

A STATE OF GRACE

Bridges connect the nunnery of Yarchen Gar to the male monasteries. The island has no running water or electricity, and the nuns must also endure long winters, where temperatures can drop as low as -30 degrees Celsius, yet they will often stay here for several years of study.

Living on a prayer

Set at 4,000 metres up on the harsh Sichuan grasslands, the island nunnery of Yarchen Gar is home to over 10,000 nuns. It is the site of the world's largest gathering of practising Tibetan Buddhists, drawn here for the chance to hear the teachings of Asong Tulku, a highly revered spiritual leader. With more Chinese converting to Tibetan Buddhism, the remote region is witnessing improvements to its infrastructure, making it more accessible to intrepid travellers like recent visitor, photographer **Dave Stamboulis**.



IN THE MULTITUDE

Nuns and monks gather for the teachings of Asong Tulku, a venerated spiritual leader who attracts pilgrims from across China. The teachings occur every morning for several hours, and during festivals, can last for days. While Yarchen Gar is other-worldly any time of the year, early November sees the start of a 100-day meditation ceremony during which thousands of nuns enter their makeshift hillside cubicles to meditate, before emerging en masse to the main temples to join the monks in rites presided over by the head lama.



**WHERE PEACE
RESIDES**

Meditation huts sit on the hill above the nunnery. During festival and times of study, nuns will enter into solitary confinement in these crude shelters, some remaining in prayer for up to three months. Brought food and water by other nuns, they will only leave their individual huts to use the toilet.



SOUL SISTERS

Two nuns greet each other while spinning prayer wheels, a central part of their Tibetan Buddhist faith. Also known as Mani wheels, these devices are believed to spread well-being and spiritual blessings to others.



SEEKING REFUGE

A nun walks past a long line of prayer wheels. Many of the nuns and monks in Yarchen Gar have expressed extreme thanks for being able to live and study here, with valuable teachings and teachers available and more opportunity to learn than in Tibet, where religious controls are more strict.

GETTING THERE

The easiest way to reach Yarchen Gar is to hire a private taxi from Chengdu. The breathtaking mountain journey to Garze, the nearest city to Yarchen Gar, takes anywhere from six to nine hours, depending on the state of the highway (currently being upgraded). From Garze, it's a one hour trip up onto the plateau.



SilkAir flies daily between Singapore and Chengdu