཇུ་དང་མཉམ་འཇུག་གྲོང་ཁང་། 州党校宾馆 (Zhou Dang Xiao Binguan; yes, this is Party with a big P), which has spacious, clean two-bed rooms with private bathrooms for 100/night (on 中山路 Zhongshan Lu about 200-300 meters west (towards the mountain) from the main intersection; look for a courtyard immediately after the narrow market street). Other less-desirable options on Zhongshan Lu include the **Huangnan Hotel** རྒྱལ་ལྷོ་གྲོང་ཁང་། 黄南宾馆, (Huangnan Binguan) which is cheaper but grottier than the PPS Hotel (and across the street), as well as the **Telecom Hotel** ཇུ་མཉམ་འཇུག་གྲོང་ཁང་། 电信宾馆 (Dianxin Binguan) which, theoretically (despite the nastily rude attendants) is slightly more upscale (and priced as such). The **Education Hotel** ཇུ་མཉམ་འཇུག་གྲོང་ཁང་། 教育宾馆 (Jiaoyu Binguan) is newish and just north of the main crossroads. But if you want to be adventurous, you can find beautiful Tibetan-style accommodation at **Rebgong Home** རེགོང་ལྷོ་ཁང་། 热贡藏家 (phone 13209734095), located in a village about 1km north of Rongwo monastery (Weiwa Cun 唯哇村). Though rooms are small with a shared bathroom and shower, they are located in a beautifully renovated courtyard house within a peaceful village setting. The Tibetan restaurant which shares the premises may be the best in the prefecture.

Eats

Don't be limited by the Lonely Planet recommendations; there are plenty of delicious places to eat in Rebgong. My favorite **Tibetan** places are **Rebgong Home** 热贡藏家 (listed above; call first, as food is not usually available in the off-seasons) and **Drokar Tsampa**, located on the massive square in the newer northern end of town (taxi drivers will know where it is). Both of these places have English menus, though the staff can't speak English.

Many **teahouses** also serve good Tibetan food. The best in town are the **Tibet Tea Restaurant/Tibet The Restaurant** (different names on different signs) located about fifty meters north (downhill) of the

monastery on the main street, **Rebgong Teahouse**, located at the far southwest corner of Zhongshan Lu (again, both have English menus but no English speakers), and the nicely greenhouse-esque **Homely Teahouse/Fucai Restaurant** just downhill and across from the Tibet Tea Restaurant (news flash: now has trilingual menu! though many items are missing if your language is not Tibetan). There is also a good teahouse/restaurant on the Zhongshan Shichang (middle street), though it may take up to 90 minutes to get simple food (!).

For **Sichuan** food, there are several good restaurants on Dehelong Lu near the square at the north end of town. The **Sihai Chuan Cai** 四海川菜 in the Tongren Bo'ai Hospital building at the end of Zhongshan Lu (just left of the hospital entrance) is quite good as well.

And here's the randoms. For **baozi**, hit up a small Muslim restaurant on an alleyway heading west (right, if you're walking towards the monastery) from the Zhongshan Shichang (the market on the middle street), the tiny Xingyue Baozi shop on Zhongshan Lu, or a small Tibetan restaurant just south of Yifu Zhongxue (middle school); look for the steamers. Xiaqiong Lu also has a good (if tiny) baozi restaurant just south of the first T-intersection walking downhill from the monastery. **Shaokao** (BBQ) is good on Dehelong Beilu (walk towards the big square at the north end of town; by far the best is 玉峰小炒 **Yufeng Xiao Chao**, with shaokao only available after 7:00 or so) (**News flash: sadly, this place has closed!**). There is also a particularly excellent **meat jiaozi** place (the 热贡饺子馆) located just south of the Rongwo monastery. If you're jonesing for surprisingly delicious **western food**, try the **Gu-chu Cafe** (English menu and somewhat-English-speaking staff) located next to the vast new square at the northern (downhill) end of town.

Lastly, don't forget to try the delicious fresh **yak yogurt** sold everywhere around town. **NOTE: VEGETARIANS BEWARE:** Nearly of these places list "vegetarian" dishes on their menus; however, this usually translates to "less meat". If you want your food truly vegetarian, be very specific to the waiter.



From Amnye Taklung above RG town

Transportation

Around town, you can walk everywhere – though there are also taxis (4 yuan in town, 5 yuan across the river) and – news flash! – somewhat superfluous buses (1 yuan).

Getting there/away: You will be constantly accosted for **rides to Xining** (60元 per seat) on Dehelong Beilu opposite the square at the northern end of town (600m north/ downhill from the main intersection, just past the Yulong Hotel). In reverse, you can catch a ride from Xining to Rebgong from the **Huangnan Banshichu** 黄南办事处, about 100 meters west (along Dazhong Jie) from the Dazhong Jie and Delingha Lu intersection. In addition, buses run between the Xining main bus station and the Rebgong bus station (which is downhill from the main intersection on the street diagonally sloping to the north and down towards the river) every 20 minutes. Daily buses also run from Rebgong to **Xiahe/Labrang** 夏河 ཁོ་ཤར་ (25元, 2-3 hours, 8:00am) in Gansu province, a spectacular ride ascending through redrock canyons and forested gorges to **Garze**, then continuing through a spectacularly beautiful grassland region nearly all the way to Xiahe. Other buses from the Rebgong bus station include **Xunhua** (9:30 or so, maybe 10:30-11, 1:30, 3:00 or so), **Lanzhou** (6:50am, 7-ish hours) as well as to county towns within the prefecture (**Jianza** 尖扎 གཞེན་ཆ་, frequent, 1 hour; **Zeku** 泽库 ཅེ་ཚུ་ and **Henan** 河南 མོ་ལོ་མོ་རྩེ་, hourly until early afternoon; many of these buses are coming from Xining and stop at the opposite side of the Rebgong bridge). You can also get to these towns via shared cars (not too expensive) which can be found near the main intersection. There are also direct buses between Zeku and **Linxia** 临夏 (in Gansu) that pass through Rebgong around midday or early afternoon, as well as another that plies a route from Linxia through Rebgong, Zeku and **Tongde** county to **Dawu/Golog**. Both of these buses stop at the far side of the Rebgong bridge; however, sometimes they inexplicably fail to come. **NB:** If it happens to snow even a dusting, expect all official transport to shut down indefinitely. Your best hope at these times is to catch a through bus (inexplicably, buses from higher and snowier places are often still running), meet up with people on Zhongshan Lu or in the bus station parking lot to charter a van/minibus, or pay through the nose (usually 100 kuai or more!) for a seat in a car to Xining.