

DESTINATION SPOTLIGHT 

Exploring the Sacred TSUM VALLEY

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**TSUM COMES
FROM THE TIBETAN
WORD “TSOMBO”
WHICH MEANS
VIVID.**

Tsum Valley is situated in the northern Gorkha district of Nepal, surrounded by the Buddha Himal with Himal Chuli to the west, Ganesh Himal to the south, and Sringi Himal to the north. Tsum is one of the eight sacred valleys (called Beyuls) in the inner Himalayas and owes its genesis to the 8th century Buddhist saint Padmasambhava. Legend has it that Padmasambhava created beyuls as a refuge for people fleeing from the adverse effects of war, famine or from religious persecution. Saturated with Buddhist culture, these valleys uphold religious values and help preserve the lost way of life. Tsum valley is inhabited by Tsumbas, an indigenous community.



Tsum Valley is situated in the northern Gorkha district of Nepal,

Together with the majestic backdrops of the famous Ganesh Himal, Sringi Himal and Buddha Himal, this serene valley carries a history of ancient Himalayan civilization styles; culture, art, tradition, religion, customs and thinking.



View of Rachen Gompa, at the foot of a hill



IN AND AROUND TSUM VALLEY

Place like Tsum and other remote Himalayan villages have a long history of flourishing Buddhist religion and culture and had its extensive influence. The ancient remains are also vividly visible these days and can be seen by anyone.

When you reach the first settlement in Upper Tsum, you immediately feel as though you have been transported to another world. The valley is beautiful with small and very decorative stone-built settlements, cultivated fields, crystal clear streams, massive forests and towering snowy 7000 m peaks. Walking along the old Nepal – Tibet caravan path leads you to Mu Gompa, which was established in 1895 A.D. and restored in 1998. Close to Mu Gompa is the oldest monastery in the valley – Dephyudonma Gumba, founded about 700 years ago.

The landscape is dotted with mani walls, chortens and kaanis (gateway chortens). Chortens are Buddhist religious monuments, also known as stupas, which are distinct features in Tsum Valley. They are erected to ward off evil spirits from places that are identified as thresholds

such as confluences and bridges or to commemorate the visit or death of historic figures, lamas or even relatives. Kaanis are also called gateway chortens placed before the entry of any village which travelers are supposed to walk through. Mani walls are long walls made of mani stones i.e. stones with carved mantras. The main purpose of these mani walls is to ask the help of the gods for the wellbeing of travelers.

Around Tsum Valley, at higher altitudes, closer to the glaciers and snow peaks, there are a few circular routes. The best thing, after observation of Upper Tsum from Chhokangparo up to Mu Gompa, is to take a day's rest and continue exploring the valley. Two routes are especially



A family praying-room at a Lower Tsum village





The setting sun casting a golden glow over the Ganesh Himal range



Prayer flags fluttering

recommended; a high altitude hike around Mu Gompa and another one around Ganesh Himal Circuit. The first one starts from Dephyudonma Gumba. This trail takes 6-7 days and ranges in altitude from 4000 to 5000 m. The trail is the same one that local people use to go to Tibet. Caravans of yaks travel to Tibet every two months to get the necessary food supplies for monks. The highest pass here is Ngula Dhojhyag (5093 m). The area is home to fauna such as blue sheep, yaks, naks and chauris.

The second trail is the one to Ganesh Himal Base Camp (3888 m) from Dumje. In the past this trail was only used by monks and nuns. A glacial lake called Kangthang can be seen from

the lap of Ganesh Himal. For the avid trekker and even for those who might not be as familiar to high altitude treks, the Tsum valley is truly a delight.

A WORLD WITHIN ITSELF **What not to miss in Tsum Valley**

Upper Tsum Valley is a separate world where nature, people and spirit co-exist in harmony. The people here never slaughter animals, not even as sacrifice to the gods as is customary in many parts of the world. Every single family sends a child to the local monastery to become a monk or a nun. Rachen Gompa is the biggest nunnery/monastery in the val-

ley with life size statues of Avalokitesh-wara, Guru Padmasambhava, Tara and Buddha Amitabha. The interiors of this monastery are richly painted with murals depicting Buddhism. Tara, an avatar of the Buddha, is worshipped from September to November. During this time the nuns are invited into the villages for ceremonies.

Piren (pigeon) Phu (cave) - also known as Milarepa cave- located in the village of Burji, is one of the most sacred caves in Tsum Valley. The great Buddhist Yogi Chyuchin Milarepa is said to have meditated here once. Footprints of the great



Nile-Chhule settlement



Sacred Stupas (chortens) near Milarepa's Cave

1. Chortens near Mu Gompa
2. Young monks prepare lunch inside Mu Gompa
3. Karma Lama, whom we called Ama(mother), entertain guests at her home in Chhokangparo



Buddhist Yogi Chyuchin Milarepa have been preserved here. The cave is probably the largest and the most popular cave in Northern Gorkha. There are two separate gumbas attached to the same rocky cave which houses the life size statues of Avaloketishvara, Budhha, Tara and Milarepa.

Kyimulung is the sacred and secret Buddhist pilgrimage circuit in the mountains around Tsum Valley in a 30 km radius of the Nepal-China border. It is bounded by Lajyang Bhanjyang in the west, Thapla in the east, and goes through places such as Chhekam, Philim, Sirdibas, Dyang, Bihi, Namrung, Prok and Lho in Nepal and Rui Gaon, Ning, Sala Himal and Nyang in Tibet. Buddhists circumambulate the region clockwise. It takes about 30 days to complete the circuit.

Buddhist religion has a keen sense of beauty- a mystic sense of nature that plays an important part in leading the mind from the mundane to the higher and deeper world of the divine and in

transforming mere existence into an experience of living with wisdom and compassion.

HOW TO GET THERE

Explain yourselves properly, abide by the simple rules and you shall be treated like one of their own.

The real gem in Tsum valley is the Upper Tsum valley. You can visit Upper Tsum valley by availing the services of a local professional guide. Two special permits are needed and these permits can be prepared in Kathmandu. Help is also available from the Tsum Welfare Committee (TWC) if you think you need help planning your itinerary. Please note that no guesthouses or lodges are available once you enter Tsum valley. Local families often provide accommodation for small groups. Explain yourselves properly, abide by the simple rules and you shall be treated like one

of their own. In many homes, people will not accept money for lodging and will only charge you for the food. Feel free to pay a little more but do not force them to take money for lodging. This might offend some locals.

A FORGOTTEN CORNER OF THE WORLD

Tsum valley might be popular for being a forgotten, exotic corner of the world, but people here should not be reduced to being put on show.

Due to inaccessibility, remoteness and migration of the youth to urban areas, this sacred valley and its people have been suffering from a major economic and developmental setback. Suppressed by the challenges of everyday life, they have been forced into becoming a minority. The art,

culture, tradition and religious values of this place near the danger of total extinction. Hence, it is as much the responsibility of travelers who visit the place as it is of the government to promote the place in order to help protect what this place stands for. Tsum valley might be popular for being a forgotten, exotic corner of the world, but people here should not be reduced to being put on show. If you go to Tsum valley, tell friends and family about the place but do not forget to mention the people and the conditions under which they are living. Help develop Tsum Valley.

NOTE

Explore Himalaya Travel & Adventure runs treks to Tsum valley and Ganesh Himal Circuit. For detailed itinerary of Tsum Valley Trek browse www.explorehimalaya.com