

Gasa Tsachu: The Hot Springs of Gasa

The hot springs of Gasa, known as the Gasa Tsachu, are so important to the Bhutanese that there are two oral traditions accounting for their origin. Some believe that the hot springs date back to the time of Drupthob Terkhungpa (ca. 13th century), when he was believed to have scattered 128 varieties of medicines in Gasa, from which 128 hot springs or *tsachu* (ទស្ស) and medicinal springs or *menchu* (មេងស្ស) emerged. He is also said to have built 108 chortens after making 108 *tsha-tsha* miniature stupas of mud kneaded with his urine.



Drupthob Terkhungpa
Photographer: Dasho Sangay Khandu

Others claim that when Zhabdrung Ngakwang Namgyel (1594-1651) came to Bhutan in 1616, he entered through Gasa, and before he proceeded to Punakha, he visited to Gasa Tsachu to relax there for a few days with his followers and patrons. It is believed that Gasa Tsachu relieved Zhabdrung from his immense joint pain and fatigue, and therefore he personally blessed Gasa Tsachu to remain in perpetuity.



Mural painting of Dendup Norzang, a deity of Gasa Tsachu

Photographer: Dasho Sangay Khandu

The local deity of Gasa Tsachu is Dendup Norzang, who is believed to reside in a dense forest across the river. Visitors do not enter the deity's domain. Legend says that Dendup Norzang was a wrathful demon before Drupthop Terkhungpa converted him into a peaceful dharma protector. The households in the villages near the tsachu make offerings to the deity in their annual lochö ritual. Many visitors make appeasement offerings to Dendup Norzang before enjoying the waters. The deity is not often shown in visual form, but after much research, the former Lam Neten of Gasa Rabdey, commissioned a painting of Dendup Norzang based on texts dedicated to his worship.



Abode of Dendup Norzang, Gasa Tsachu deity

Photographer: Sonam Chophel



Gasa Tsachu at the bank of the Mo Chu River

Photographer: Sonam Chophel

Gasa Tsachu is situated near the bank of the Mo River at an elevation of 2100 meters in Gasa Dzongkhag, approximately a two hour drive from Punakha. They are considered among the highly respected and most visited hot springs in Bhutan. Thousands of people visit the *tsachu* every year during the winter months, as most believe they heal ailments. The Gasa Tsachu was damaged by flooding in July 2009 and has since been reconstructed. To accommodate increasing number of visitors, buildings for lodging have also been constructed. The hot spring of Gasa is now comparatively well-appointed with separate pools for different temperatures and the implementation of behavioral and cleanliness standards.



The people have a slow relaxing time in first pool of Gasa Tsachu

Photographer: Dr. Karma Phuntsho

According to the Gasa Tsachu caretaker, there are four pools; the first pool has curative properties for several diseases, believed to cure thirteen different types of diseases known collectively as *neyrig chusum*. This is where the medicine thrown by Terkhungpa is believed to have landed. It is said that the second pool offers a cure for gout and lymphatic diseases, but it is not good for people with high blood pressure, malaria or jaundice. The third pool is said to be a good for fracture and diseases related to poisons, but is not good for people with high blood pressure or neural diseases. The fourth pool is a good cure mainly for colds and dermatological diseases, but pregnant women and people with high blood pressure are advised not to bathe in it. Young children are advised not to remain in the fourth pool for long periods and even adults are advised not to remain in the fourth pool after sweating twice. All are cautioned not to drink water from the fourth pool.



Gasa Tsachu caretaker, Dargo narrates the history of Gasa hot spring

Photographer; Sonam Chophel

There are many medicinal springs near the hot spring, such as the Yama Menchu medicinal spring located just above. To the right is a medicinal spring called Gama Menchu, and to the left is a medicinal spring called Jagay Menchu. The best time to visit to bathe in the hot springs is between mid-October and the end of the January.

It is also good to dip in the hot springs and medicinal springs during the autumn season, when trees and grasslands change color. It is even good to dip during the spring as the flowers and trees begin blooming and can cause irritation.

Sonam Chophel is a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research.