

## **Muktinath to Kagbeni alternative day 960m↓ 3-4hrs**

A far more scenic and less trafficked route, which avoids all the jeeps and is in the sun rather than shade, descends from Muktinath to Kagbeni through Jhong (Dzong) on the north side of the valley. It also gives a taste of the forbidden Mustang kingdom as the villages are built in Mustang style and are part of the Sakya Buddhist tradition.

Here are some details since many Around Annapurna maps don't show this route and there has been confusion over whether it is a permitted route. It is permitted and the locals are very glad to see trekkers using it, but some officials have yet to catch up with this fact.

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On the left at the archway, at the top of Ranipauwa going towards Muktinath, look for an ACAP sign saying Garge Chyoling Nunnery and Chhongkhar Jhong. Take the trail along an irrigation ditch past the hydroelectric station, cross the Jhong Khola and come into Chhongkhar (Chhengar) after about 25 mins. The distinctive red, yellow, black and white stripes of the Sakya sect on houses, the flat roofs and the view of Mt Dhaulagiri are all very photogenic.



Chhongkhar from Ranipauwa looking north



Chhongkhar house with distinctive red, yellow, black and white stripes of the Sakya sect

In the lower village, look for an unlikely right-hand turn to three ochre chortens overlooking a swing bridge. Cross and descend to Jhong (Dzong or 'fort') after a further 0.5hrs. There is one lodge near the ruins of the fort and a restaurant by the mane wall, not always open. The fort is Rab-rgyal-rtse (Peak of Supreme Victory). The old gompa with 20 monks is definitely worth a visit, with statues of Sakyamuni and Tenzing Repa (entry Rs100, photography permitted).



Jhong with remains of the 'Peak of Supreme Victory' fort and Sakya sect *gompa* above. The jeep road is across the valley



The untrafficked road past Putak, view back up to Jhong and Thorung La

20 mins further down, below the road, is Putak (Bhed) which is worth looking around but currently without trekker facilities. Continue down the road to a swing bridge after 15 mins, cross or use the road if it has been repaired, climb over a pass to some unusual mineral springs and huge eroded hills after 30 mins. The goats from Kagbeni are grazed over these immense empty slopes during the day – you will see small L-shaped stone shelters for the shepherds against the notorious up-valley wind. Follow the walking tracks that cut corners on this unused road, descending to the right of a small range on the where blue sheep have been sighted in May. Enjoy the views into Mustang but don't go there.



The eroded hills of the mineral springs area, about 1 hr below Jhong



Kagbeni goat grazing lands looking towards Mustang

About 2 hrs from Jhong you will see Kagbeni below on the left, below strings of prayer flags. The up-valley wind may be fierce and dangerous. Drop to the road to the north and look for a very narrow unlikely gully that drops you steeply to Kagbeni in 15 mins. The road can also be used but is very exposed to wind. If questioned by ACAP on arrival (since you appear to have come from Mustang), just say 'Jhong aune' (coming from Jhong).



Descending the rocky goat gully to Kagbeni

By the way, it is now permitted to visit the first village above Kagbeni, on the left looking upstream, called **Tirigaon**. Either cross the swing bridge across the Kali Gandaki out of Kagbeni or use the riverbed if the river is low. It takes about 1 hr to reach Tiri, also called Ty locally and Ting-ri by David Snellgrove in 1956. There is sometimes a bhatti in an orchard just before the climb to the gompa where simple meals can be obtained. The rest of the village is typical of Mustangi villages further north but has no trekker services yet. The Sumdu Choeden complex above consists of a recently repaired and relatively uninteresting gompa, monks quarters and a small but fascinating nunnery with one attendant nun. Find her for the key and leave donations both for her and the nunnery. The excellent slate-carvings of four guardian kings, which we were told were carried from Tibet, are around the inner entrance, while the antechamber has some fine paintings of monks on stone behind glass. Photography is not permitted.

Sue and Howard Dengate (November 2010)

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