

# Tibet - Against The Odds

It was November, a magnificent time to be amongst the mountains of Nepal. Clear cobalt skies, bright sun shine and magnificent views. I had just completed a short trek into the Annapurna Sanctuary and now, sitting in a light aircraft on my return to Kathmandu, I had time to savour the excitement of my main reason for being back on the Roof of the World. I was actually going to Tibet. To Shangri La, that high altitude moon scape where the people lived on tsampa, yak meat and rancid, butter tea, mystical Lamas levitated and the dead were fed to vultures.

Just the name "Tibet" conjured up feelings of intrigue. It was a place that had never been easy to reach due to its geographic isolation, Tibetan isolationism and, most recently, Chinese censorship. It was forbidden fruit and consequently all the more desirable. Getting in was against the odds and knowing that I was about to was exhilarating.

At the time I knew very little about Tibet. It was materially backward and less tainted by westernization, but forcibly occupied by the Chinese. How had Tibetan culture fared in this environment I wondered. Certainly the Tibetans I'd met in Darjeeling and Nepal were enchanting people. Would they be the same in their overrun homeland? That seemed against the odds too, but time would tell.



A dramatic contrast . Above, Mount Everest from the southern side of the Himalaya and, below, a view of the Tibetan Plateau on the northern side



Because entry to Tibet for foreigners was restricted by the Chinese my only option at that time was to join an escorted tour group. This isn't my preferred style of travel, but I consoled myself that visiting Tibet as part of a group was better than not visiting at all. Besides, a few group imposed restrictions might heighten my empathy towards the far greater restrictions being endured by the Tibetan people.

Back in Kathmandu I met my group of eight westerners, had a short briefing from Tibet Tours and Travels, our host and made some last minute preparations, primarily to secure a stock of passport sized Dalai Lama photos. Next morning we boarded a China Airways jet bound for Gonggar Airport. The weather was clear. I pinched myself to make sure that it wasn't all just a dream.

## Day 1 - Kathmandu to Zetang

Certainly the views from our aircraft were dreamlike. The familiar, lush, terraced terrain I enjoyed as we flew east from Kathmandu was quickly replaced by deep valleys and mighty snowclad peaks. The aircraft banked northwards as we reached our cruising altitude of about 10,000 metres. We were crossing the border between Nepal and Tibet at a point marking a high pass across the Himalaya.

To the west was Sagarmartha (Nepali for Mount Everest) but, no, I reminded myself, I'm in Tibet now and the tallest mountain is known by Tibetans as Chomolungma. Even viewed from 10,000 metres, she asserted her absolute dominance over everything else. I could distinguish Lhotse, Nuptse and Makalu amongst the sea of peaks and glaciers, but because there were so many peaks, it was difficult to identify many others as we drifted swiftly by. From the other side of the aircraft, looking east, I could see Kanchenjunga towering over everything else.

As I watched, a startling transformation unfolded. The shades of blue, green and black of Nepal gave way to golds and browns and the earth's surface was suddenly much nearer to us. Unmistakably, we were flying over the Tibetan plateau, which has an average height of 4,500 metres. In the rain shadow of the main Himalayan divide, the snow line had risen to 6,000 metres and the mountains now appeared to be sprinkled with icing sugar rather than smothered in heavy snow and ice.

Although numerous mountains still punctured the terrain, they were spaced more widely and the land in between them was much flatter than on the Nepalese side. Dark green rivers looped their way amongst the mountains, giving some relief to an otherwise desolate domain. I could see virtually no vegetation, but this only served to accentuate the striking turquoise lakes that blinked skywards like precious jewels.

A particularly large, gleaming lake came into view. It was Yamdrok Tso, the deepest lake in Tibet. I looked forward to when we would pass along its rocky shores in two days time.



Onboard the aircraft time passed very quickly. While still transfixed by the scene below me, a surprisingly large airstrip came into view. It had to be Gonggar, which was confirmed as we started our descent.

Gonggar airport lies 130 kms south of Lhasa in the Yalung valley. Reputedly the cradle of Tibetan culture, my first impressions, as I set foot on Tibetan soil, were not Tibetan. Multitudes of green uniformed, peak-capped Chinese officials stood about the place. Most were still teenagers, neither hostile nor welcoming, probably just feeling awkward, but certainly omnipresent.

The arrival hall served far more effectively as a fridge than a place to receive people. Maybe the intention was to numb the minds of all foreign guests from the outset, in the hope that they

wouldn't notice the extent that the Chinese seemed out of place on the plateau.

I discovered later that the boxlike concrete architecture of Gonggar Airport was entirely consistent with modern day Chinese architecture throughout Tibet and much of mainland China at the time. In Tibet it served as a stark contrast, accentuating how the Tibetan buildings blended so naturally with the landscape.

Eventually we made it through passport control, feeling relieved to be out of the 'fridge'. Through customs we were met by Mr Wu, our official Chinese guide. Mr Wu was a tall, skinny, conscientious fellow, with round glasses, in his mid twenties, who spoke relatively good English.

To be fair to him, he had a difficult assignment. He was young and Chinese. His group were all mature, well educated, western individuals sympathetic to the plight of Tibetans. I could see by his tenseness that he realized this. At least his group were reasonable people who also realized Mr Wu's predicament. We didn't seek to make him any more uncomfortable than he already felt.

As it turned out, over the following week Mr Wu made a genuine effort to show us as much of native Tibet as his people's rule book would allow. At times, he even tolerated the odd infringement, giving us a little extra rope by which we could explore just a little outside our prescribed itinerary. We appreciated this very much.

Like most Chinese I have met, Mr Wu proved to be a perfectly nice individual. I have often pondered how the Chinese en masse could be so inhuman in Tibet when, individually, they are just human beings with the same hopes and dreams as anyone else.



Decorative stucco on a Tibetan house in Lhasa

Also waiting for us through passport control was Pemba, a huge, self confident Tibetan who was to be our driver. In Tibet drivers are treated a bit like royalty. Tibet is a huge place, roughly the same size as western Europe and much more difficult to negotiate. A good driver was worth his weight in gold and Pemba knew it. Adding to his prestige was that his vehicle was a luxury, air-conditioned mini coach, not that Pemba drove it any differently than he would have one of the ubiquitous heavyweight Chinese army lorries so common in Tibet. On the rugged dirt roads snaking across the plateau this proved to be a mistake later in our journey.

Everyone managed to connect with their baggage and we were soon bouncing along the Yarlung valley on a dirt road towards Zetang. We encountered mainly two kinds of vehicle along the way, heavy Chinese lorries and motorized rotary hoes, converted into modes of transport by attaching trailers to them. People neither had the money nor the time to waste on impractical cars.

As the lorries thundered by, clusters of magnificent, long haired yaks scattered in panic. These beasts of burden had been partially superceded by motorized vehicles around the more urbanized regions close to Lhasa but, as we traveled further afield, we realized that they still provided the main form of transport, haulage and sustenance in Tibet.

The Tibetan houses impressed me. Although of similar boxy shape, they were larger than those I had seen in the Solu Khumbu, implying prosperity. Normally two or three storied buildings, with attractive stucco decorating the whitewashed walls, in each corner of each household short poles with colourful prayer flags protruded, protecting the inhabitants from evil spirits.

Grazing around the houses were very peculiar looking sheep. Their sides had been shorn while the full length wool on their backs had been dyed an earthy orange colour. Punk sheep, surely not! From the windows and doorways of the houses came spontaneous, friendly waves of welcome. Mr Wu smiled.

Zetang was a hick town, a sprawl of Tibetan and Chinese buildings about 195 kms southeast of Lhasa. The general store was mildly entertaining, due mostly to the humorous glances the locals gave me, although the hotchpotch collection of merchandise was rather quaint as well.

Having just been hiking in the Annapurna Sanctuary, I was coping well with the sudden 2,700 metre altitude gain we'd made since leaving Kathmandu. Some of the others weren't faring so well. Head aches and nausea were common complaints, but these symptoms disappeared after a day or so as everyone acclimatized to the higher altitude.

### Day 2 - Samye

Next morning the conditions were typically harsh. A blazing sun burned relentlessly down from a clear sky, while an icy wind bit our exposed skin and churned dust into our eyes and mouths. We bumped along beside the Yarlung River in our luxury mini coach for about 40kms, dismounting at Samye Dukou, a well used ferry crossing point for pilgrims wishing to visit the oldest monastery in Tibet, known as Samye.

Here was our first chance to rub shoulders with real Tibetans. With us, they waited to cross the Yarlung River. Dressed in all manners of attire, they made a fascinating picture. I suppose we had a similar impact on them too.



One of our fellow passengers on the ferry across the Yarlung river

I wanted to photograph one particularly pretty young woman, but she was rather shy. Maybe a Dalai Lama photo would give her courage? Of course, it worked like magic. Regrettably, the portrait I took wasn't a very good one, but I still remember vividly her look of complete adoration when I placed the little passport sized photo in her hand. She stared at it for a moment then, as she went to put it inside her coat next to her heart, she quickly took it out again to reassure herself that, yes, she really did have her own little portrait of her God King. I was actually a little startled, witnessing for the first time just how deeply Tibetans love their spiritual leader.

At first glance, Tibetans are simple folk from a spartan environment. But what they lack in the physical world they make up for in the spiritual one. Fundamental to their belief system are the concepts of compassion and impermanence. When the notion of rebirth is added, it becomes clear why they place such little emphasis on things material. Tibetans laugh often, even in times of extreme adversity like the Chinese occupation they continue to endure.

Tibetans are devout Buddhists. This is undoubtedly what enables them to remain strong in the face of oppression. Their branches of Buddhism are unique, having strong linkages with Bon, the Shamanist religion that prevailed in Tibet prior to the onset of Indian Buddhism.

Tibetan Buddhism, whatever stream it takes, is central to a Tibetan's life. It not only shapes the way they think, but also what they do on a day to day basis. It is normal to see Tibetans spinning prayer wheels and chanting mantras, almost as second nature, as they go about their business. Making pilgrimages to chortens and gompas are a regular, often very time consuming and physically exerting pastime. So is the circumvention of mani walls, sometimes several kilometres in length, as they are encountered on mountain trails or in towns and villages.

I dwelt upon the dramatic contrast between my own life and those of the locals I sat with as we picked our way through a maze of sand bars in the shallow, broad waters of the Yarlung River. The slow journey took about an hour and, once on the far bank, we all boarded an open topped Chinese lorry to cover the remaining distance across golden sands to the small village of Samye.

As we approached Samye Monastery, once a complex of 108 buildings and the oldest of all Tibetan Monasteries, I hoped that the damage inflicted on the sacred site by the Chinese would not be too great.

Samye is set in a wide, flat valley surrounded by snowless peaks. Completed by King Trisong Detsen and Padmasambhava in 779, it represents the cradle of Tibetan culture. Although many of the 108 buildings have disappeared, the central temple stands tall. Ironically, while the first level is of Tibetan architectural style, the second level is Chinese and the third Indian, signifying the origins of Tibetan culture.

I was initially impressed, then relieved, as we approached the monastery. It loomed over the mud walled dwellings spread out around its base. The gilded rooves gleamed in the harsh sun and monks seemed to populate all the levels. It looked at once formidable yet beautiful. The interior lived up to the exterior's grandeur, with intricately carved and painted frescoes, columns, doorways, Buddhist statues and thankas.



Outside and within  
Samye Gompa

To visit any Tibetan gompa is a very special experience. They espouse peace and nonviolence and, whilst being steeped in mystique, resulting from their great age and the strong feeling of spiritual serenity that pervades, a Tibetan gompa is a living place. Monks and devotees are always there, doing what they have done for so many centuries, giving and seeking spiritual guidance and

traditional cures for physical ills. The head monk, known as the Lama, is believed to possess magic, healing hands.

For a westerner, being in such a place can be a pertinent reminder of just how materialistic and unnecessarily complicated we sometimes permit our lives to become.

Samye was indeed impressive, but I wanted to get a better feel for the entire complex. Mr Wu agreed that, if I hurried, I could climb the hillside to the east of the village to get a view. I puffed my way up about 100 metres in the thin air to a little, white stupa. The view back was worth the effort.

From my vantage point I could see busy farmers cajoling their yaks to plough faster while women bent over, tending crops. Well defined and orderly plots fanned out in all directions, accentuating the Gompa as if it were the centre of the universe. Pilgrims made their way in a clockwise direction around pilgrim circuits and monks moved about in the main courtyard of the Gompa. The hills surrounding the valley, although devoid of snow, dwarfed all manmade objects. The limitless, blue sky in turn dwarfed the hills. It suddenly struck me again that I was actually in Tibet. And it was big, both in terms of physical dimensions and spiritual impact.

### Day 3 - Zetang to Gyantse

Day two involved a 310km journey from Zetang to Gyantse, Tibet's fourth largest city. For the first two hours Pemba zoomed us along relatively level road beside the Yarlung River. Then we headed south, climbing quite rapidly up a dirt road that deteriorated as we ascended. As we neared Kamba La, a prayer flag strewn pass at 4,900 metres, Pemba's driving skills became increasingly questionable. His approach entailed charging all obstacles at what ever speed was achievable with his accelerator foot jammed to the floor. Hairpin turns, pot holes and mud patches all crashed by in a vibrating blur. I wondered how long our comparatively delicate coach was going to withstand Pemba's punishment.

Arriving at the pass unscathed, we all got out for some fresh alpine air. While a stiff wind whipped the multitudes of weather beaten prayer flags into a frenzy of prayer sending, I marveled at the scene spread out before me over the pass. Directly below



Samye Gompa viewed from the surrounding hills

lay Yamdrok Tso. Its almost luminous, turquoise coloured waters seemed to soak up the suns rays, radiating them back skywards in brilliant turquoise. The hills surrounded the lake in rich shades of brown and gold while, in the distance to the south, a beautiful snowclad mountain range graced the near horizon. I figured that this must be Kula Kangri, a 7,553 metre peak lying on the border with Bhutan.

I was relieved to find Pemba taking the downhill section a little more sanely. Even so, it didn't take long to reach the lake shore at 4,480 metres. As we traced the sweeping bends of Yamdrok Tso, the scenery resembled more and more that near Sagar-martha in the Solu Khumbu, only flatter. Glaciers extended like gnarled, icy fingers from the snowy peaks high above us.

Sparkling streams supported little explosions of plant life and Tibetan families, who had built their whitewashed, mud dwellings near their sustaining waters.

At a convenience stop we were surprised when a group of hunters materialized, seemingly out of nowhere. All sported ancient, flint lock rifles and one had a clutch of soft, red fox pelts that he hoped to sell us. It never ceased to amaze me how people appeared unexpectedly in the most remote places on the plateau. In such a vast, inhospitable and materially backward place, the local people were incredibly mobile.

We began to climb noticeably again. This heralded our approach to Karo La, which we breached, at speed, at 5,010 metres. Once over the Karo La, during the 75 km descent to Gyantse, the scenery underwent another perceptible change. As the mountains receded, wide open, desolate valleys painted in shades of red and gold dominated. Nearing Gyantse, the scene became more fertile, featuring large fields of golden barley, interspersed with numerous little Tibetan villages. Little, white stuppas dotted the hillsides, yaks toiled ponderously at the behest of their hardy masters, or grazed contentedly in the fields.

At face value, the only evidence of any Chinese influence was the occasional destroyed gumpa. Everything else seemed to be as it might have been for centuries. The people I saw during the entire journey along the southern route to Gyantse were also unmistakably Tibetan. There was no evidence of the ubiquitous blue Maoist suits - all were dressed in Tibetan clothing. It was surprising and reassuring.

Our first sight of Gyantse was of the Dzong, a formidable looking fort planted firmly atop a prominent high point some 200 metres above the surrounding plain. Even in ruins, the Dzong commanded our skyward gaze. It conjured up images of courage and desperation in my mind's eye. In 1904 Gyantse was the site of Tibet's last gallant attempt to halt the British Expeditionary force led by Francis Younghusband.



Above, looking across Yamdrok Tso to Kula Kangri from Kamba La

Below, a view towards Gyantse from Karo La



Since 1268 the Gyantse Dzong had controlled passage along the silk route. Its location was ideal for policing those who trod it and for extracting taxes. Maybe the 1904 defenders felt confidence in the Dzong because it had performed so formidably for so long but, given the gulf between Younghusband's modern weapons and the Tibetan's ancient muskets and slingshots, it was a tragically one-sided confrontation. The result was 2,700 Tibetan deaths, Younghusband lost 40 of his troops, but his passage to Lhasa was assured.

Thankfully, Chinese destruction was less evident. Due to the shape of the crescent ridge enclosing the old part of town, virtually all Chinese construction had occurred outside the old city walls.

Gyantse lies 250 kms southwest of Lhasa at 3,950 metres, housing a population of 10,000. Once a major wool craft centre, the trade had struggled to re-emerge since Chinese occupation almost snuffed it out. To view old Gyantse from either the Dzong, at the eastern end; or the crumbling city wall above the fabulous Pango Chorten and Palkhor Choide Gompa, at the western end; was one of adventure travel's rare privileges. To see it was to see a concentrated dose of Tibetan culture, encapsulated within the easily digestible confines of the brick-red city walls.

### Day 4 - Gyantse to Shigatse

Waking with a head cold, spread through the tour group via the air conditioning in our now battered mini coach, I got my chance to explore Gyantse at dawn. As I walked briskly along the wide main street, exhaling warm mist into the biting air and marveling at the imposing silhouette of the Dzong, roosters announced the arrival of the sun's first rays on the town. It was 8.30 am Beijing time. Eventually I reached a high point on one of the pilgrim circuits up behind the chorten where, below me, another day in Gyantse unfolded.

Pilgrims circumvented the beautifully decorated, nine leveled chorten as the all seeing eyes of the Buddha, painted on the outsides of the ninth level, gazed down approvingly. This spectacular chorten, standing since 1389, is shaped like a three dimensional Mandala, representing the Buddhist universe. The pilgrims also moved purposefully around the neighboring Gompa, constructed by members of the Gelukpa sect, turning scores of golden prayer wheels as they passed. In and out of the Gompa, up and along the ridge, tracing ever larger pilgrim trails they went, until their energy failed them.

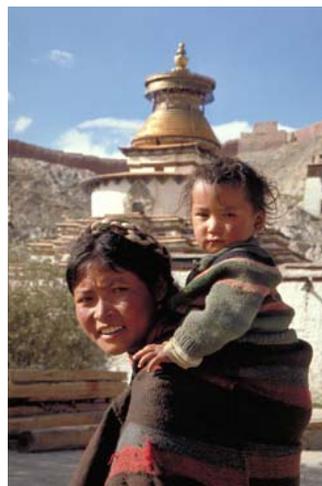
Smoke rose from the crumbling chimneys, people took sun on their flat rooves, or passed the time of day trading market items or just talking in the wide main street linking the Dzong with the Gompa. In narrow, meandering alleyways many dogs snarled at passing strangers.



Left, a view of the Gyantse Dzong at dawn, from old Gyantse

Bottom left, locals outside the nine leveled chorten

Bottom right, a section of the chorten



Before midday we were once again careering along madly at the mercy of Pemba. Our destination was Shigatse, Tibet's second largest city, 90 kms northwest of Gyantse. It shouldn't have taken very long to cover the distance across mostly flat terrain, but Pemba's aggressive driving style finally caught up with us. Half an hour out of Gyantse our rear axle snapped. Clunk, that was that, so it seemed!

Luckily we ground to a dusty halt close to a roadside village, so Mr Wu swung into action. While he made arrangements for a Chinese lorry to take us on to Shigatse, we enjoyed the spontaneous opportunity to mingle with the villagers.

It felt a little awkward at first, a bit like a group of earthlings unexpectedly bumping into a group of Martians. We had our bright, tidy, western clothes, shiny cameras, recently shampooed hair and white faces. They had their ragged, dust covered jackets, babies slung onto their backs, disheveled, matted hair and wind burned, leather faces.

But we all shared one universal trait, curiosity. Initial barriers dissolved and soon little clusters of villagers followed each of the group's every move. One of my wealthy American colleagues made the naive gesture of giving one of the tenacious little children some money. Predictably, the crowd went wild, everyone trying to get their own personal handout. For a few moments I thought it would all end in tears and when the crowd eventually calmed down I was quite relieved. At least my group had learnt the price of playing God.

As the minutes passed into hours, the villagers started to drift away. This gave me an opportunity to take some photographs and also to sit quietly next to a roadside cobbler, watching his earthen, yet nimble fingers at work.

Eventually a lorry arrived and Tibetan style, packed into its open tray, we rumbled our way into Shigatse. It was late afternoon, but there was still sufficient daylight for me to explore the scarce remains of the once mighty, fifteenth century Samdup-tse Dzong, as well as the flea market and narrow alley ways at its base.



Luckily one of my group members joined me. He proved to be a good companion as we negotiated the narrow alleyways leading indirectly to the foot of the Dzong, because we needed one another to watch the other's back. If the rubble strewn paths and open sewers didn't get us, the savage hounds lurking around every blind corner and in every low doorway probably would. It was quite un-nerving and, on several occasions, we had to hurl rocks at advancing packs of vicious mongrels before finally reaching the trail leading up to the ruined Dzong.

I had heard tales about the savagery of Tibet's canine population. Huge, fearless Tibetan Mastiffs guarded their master's tents on the wide expanses of the plateau, but meeting them in heavily populated areas was an unpleasant surprise to me.

The exertion and anxious moments were worth it when we reached the top. Before us, on a flat plain, lay a tranquil panorama giving no hint of the unpleasant surprises lurking in the many alleyways below. Bathed in golden, evening light were the whitewashed, low level houses and shops of the 40,000 people of Shigatse. The city glowed in the soft light, beautifully complimented by a band of reddish gold hills behind.

As the sun sank, the vast bulk of the ruined Dzong asserted its shadow on the town, a timely cue for us to make a hasty descent. Neither of us relished the prospect of picking our way back through those inhospitable alleyways in the dark.

The main reason for our journey to Shigatse was to visit the cream, brown and ochre coloured monastic city of Tashillunpo. Built in 1447, Tashillunpo is the official seat of the Panchen Lama, head of the Gelukpa or Yellow Hat Buddhist sect. This spiritual leader, claimed by some to be a reincarnation of the Dalai Lama's tutor is, in the eyes of Tibetans, second only to the Dalai Lama.

### Day 5 - Shigatse to Lhasa

The day we explored the wonders of Tashillunpo it happened to be the anniversary of the death of the first Dalai Lama. Our timing was fortunate, as it meant we were able to see the gumpa at its liveliest. Tibetan pilgrims were everywhere, busily draping delicate, white scarves in homage to multitudes of Deities.



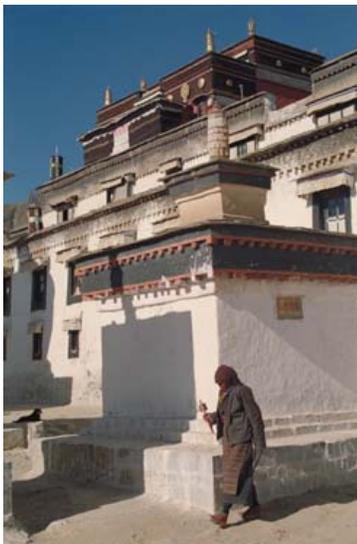
The main entrance to Tashillunpo Monastery, Shigatse

The most impressive deity was housed in the Hall of the Maitreya. Meaning Buddha of the future, Maitreya is seated on a lotus and plated in 10,050 ounces of solid gold. He is the largest statue of Buddha in Tibet, standing 27 metres tall, with three metre long ears. Aside from his gigantic size, the dimly lit, ancient chamber encasing him added to the mysticism I felt there. Going by the hushed tones and wide eyes of the pilgrims, it appeared that they felt it too. In many respects, he embodied the same spiritually moving qualities that the Himalayan mountains do.

I came upon another smaller chamber, filled by maroon robed, chanting monks. The hypnotic hum of their chanting rose and fell. I imagined what it must be like inside a beehive and felt somehow envious that I didn't also belong to such a closeknit fraternity as the monks appeared to enjoy.

Outside the many chambers, pilgrims dutifully made their way around meritorious circuits, within the complex itself and then outside the walls of Tashillunpo. Some were satisfied simply to walk, as they caressed rosaries and rhythmically spun portable prayer wheels, known in Tibet as Khor-lo. Others prostrated their way around the grueling outer circuit, which led them high onto the ridge above Tashillunpo and over towards the ruined Dzong. Such religious devotion has never ceased to amaze me.

We came upon a large courtyard surrounded by lavishly decorated frontages. At one side a Tibetan orchestra played. To my western ears it sounded more like a mysterious concoction of thunder clashes, from large cymbals, and booming whale flatulence, from two very long horns. Monks sporting ceremonial garb danced in slow motion to the strange music, waving long swords this way and that. The Tibetan audience seemed entranced, no doubt following some ancient tale as it unfolded in the dance. For me, the pace was too slow and, in my ignorance, the movements held no significance.



A pilgrim at Tashillunpo

The highlight of this leg was the opportunity to observe modern day Tibetan fishing techniques in action. As we passed a wide section of the Tsangpo, we were startled by a loud thud. Out on the milky, turquoise surface of the river floated a small yak skin boat containing two enterprising Tibetans. The thud had been a submerged stick of dynamite exploding and, as we got over the shock of it, the 'fishermen' casually went about harvesting their catch.



At a festival at Tashillunpo

Tracing the west wall of the Kyichu valley, we rounded a bend and suddenly, there before us in the distance, stood a majestic edifice. There was no mistaking the Potala. Despite the absence of the Dalai Lama himself, his official winter palace continued to watch over his kingdom's largest city, as it has since 1643. As if reaching to the heavens, it stood as an architectural

testimony to the indomitable spirit of the Tibetan people.

We departed for Lhasa around midday. Mr Wu had done well, successfully arranging the overnight dispatch, from Lhasa, of a replacement mini coach. Pemba seemed unmoved, indicating that replacement vehicles may have been a regular occurrence for him.

By the central route, we sped along tarsealed roading beside the surging waters of the Tsangpo River. Valley walls soared above for much of the journey, until we reached the broad expanse of the Kyichu valley on our final approach to Lhasa.

I had grandiose preconceptions about what the Potala would be like. Seeing the real thing for the first time, I wasn't disappointed. The building is on a grand scale, 13 floors together reaching nearly 120 metres in height, more than 1,000 rooms, 10,000 alters and 200,000 Buddhist statues. The almost sheer, cream and burnt ochre walls, gilded rooves, and huge, tangled clusters of prayer flags could not fail to impress.

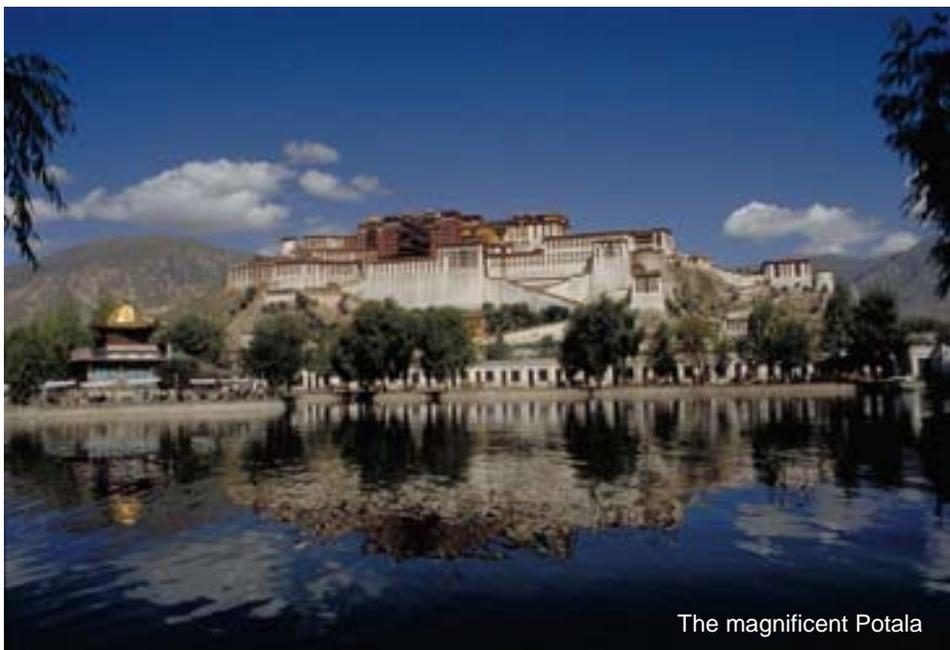
Just as the Dalai Lama is Tibet's equivalent to the Pope, so the Potala in Tibet can be likened to the Vatican in Italy. Potala is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Bodala', meaning Buddha's mountain, signifying just how sacred this place of Tibetan worship is. The People's Liberation Army shelled it during the 1959 uprising, but even the Chinese realized what a treasure the building is and put a stop to the destruction before it was irreparable.

Lhasa, situated at 3,683 metres, has variously been both the religious and political centre of Tibet. Its population of 150,000 makes it by far the largest city in Tibet, but less than a third of those living in Lhasa are Tibetans. Consequently, a large part of the city is characterless Chinese concrete. There is a Tibetan quarter centred on the Barkhor Bazaar, which I was itching to explore. I hoped that Mr Wu would give us a little slack the next day when we were scheduled to call there.

We checked into the Lhasa Holiday Inn at dusk. The standards in this hotel were a great deal better than our first encounter with Chinese accommodation back in Zetang so, from a third level balcony with beer in hand, I struggled to come to terms with the dramatic contrast between my own cocooned luxury and the realities of life outside the hotel walls. Historical accounts by people like the English explorer Manning, Younghusband and Lowell Thomas Junior all make reference to the squalor in the streets of Lhasa. Many of those shoddy streets spread before me then, but I found it difficult to drag my gaze away from the Potala, which loomed up directly ahead. When the last rays of the sun had gone, I slipped back to the centrally heated comfort of my room to watch Rambo, first blood.

### Day 6 - Lhasa

Next morning began auspiciously. Whether it was due to arriving in the holy city, to having witnessed Rambo's super human carnage the previous evening, or simply to coincidence, my digestive tract ended its four day strike.



The magnificent Potala

Feeling considerably more comfortable, I was shepherded across to the Potala by Mr Wu. The Buddha's Mountain was swarming with pilgrims. Although it was intriguing to look behind the mighty walls at what was contained in the many assembly halls, meditation chambers, shrines, chapels, mausoleums and private apartments, I found that pilgrim watching was even more entertaining. They came from all over Tibet, an astoundingly diverse group, all sharing one common, unshakable devotion.

Some of the most notable types of pilgrims were trendy Lhasa urbanites, wearing an amusing blend of western and Tibetan clothes; swarthy, dust-caked peasants; volatile Khampas, easily distinguished by red or black twine braided into their hair and by the prominently displayed daggers under their belts; Golok nomads from Qinghai province, distinguished by the Golok women with waist length, yak butter smeared, plaited hair; and monks, representing all the main Tibetan Buddhist sects from all over the plateau.

Inside the Potala our group might have been invisible. In competition with the sights offered in the Dalai Lama's official residence, we held no interest for the pilgrims. Here was another reassuring indication of how strong a Tibetan's faith was.

That afternoon we visited the true heart of Lhasa. Known as the Barkhor, this is a bazaar shaped roughly as an octagon, with the most holy gumpa in Tibet, the Jokhang, located at its centre. Therefore, the bazaar has become one of the most colourful pilgrim circuits in Tibet.

Before 1949, traditional, three leveled Tibetan housing totally surrounded the Barkhor. Narrow alleyways weaved towards it from all directions. The Barkhor and, more specifically, the Jokhang appeared suddenly and dramatically. Today, it is still possible to experience this sensation on five sides of the octagon, but not at the most spectacular front side of the Jokhang, where a wide concrete courtyard has been laid.



Pilgrims queuing inside the Potala



The courtyard at the front of the Jokhang

Although this courtyard is not a part of Lhasa as Tibetans had created it, it has nevertheless become a colourful, usually happy, gathering place. My first sighting of the Jokhang was still a most memorable one. Before me, a sea of Tibetans went about their business to a backdrop of cream and rust brown walls and gleaming decorative roofing. The same diverse mix of pilgrims that I had enjoyed watching up in the Potala now wandered about, while merchants and beggars cajoled them, artisans entertained them, tourists photographed them and Chinese soldiers quietly oversaw them.

I joined the throng, marveling at the sheer variety of sights and sounds. Eventually I reached the front of the Jokhang but, even before I got there, I could hear a strange scuffing sound. It was the sound of scores of pilgrims prostrating on the stone floor before the huge main entrance to the Jokhang. I stood watching this for 30 minutes or more, during which time most of the prostrators continued their deliberate rhythm unabated. The huge flat stones forming the floor had been rubbed silky smooth, like river boulders. My mind boggled at the thought of how many prostrations it had taken over the centuries to achieve this.

From the courtyard, people funneled off to the left, moving in a clockwise direction, around the Barkhor. The entire circuit was lined with markets, little shops, street vendors and prayer wheel stations. On sale were curios and ornaments, carpets, turquoise, coral, silver and other jewelry, daggers, animal skins, yak meat and other edibles such as yak cheese and yogurt, prayer flags, ceremonial scarves, khor-lo, thankas, clothing, Tibetan remedies, even Dalai Lama photographs, in fact anything a pilgrim could possibly want.

It took more than two hours to circumnavigate my way twice around what I guessed to be about a one kilometre circuit. I might have taken longer if I hadn't been obliged to meet the rest of the group outside the main entrance of the Jokhang.



The Jokhang was founded in 650 by Songtsen Gampo, who was instrumental in establishing Buddhism in Tibet. Throughout its history, the Jokhang has always played a significant role. Unlike other Tibetan gompas, the Jokhang is used by all Buddhist sects, making it a spiritual centre for all Tibetans. It has, at times, been a centre for various different sects as well. During the 1959 uprising, Tibetan freedom fighters used the gompa as a refuge,

mistakenly believing that the Chinese would not have the gall to attack it.

Although the Chinese have imposed strict rules on what the monks are permitted to let tourists do inside their gompas, our monk was clearly more concerned about giving us the best insight he could about the Jokhang. In typically hospitable Tibetan style he answered our questions, permitted us to

At the agreed time, Mr Wu diligently gathered together his little flock and ushered us past many prostrating pilgrims into the gloom of the Jokhang. We were met by a very charming, bald, old monk who spoke passable English. In his crimson robe he led us past long banks of golden prayer wheels, into the main chamber on the ground level. We were the only non residents in the gompa, so enjoyed plenty of space to move around.

The Barkhor is a great place to meet some of the many colourful characters of Tibet

take photographs and let us explore the many chambers on four levels. There were 20 chapels on the ground level alone, dedicated to deities, saints and kings. Leading us to a small chapel at the back of the ground level, he unlocked the heavy, wrought iron, chain curtain that barred our entry. Inside, surrounded by extravagant ornamentation, precious jewels and protective deities, was the Jowo Sakyamuni, most revered of all statues of Buddha in Tibet.

Although it is uncertain whether the statue is original, or had to be replicated following the handiwork of the Red Guards, its aura remained. The Sakyamuni is 1.7 metres tall, a statue of the Buddha at twelve years of age. Said to be one of only three statues crafted of the first Buddha while he was alive, the statue is beautiful, covered in gold and inlaid with many precious stones. It is believed that Princess Bhrikuti Devi brought the statue from her Nepalese home in the seventh century when she traveled to Tibet to marry Songtsen Gampo.

Apart from the Sakyamuni's obvious fascination, the whole gomba oozed character and mystique. The exquisite frescoes, carved architraves and columns, statues and thankas were delicate, yet seemed as much a part of the harsh Tibetan plateau as anything else. With the absence of pilgrims, the dim light of countless yak butter lamps gave the illusion that the Jokhang lacked life, but a torch beam confirmed that Tibetans have used bright, vibrant colours since the ancient times when they applied them to the interior of the Jokhang.

I explored my way up through the levels, eventually finding myself out on a huge flat roof. In contrast to the interior chambers, the roof was bathed in bright sunlight, which glinted off multitudes of gilded friezes, cornices, statues and roofing panels. Even more enchanting was the spectacle spread out directly below me outside the main entrance. The sound of cloth rubbing on stone amplified upwards, accentuating the deliberate efforts of the prostrators. From my vantage point they were oblivious to my presence, perfect circumstances for a photographer.



By gazing outwards, I could take in the whole courtyard, many of the houses in the Tibetan quarter, which reached a maximum of three levels in deference to the four leveled Jokhang and, in the distance directly ahead, an unimpeded view of the magnificent Potala. The omnipresent reddish gold hills and alpine blue sky provided the perfect backdrop. I stayed there as long as I could,

relishing the ambience and pondering about how similar my view could be to that enjoyed by the angels in heaven.

That evening, well meaning Mr Wu took us to a "genuine" Tibetan restaurant. Here I encountered yet another irony. The food and surroundings didn't seem very Tibetan at all, but Dave, another member of my group, and I did end up sharing a genuine Chinese frontiersman's experience.

The sacred Jowo Sakyamuni, housed inside the inner-most chamber of the Jokhang

Dave was the eternal joker come party animal. Action at our table had all but died out so Dave had gotten himself into an hilarious sign language conversation with a group of stolid looking Chinese soldiers. He couldn't speak any Mandarin, they couldn't speak any English, but they all seemed to be engrossed. Dave kept them entertained for some time, but there's only so much that can be done with sign language. He was struggling, but clearly wasn't ready to retire. "Hey, Pete, come over here and meet some friends of mine." The fateful words had been uttered, I complied and, for the next few hours Dave and I took on the might of China in an orgy of drinking, arm wrestling, Indian leg wrestling and knuckle bashing contests.

We actually fared quite well, against the odds you might say and, in the finish, we all parted the best of friends. The soldiers ceremoniously presented each of us with a people's fountain pen, which I later found didn't work, then gave us a military escort back to the Holiday Inn, in the cab of one of their lorries.

I felt strangely emotional when we said farewell. I felt like I should hate them for what they represented in Tibet, but that was quite impossible because they had been very warm acquaintances, just a bunch of young men seeking fun and companionship, like Dave and I. I considered the notion about soldiers being just pawns of politicians. Could that excuse them for the brutality so many of them had committed in Tibet? In my drunken state it was all too hard, so I went to bed.

### Day 7 - Lhasa

On our last full day in Shangri La we ventured outside central Lhasa. Spread over a large area up on a hillside west of the city, lay the monastic city of Drepung. Founded in 1416 as a Gelukpa monastery, it became the largest monastery in the world - in its heyday housing 10,000 monks. Although now being rebuilt following the Chinese invasion, only 400 monks lived in what remained of the once gigantic complex.

I found the cavernous, soot coated kitchen particularly interesting. Monks stood on tables, pumping long staffs in and out of giant butter tea churns. The colourful rock paintings on the hillside high above the buildings were also memorable, as was the view back towards Lhasa.



Making butter tea in the kitchen at Drepung Monastery

In the afternoon we visited the Tibetan Medical college of Lhasa. Although Tibet is still in the dark ages in some respects, this can not be said about their medical prowess. However, it follows a very different approach to Western medicine. Tibetan medicine focuses on energy flows, seeking to treat causes of illnesses rather than their symptoms. Herbal remedies and acupuncture also play an important part. The medical college housed a huge range of elaborate medical thankas, outlining Tibetan medical theories and approaches.

### Day 8 - Lhasa to Kathmandu

Next morning, at breakfast on the day of our departure from Tibet, I met a Frenchman who had spent two months in Tibet in 1985 when, for a time, the Chinese permitted independent tourists to enter. That door closed again in 1987 when Tibetans staged another uprising.

At first, he surprised me by explaining that Tibet seemed more 'Tibetan' now than when he first visited. But when I thought about my own preconceptions about Tibet under Chinese occupation, I had to agree that Tibetan culture was more prevalent than I'd expected too. This realization consoled me as we set off for a last look around the Barkhor before our departure for Gonggar airport.

Despite the beautiful clear morning, for some reason the atmosphere in the Barkhor had completely changed. Chinese soldiers marched around briskly in squads, any Tibetans about no longer beamed big smiles, or sought to sell things to us and the atmosphere was electric. Mr Wu explained quietly that it was soon to be the anniversary of the 1987 uprising and the Chinese were not about to tolerate any nonsense.

Being there in the Barkhor enabled me to more vividly imagine how I would feel if uninvited foreigners had brutally forced their way into New Zealand and, once there, ran about with guns telling me what to do and how to behave. I felt outraged but, under the circumstances, I would have been naive and foolish to show any form of protest.

I hope at least that the words and images on these pages will help more people to form their own sympathetic opinions about the plight of the Tibetan people, thereby adding weight to the growing international opposition to the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

Our return flight to Kathmandu was just as beautiful as our outbound leg the week before, crystal clear weather and calm conditions. Strange then that, when we arrived back at Kathmandu airport, I met several long faced Westerners who all told the same tale of woe, their flight to Gonggar airport had been cancelled "due to bad weather". Maybe so, but these unfortunates all made a common wrong assumption, that Mother Nature was to blame. The official line would have been more accurate if it had read "due to bad political weather". I realized then how lucky our group had been, how privileged we were to have been given a glimpse of the forbidden land.

The Tibetan people have been molded by thousands of years living in a unique, isolated and hostile environment. By western standards they are technologically and economically backward,

but it is now widely accepted that they are spiritually and intellectually advanced, in terms of religion and medicine.

Tibetans have learnt to live in synchronization with nature. To them the Chinese occupation, although catastrophically brutal and far reaching, is but a blip in their amazing story. It appears that it will take more than Chinese persecution, ignorance and arrogance to snuff out their spirit. Tibetans seemed to me to embody, in human form, the heart and soul of the Himalaya. I had been privileged to get a glimpse of that soul.



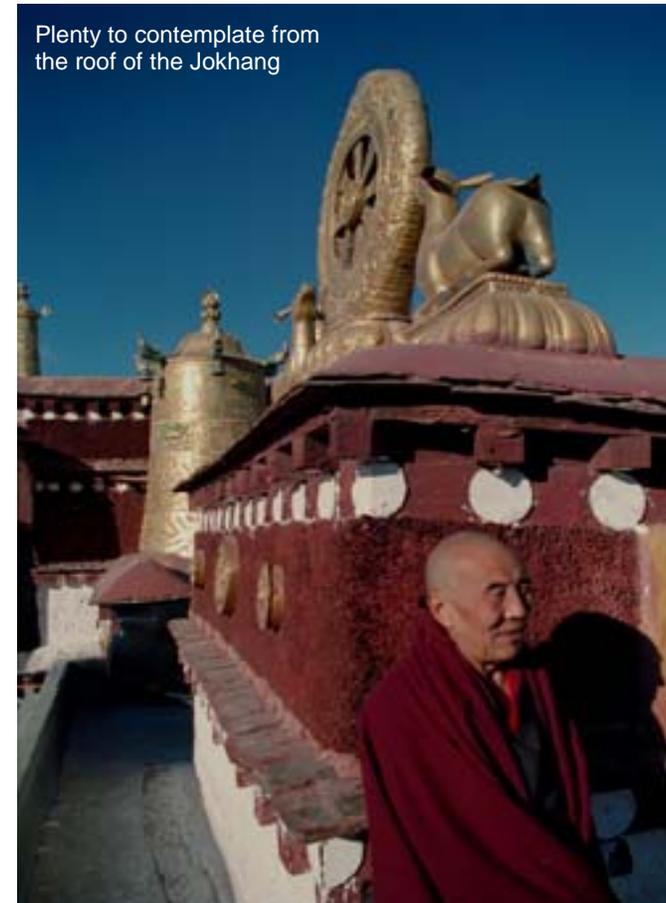
Symbols of Tibetan faith - prayer flags in the Barkhor  
Below, an example of the devastation following Chinese occupation - ruins at Drepung Monastery



## Tibet - Against The Odds

Tibet's isolation, whilst opening a door for the red guards to flood through in 1949, may in the end be their ultimate route to cultural and spiritual survival. Motivated by concern for the survival of the Tibetan people and their unique culture, the West is finally speaking out against the Chinese occupation. Yet, a much subtler, but potentially far greater threat to the survival of unique cultures is westernization itself.

The processes of industrialization, modernization, urbanization, consumerism and democracy have fundamentally altered cultures all over the world, to the extent that they are barely recognizable as distinct cultures anymore. Will this be the final irony in the story of Tibet's struggle for survival, as Tibetan refugees, forced from their homeland, gain exposure to the material comforts and notions of the west, ultimately losing their own faith in the process?



Tibet is a unique treasure of nature and of mankind, struggling to survive against daunting odds. Their devotion and tenacity have forced a shift in China's stance, which appears to soften as the years pass. But it is not the Chinese who hold the only key to Tibet's survival.

# Tibet

