

# Across Tibet To Chomolungma

I have visited Tibet twice. The first time was in November 1990, as part of an escorted tour group departing from and returning to Kathmandu in Nepal. That journey gave me an insight into one of our planet's most intriguing natural and human domains. I came away yearning for a chance to explore it further. My second visit granted me that wish and was an experience I'll never forget. Just getting there was an adventure.

In life it's often the case that great opportunities present themselves unexpectedly. During my overland journey from Karachi to Hong Kong in 1992 that's exactly what happened.

## Getting There - An unexpected Return

Heading north along the Karakoram Highway, I met travelers moving in the opposite direction. Several mentioned rumors about Tibet being unofficially open to foreigners. "Open" in the sense that foreigners could travel into and around Tibet without the burden of a special permit, or the constraints of having to belong to an escorted tour group.

It sounded too good to be true, that is, until I met a fellow New Zealander who had just come from Tibet himself. Alex Jack explained exactly how it could be done, including how to avoid the numerous check points on the Golmud - Lhasa road and how to visit, on foot, the base camp of the north face of Chomolungma. His accounts sounded amazing but feasible, although there was no guarantee of success. I had only been to Tibet once before as a group member on a one week tour. How wonderful it would be to enjoy the freedom to explore that mystical moon land unescorted. I had to try it.

I made my way north to the Khunjerab Pass (4,730 metres), marking the border with Pakistan and China and also the point where the jutting Karakoram mountains give way to the much gentler Pamirs. From the Pass, a long, grueling bus ride took me down off the broad, rounded, alpine domain of the Pamir.

The contrast was dramatic crossing the desolate, parched lowlands of the Tarim Basin. Here I stopped for several days in the ancient, Uigur town of Kashgar before travelling northeast, through the concrete jumble of Urumqi, to Turpan.



Sandhills in Dunhuang - a long way from the mountains of Tibet

Said to be the hottest place in China, Turpan lies in an arid dust bowl some 150 metres below sea level. In terms of altitude, this was about as far away from the Tibetan Plateau as I could get on earth.

From Turpan I traveled southeast to the oasis town of Dunhuang in Gansu Province. Appropriately, as I drew nearer to Tibet, Buddhism again became a feature, manifesting itself in the 366 AD Mogao Caves, lying close to Dunhuang.

Dunhuang was, for a time, under Tibetan control in the ninth century so, in a sense, this heralded the start of the Tibetan section of the Silk Route and also my own return journey, overland from China, into Tibet. Next stop was Golmud, 16 hours of monotonously straight gravel road away, directly south of Dunhuang, in Qinghai Province.

Golmud gave no hint that I was drawing nearer to Tibet. It was a gray, sprawling, concrete, Chinese outpost, but a visit to Golmud was a necessary evil. Being located closer to Lhasa than either Kashgar or Chengdu, it was the obvious Chinese entry point for me.

The prospect of returning to Tibet left me a very restless sleeper. It was no effort rising early the morning after arriving in Golmud to go forth into 'battle' against the Chinese ticket agents at the government-run central bus station. Moving from ticket window to ticket window, the only response I could elicit was a chorus of "Maos" (the ubiquitous Chinese word for "no, not possible, go away you tiresome foreign barbarian, don't bother me now or ever"), followed by either blank or hostile gazes. Apparently the news that foreigners were permitted to enter Tibet had not reached the seething metropolis of Golmud.

Unperturbed, I tried a private bus depot near my guest house. To my delight I met with instant success, securing a 'luxury class' seat, regretfully in a 'catapult slot' at the very rear, on an 'express' bus to Lhasa. A feeling of de javu was followed by memories of an earlier journey from the Indian border up to Kathmandu four years earlier. The 950 km journey was expected to take between 30 and 50 hours depending on the state of our vehicle, which included a short overnight stop just before the Qinghai/Tibet border. Our scheduled departure was midday.

Luckily, I arrived early at the depot as, miraculously, our bus departed ten minutes early. It was indeed completely full, with a mixture of grimy western travelers (like myself), Tibetans and Chinese. As the bus pulled out of the depot, the dull, gray sky couldn't diminish the rush of elation I felt. I was actually on my way back to Lhasa.



A seemingly endless road leads to the Tibetan Plateau from Golmud

While the wheels of the vehicle laboriously bumped their way over the endless gravel road, my excitement and anxiety mounted. I hoped to enter Tibet by the Tang La, reach Lhasa and then reassess my options. My only preconceived objective from the outset was to trek the 100 km walk, from the Lhasa - Kathmandu road, to the north face of Chomolungma. But would the Chinese turn us back?

That fear was first put to the test only 32 kms out of Golmud as we approached the first of four checkpoints that Alex had warned me about. The unwavering grind of the engine was

sweet music as the bus passed through checkpoint one without even slowing. My fears diminished a little, but the dreaded fourth checkpoint at Nagchu, 350 kms north of Lhasa, where it was rumored that westerners had been turned back as recently as a week before, kept me on edge well into the following day when we finally reached Nagchu.

The first ten hours saw us trundling across a vast, rocky plain. Although barely perceptible, an average speed of 32 km per hour confirmed that we were gaining altitude.

Eventually, huge rounded hills, like the ones I had seen in the Pamirs, started to close in around us.

Just before we began climbing in earnest, a mobile check point appeared suddenly and this time, the green uniformed Chinese officials not only required our driver to halt, but also that we all dismount. My pulse raced, making my feelings of relief and amusement all the more acute when one of the officials said "Welcome Tibetan autonomous region. Have nice stays our lovely country. You like photo?"

After much photo taking, hand shaking, back slapping and 'cheesy' grins, my confidence level was boosted another notch as we reboarded the bus. Soon we were 'snail pacing' upwards into vast, rounded, icing sugar capped mountain ranges. About sunset we approached the first of three high passes. This one lay at 5,010 metres but, being outside Tibet's borders, it seemed naked without its compliment of colourful prayer flags. Mother Nature made up for it by bathing the mountains in orange velvet, reminding me how lovely it is to be amongst high mountains.

On we went into the night. Our speed had picked up since descending from the pass and consequently, I endured the joys of riding the catapult seat for several hours. Mercifully, at 12.30 am, 380 kms from Golmud, we jolted to a halt at the Toutou Heyan truck stop.

An unlined shoe box in a sewer would have made a plausible resting place after the 12 hour shakeup, but the grim faced, mean eyed dwellers at the truck stop tried diligently to magnify our discomfort.

After fleecing us of as much cash as they could without inciting a riot, in surly grunts they herded us toward what any civilized individual would justifiably have mistaken for a derelict chiller.



Symbols of Tibetan Buddhism

By dim candle light we exhaled mist while stumbling around dank, stone cells trying to locate our bedding. Eventually, an orderly chaos prevailed, with a bus load of weary passengers huddled under damp yak skins. Outside, fierce dogs growled, the Toutou Heyans cursed and, with a deliberate clunk, one of them rammed the outside bolt to our only exit home. We were in for the duration, whether we liked it or not.

The cold, musty dampness wasn't the only cause of discomfort that night. We had ascended more than 3,000 metres that day, now attempting to bed down at 4,600 metres. This inevitably resulted in major discomfort for some of the westerners. As they groaned and tossed fitfully, other more lucky passengers snored, bouncing amplified grunts and snorts off the stark, stone walls. I suffered the agony of a bursting bladder for as long as humanly possible, before finally being forced to face my dilemma. Should I wet my yak skin, or stumble out into the cold shadows in search of a place to relieve myself?

A little while later, in desperation, I shoved at the bolted double doors of our exit. They buckled, just opening enough to let me poke my shriveled apparatus through. In urgent ecstasy I prayed that one of the huge hounds out in the yard didn't have a liking for 'one eyed trouser snakes'.

Next morning, at 6.30 am, as we made our way back on to our bus, I reassured myself that no one would be sufficiently alert to notice the peculiar green tinge in the ice that they walked across outside the entrance to our cells. And besides, if they felt anything like me, they would be preoccupied with an ambition to put as much distance between them and Toutou Heyan as quickly as possible. That's just what we did, but agonizingly slowly.

Two hours of upward progress found us on the 5,180 metre Tang La, just as the sun popped over some distant mountains. The gray of the previous day had been replaced by brilliant blue. This, and the dancing prayer flags and beautiful, wide open vistas were truly a sight for sore eyes. Mother Nature seemed to be in a very good mood and, after all, there was reason to celebrate, as Tang La marked the border between Qinghai and Tibet.

Everyone got off the bus to take in the view and attend to bodily needs. A group of Lhasaites quickly formed a circle on the newly sun-drenched earth, laying out various items for a typically Tibetan picnic breakfast. How natural they appeared, relaxing on home turf once again.

But in the back of my mind a nagging fear marred an otherwise idyllic situation - today was 'Nagchu day'. I had ample time to dwell on this as we averaged a crawling 24 kms per hour between Toutou Heyan and Nagchu. It took nine hours to cover 220 kms.

At least the scenery improved by the minute as we passed Tibetan hamlets, nomad encampments, herds of woolly yaks, sheep and goats in huge, rolling, green pastures and endless mountain peaks. I looked out for signs of Wen Quan, reputedly the highest town in the world at 5,100 metres, but I couldn't spot anything. Our third checkpoint at Amdo came and went without incident, followed soon after by a beautiful lake on our right side, known as Amdo Tsonak Tso.

As we drew nearer to Nagchu, I studied the detailed map that Alex had expertly described to me back in Gilgit, while his words again ran through my memory.

"Make sure you get off the bus at a little bridge on the main road north of Nagchu. There's a low ridge that shields you from the guards line of sight. But don't go any further or the guards will see you and you'll be history. The checkpoint's at the northern end of town, but the terrain is mostly flat so you can see the checkpoint clearly, a big, red, brick building with a noisy generator.

Before the ridge, duck off the built up road and follow a fence line to the right. This will link up with a footpath leading over another little bridge, which leads to a quarry on the left across the river. On the town side of the river are a group of white tents.

Keep low and just follow the river past the quarry, past a little gumpa and then around a little hill that shields you from the main road leading south from Nagchu.



Spirited urchin, made in Tibet.  
Military cap, made in China



Once you get back to the main road outside the southern end of town, just stick out your thumb and hope a truck will be along soon. Good luck mate, it worked for me.”

I didn't relish the idea, but was prepared to give it a go if need be. At 3 pm we approached the bridge Alex had described. I quietly gritted my teeth, crossed my fingers and legs and waited agonizingly to see what would happen. Sure enough, the ridge came and went, the little white tents came into view on our right and the hateful, red, brick guard house loomed nearer, and nearer, and then... we sailed right through checkpoint four without missing beat.

I couldn't believe it at first. Nagchu had taken on larger than life proportions during the long hours of waiting and pondering we'd gone through on the journey. Maybe it hadn't been Nagchu yet? But it had to be, everything on Alex's map checked out. It took a while before I eventually accepted that yes, I was going to Lhasa.

From Nagchu, at 4,445 metres, we made our way to the third pass on the route. The going was much easier than the approach to Tang La as we climbed to 4,624 metres on Shangshung La. From there it was all down hill to Lhasa at 3,683 metres. We covered the final 350 km stretch between Nagchu and Lhasa in only six hours, averaging a heady 58 kms per hour. The ratio between time spent with bum on seat and bum in flight accordingly increased in favour of the latter.

All the anxieties and discomforts of my marathon journey were justified in a single moment when, rounding that bend at the base of the Kyichu valley's west wall, the Potala came into view.

I felt the same excitement I had felt upon first laying eyes on the Dalai Lama's palace nearly two years earlier.

As we pulled into Lhasa central bus station at 9 pm, it dawned on me again that my circumstances were very different from those of two years earlier. I was no longer constrained by a time limit or fixed itinerary and felt like a kid who had just inherited Disneyland. I chose to spend our first night in Lhasa at the Snowlands guest house, in the Tibetan quarter of course, and only a minute's walk around the corner from the Jokhang. I had my first shower in four days, a delicious meal of Tibetan momos and not so Tibetan cheese cake and fell asleep to the lively street noises and howling mongrels of old Lhasa, just below my second story window.

It felt fantastic to be back.



The Potala, seen from across the Lhasa River

### Time in Lhasa

My first destination next morning was, naturally, the Barkhor and its magical, old Jokhang. I spent the morning marveling at the intoxicating human cocktail hustling around the pilgrim circuit and amongst the closely packed stalls. Being Sunday, it was particularly busy, as it also is on Wednesdays. Because the Potala is opened to the public each Monday and Thursday, pilgrims converge on Lhasa the days before, always heading for the Barkhor.

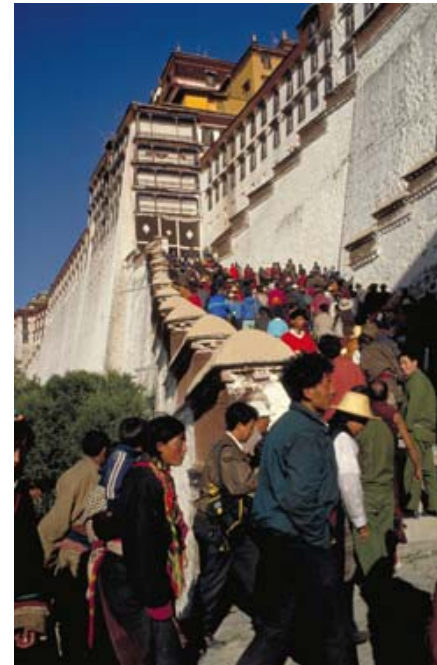
Tourists pitted their bargaining skills against the locals while inquisitive groups of nomads crowded around to watch. Vigorous haggling was punctuated with wild outbursts of laughter from all parties. I stood back, letting my zoom lens take me back into the action as a candid observer.



Prostrators at the front of the Jokhang

Midmorning, I eventually found my way, past the obligatory clutch of prostrators, into the shadowy tranquillity of the Jokhang. An English speaking monk welcomed me in, clearly delighted to learn that the Chinese had slackened their restrictions on the entry by foreigners into his homeland. Over several cups of butter tea we talked about the gomba and about my life and theirs.

Later on the roof, I found a little spot that became a daily sunset observation post during the remainder of my stay in Lhasa. That evening, like every evening, directly below me pilgrims paid homage as they smoothed the ancient paving slabs a fraction more with each deliberate prostration. Old Lhasa eased into another dusk as lights



Pilgrims surge up the steps of the Potala

came on in windows, merchants packed away their stalls and pilgrims quietly made off down narrow alleys to their lodgings. Once the sun had disappeared completely for the day, by the soft glow of yak butter lamps I made my way back down the smooth wooden stairways of Tibet's most sacred gomba, out across the Barkhor and into one of many little Tibetan come western cafes for dinner. I relished the luxury of being able to savour those moments without the nagging concern that time was running out.

On 'Potala day' I joined the expectant crowd banked up against the main gates at the base of Buddha's mountain.

Stern faced, muscular monks with clubs kept the crowd under control, but when the gates opened, wood on bone wasn't enough to quell the crowds enthusiasm any longer. A human tide surged up the huge, stone staircase, I being carried along with it. As pilgrims spread throughout the many chambers and courtyards, the pace settled down. I marveled at the strength of the Tibetan faith.

With time on hand, I was able to leisurely explore the chortens and rows of glinting prayer wheels arranged about the base of the Potala, marking another important pilgrim circuit. A fruit and veg market at the eastern end, entirely patronized by Chinese, painted a vivid picture of cultural segregation, as distinct as oil on water.

In the afternoon I cycled north from the city centre to the fifteenth century monastic city of Sera. Once housing 5,500 Geluk-pa monks, the partially restored complex now housed only several hundred, but it still exuded Tibetan-ness. In an outdoor courtyard young monks sharpened their debating skills, ramming home their points with much stamping of feet and clapping of hands. In another courtyard, I was invited to sit in on a chanting session, which mesmerized me for nearly an hour.



Monks studying at Sera monastery

From a vantage point up on the north wall of the Kyichu valley, I could make out a wide thicket of tall trees. Vultures circled above, confirming that this was one of Lhasa's sky burial sites. A kind of morbid fascination compelled me to see if I could get a closer look, but as I cycled nearer I soon realized that the site had been selected with privacy in mind.

Sky burial is the most common and practical means to dispense with the bodies of the dead in Tibet. Living beings are far more important than dead ones so, better to hack the corpses to pieces and feed them to needy vultures than to kill worms as you hack into the rock hard earth to dig graves.

Wood is also scarce, so cremations are normally reserved for Lamas, whose ashes are placed in chortens.

My curiosity quickly gave way to respect as I recalled accounts of camera toting westerners overstepping the bounds of decency in 1988. As this occurred more and more frequently, the burial staff quite understandably became increasingly irate, ultimately resorting to stonings and even the occasional beating. The most practical weapons available in these instances were sometimes the severed arms or legs of corpses, which I imagine would have left a lasting impression on any disrespectful recipient of the gory blows.

On my third day in Lhasa, I met a Dutch couple who I'd met several weeks earlier on the Karakoram highway. Chris and Johanna never actually intended to visit Tibet, but fate determined otherwise. The day before

they intended to return from Kashgar, over the Khunjerab Pass to Pakistan, just south of the pass, torrential rain and heavy snowfall sent 70 landslides crashing down onto an 80 km stretch of the Karakoram highway. At least one American woman had been killed by falling debris and the resulting floods devastated large areas further south, claiming the lives of some 1,500 Pakistanis between Hunza and Lahore. I had only missed this nightmare by three days and the Khunjerab Pass had been closed ever since. The news was rather shocking, again contrasting our human frailty against the immense forces at play in the mountains.



Despite the tragic circumstances leading to Chris and Johanna's presence in Tibet, it worked out well for us. Collectively, we made plans to visit the north face base camp of Chomolungma. Our route would take me back over the familiar southern route, via Yamdrok Tso and Gyantse, to Shigatse. From there, I would enter new ground as we followed the 'friendship highway' west a little past Xegar, to the point where we would commence our 100 km walk south to the base camp.

With the aid of a Tibetan Guest house owner along Xingfu Donglu, we arranged our mode of transport for the journey, a cheery Tibetan driver named Kaytu and his utilitarian, drab green, Chinese military jeep. The shared cost was very reasonable and gave us the luxury of flexibility as we traveled.

### Tsurphu Festival

Although keen to start our journey, we delayed our departure for a few days because another exciting event was due to happen at the gomba of Tsurphu, two and a half hours drive from Lhasa. Tsurphu, an important Karma-pa gomba, was to host the ordaining of a nine year old boy, believed to be the incarnate of the previous head lama of the sect, who died nine years earlier. The date for this fascinating event was September 27, but unfortunately it coincided with another less auspicious anniversary, the 1987 uprising, which resulted in the Chinese reclosing Tibet to foreigners.

In the lead up to the Karma-pa festival, as the number of Chinese soldiers swelled noticeably, rumors flew around the cafes of Lhasa about a Chinese crackdown.

Some claimed that foreigners would not be permitted to visit Tsurphu and if they tried, they would be expelled from Tibet. Others claimed that it was possible if you secured a permit, but how did you do that? I tried in vain by paying a call to the local Public Security Bureau. Here I met a very unsettling, slippery Chinese official who contradicted or denied everything we thought was correct, including that Tibet was even open, officially or otherwise, to foreigners. I left the PSB wishing I'd never gone there in the first place.



Looking back to Lhasa from the Potala

We eventually found our answer through two American artists, also staying at the Snowlands guest house, who were in Tibet painting very beautiful and authentic thankas. The couple knew all the right contacts and secured a group permit. We were lucky enough to be included in their group.

As agreed, at 7 am on the 27th, we stood outside the Yak and Yeti guest house on Xingfu Donglu, clasping cold hands and exhaling warm mist, as we waited for the mini bus to arrive. It eventually did an hour late and we were soon bumping our way out of Lhasa and up into the hills. As we neared Tsurphu we could see clusters of Tibetans crouching in fields near the road having picnic breakfasts. Others contentedly walked towards Tsurphu, some of them no doubt having made the journey from far off places to be at such an auspicious occasion. They were a varied and colourful lot, peasants, nomads, Lhasaites and even Buddhist foreigners from Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and India.



We made our way up a broad valley that narrowed considerably the further we ascended. At 4,400 metres we reached a small tent city to the left of the road, beside a river. There was a definite carnival atmosphere as pilgrims milled about, renewing acquaintances, trading small goods, reprovisioning depleted essentials and checking out the odd looking westerners who had succeeded in breaching the Chinese check points on the outskirts of Lhasa (our permit had come in very handy).

For a change, my western appearance was far down the novelty scale for the pilgrims. They were much more concerned about gaining entrance to the main hall to witness the solemn ceremony unfolding inside, or at least to take in the dances and plays going on in the courtyard. I was also one of many, almost invisible in the continually moving crowd.

It was relatively easy to capture on film their unaffected fascination at what was happening about then. Their devotion, sense of humour and



Pilgrims at Tsurphu Gompa



Just beyond the tent city stood the stone and mud outer walls of Tsurphu Gompa. We all made our way inside to the main courtyard, which was a buzz of excited anticipation. The main hall loomed over everything, comprising at least five levels and, as I discovered later, affording a superb view from its flat roof.

The next few hours proved to be the single best opportunity I have ever enjoyed to candidly photograph some of the most amazing people on our planet.

warmth shone forth like sun bursts from abating monsoon clouds and the daunting epic of their coexistence with the harsh Tibetan plateau was obvious in their leathery, wind burned skin, their oily, dust matted hair and weather beaten garments. There was no disputing that they were people of the earth.

Yet some of the pilgrims also conveyed nobility and beauty. The women wore their wealth in the form of huge smoothed lumps of turquoise, amber and coral woven into their intricate hair dos. Around their necks, adorning their earlobes, noses, wrists and fingers were a vast array of jewelry, ranging from silver to bone and from the most delicate to the most outrageous.

Some of the men, particularly the Khampas, sported fabulously complicated hairstyles and wore beautifully embroidered tunics, substantial boots and decorative knives. It was one of those situations where I reveled in my passion for photography.

The single most memorable moment came late in the afternoon. The complicated and lengthy ceremony inside the main chapel had concluded and the incarnate was ordained. Word must have passed around because, quite suddenly, the noisy, enthusiastic crowd fell silent and gazed up expectantly towards a balcony high above them. It seemed that the crowd had become a single organism as they waited silently to see their new spiritual leader.

Presently, a tender faced young boy with big dark eyes, shaven head and clothed in robes and ceremonial red hat emerged cautiously, escorted on either side by monks. The looks of pure adoration universally beaming from the faces of his followers stirred strong emotions in me. Then the crowd, still moving in unison, erupted into a hail of clapping and cheering. Multitudes of white ceremonial scarves and all manner of hats were hurled high into the air. The little Lama smiled as he was ushered off the balcony.

We arrived back in Lhasa before sunset, in time to ponder our day's experiences from our favourite spot on the roof of the Jokhang. I felt privileged to have witnessed the festival at Tsurphu and relieved to find that the anniversary of the 1987 uprising had come and gone with Lhasa remaining calm and peaceful. It had been a good day indeed.

### Lhasa to Xegar

Two days later I found myself at another Gomba that I'd not visited before. 20 kms from Gyantse lay the eleventh century

Shalu Gomba. In our Chinese jeep it was no problem to make a short diversion en route to Gyantse to see it. Like Samye Gomba in the Yarlung Valley, it was surrounded by a Tibetan village. But unlike Samye, the outward impression was of deep blue tiles rather than golden rooves. Although Kaytu, our Tibetan driver tried, he couldn't locate a monk to open up the gomba for us. While we waited though, an in-

quisitive group of snot-nosed urchins quickly gathered around. The main attraction was the digital alarm of my wrist watch, which put the gadget's robustness to the test in no uncertain terms.

Two days later, tracing the Tsangpo River westward along a fertile valley to Lhatze and then heading south east, we arrived at Sakya. This ancient town was bisected by the Trom River, which ran along the base of a range of northern hills. On the plain stood a gigantic, fortress-like, eleventh century Gomba, encompassing within its imposing walls about 18,000 square metres.



A dust storm blasts the gigantic walls of Sakya Gomba

The main chamber alone covered 6,000 square metres and contained some 40 'tree trunk' pillars supporting its roof. The gompa's great bulk served to remind us that, although the Geluk-pa sect now dominated Tibetan Buddhism, the Sakya sect once also held power in Tibet from the thirteenth century, for more than 200 years.

A striking characteristic in Sakya were the dark, bluish gray walls of the buildings, adorned with red, black and white stripes symbolizing three great bodhisattvas. These were most prominent on the buildings and ruins perched on the northern hills across the river from the main gompa. We joined a large group of nomad pilgrims making their way around a pilgrim circuit there. This led us high onto the hillside and up into a smaller gompa.



Across the river from the Gumpa at Sakya

From a little patio, we watched as, below us on the plain, a massive dust cloud engulfed Sakya Gompa. Little, ant-like figures battled to stay upright, shielding their faces from the biting grit. I had heard about the infamous dust storms that frequently ravaged the Tibetan plateau, but this was the first time I'd actually witnessed one.

That evening Kaytu, our driver, insisted that he host a dinner for us on our last night together. We had made a happy little group for three days since leaving Lhasa and tomorrow, he would farewell us just south of Xegar, at the starting point of our walk to Chomolungma.

No amount of persuasion would prevent him from paying for the entire meal, which included several bottles of Chinese beer, rapidly consumed during hearty toasts to our new found friendship. Kaytu was a 'gem'. He spoke virtually no English, but always seemed to understand what we wished to do, which he went out of his way to achieve for us. His good humour also helped our little group to establish a warm bond, which proved to make our six day trek all the more enjoyable.

After wishing Kaytu good night and, filled with the contentment of good food and good company, we settled down for the night in a dorm room of one of the two 'hotels' in Sakya. Our peace was abruptly shattered just after midnight when three cigarette puffing, Chinese officials in green army tunics and heavy boots burst, unannounced, straight into our room.

Their attitudes were mean and arrogant, I could smell the stench of stale alcohol and could see they were enjoying themselves. After some unintelligible babble, we eventually ascertained that they were demanding to see our permits, which we didn't possess. "Give me permit. No permit, no stay China!" Just as the situation seemed to be taking a serious turn for the worst, Kaytu's normally smiling face appeared in our doorway. He wasn't smiling this time as he spoke respectfully, but assertively, to our intruders. They left our room, forming a huddle out in the cold, concrete passageway. Still sitting in our sleeping bags under the harsh light of the solitary bulb dangling from our ceiling, we looked anxiously at one another, realizing that Kaytu was our only hope.



After several minutes, that seemed like several hours, the officials simply left our building. Kaytu's face appeared again in our doorway and, reassuringly, his usual smile had returned. We yearned to know what he had said to them, but the best we could manage was to convey emphatically how grateful we all were to our clever savior.

Next morning we set off early, needing to start walking as early as possible to ensure safe passage over the Pang La, a 5,200 metre pass, before nightfall. It was also a relief to get away from those obnoxious officials, just in case they decided to try it on again.

Kaytu handled his vehicle expertly on the rough Friendship highway linking Lhasa to Kathmandu. We climbed steadily, passing nomad encampments and herds of yaks and other livestock, reaching the highest point on the highway by late morning. There, at Lak-pa La, we paused in the rarefied 5,252 metre air to take photographs and stretch our legs, before once more descending to about 4,300 metres.

By mid afternoon, again with Kaytu's help, we had successfully negotiated the checkpoint at Xegar and found ourselves standing in Kaytu's dust 11 kms south of Xegar. After finally persuading him, under considerable duress, to accept our bonus, we bid Kaytu a fond farewell. Now, behind us stretched the empty tarmac of the Friendship highway and, before us lay four uninvitingly heavy back packs and a rough gravel trail.



Top, nomadic encampment below Lak-pa La Centre, prayer flags on Lak-pa La  
Bottom, before Xegar, Chomolungma ahead

### Walking In The Shadow of The Fairy Giant

The sun burnt down from a crystal clear sky. It seemed we were the only souls in a parched land. But somewhere ahead, unseen around a bend in the distance, was the little village of Sho. Beyond that, about 900 metres above us amongst the barren, golden hills, lay Pang La. Realizing that we had some work to do that afternoon, we shouldered our packs and started walking.

About 40 minutes later we strolled into Sho, a collection of mud and stone houses where we set about hiring two cross bred pack animals to lug our packs up to the pass. Though docile, the two dzos each had the strength of an ox, ideally suited for our needs. Full blooded yaks can sometimes be skittish and difficult to control. Crossing them with cows produces more manageable beasts, still able to function at high altitudes. A young Tibetan villager and his even younger side kick controlled the animals for us, keeping them moving up the hillside towards the pass.

As we climbed, the view steadily improved. Soon, Sho was a tiny cluster of dots far back down the valley. Huge, golden hills, that would be described as mountains in any other part of the world, loomed above us. As we neared the pass the trail narrowed, funneling to a steep section and cutting across the face of the hill just below a knife edge ridge.

Within our party, Chris found the going most difficult. He was a strong six footer in good physical shape, yet the high altitude was significantly slowing him down. Here was a good example of how high altitude can affect different people very differently, regardless of their level of fitness.

Pang La was a very satisfying pass to reach. We couldn't see over it to what lay on the far side right until the last moment. And when we did puff our way to the top the view was magnificent, a fine reward for our efforts.

Before us spread a vast panorama, with one snow clad peak undisputedly presiding over everything else, Chomolungma (the Tibetan name for Mount Everest). The mother goddess of all the snows certainly lived up to her name and, viewed from our vantage point some 100 kms distant, it was obvious how much taller she stood than her nearest rivals. Makalu, Lhotse, Nuptse and Cho Oyu all featured in that mountain vista, appearing insignificant in comparison.



Climbing towards Pang La from Sho

As our Tibetan escorts quickly off loaded our packs, I reacquainted myself with the sacred domain once again before me, conscious that just on the far side of those mountains lay the beautiful Solu Khumbu. Unconsciously I could feel it beckon me.



Our guide to the pass

Off Chomolungma, a brisk, biting wind drove off our escorts quickly without ceremony, also obliging us to don sweaters and coats. Mysteriously, from a clear sky, sleet rattled against us, possibly borne by 120 km per hour winds directly from Chomolungma's summit. It wasn't exactly a warm welcome, but impressive nevertheless.

Between us and the mountains lay a vast, undulating band of wind blasted, golden hills. It wasn't at all apparent exactly where we should head in order to reach Peroochi, our intended resting place that night, let alone Rongbuk Gompa 60 kms away. In typical Tibetan fashion, a little figure suddenly emerged from nowhere out of the barren landscape, several hundred metres distant. It looked like a small girl and she was headed our way.

By watching her progress, we soon identified the trail and set off briskly towards Peroochi.

We soon crossed paths with the girl. She was about 13 years old and her intention was to invite us back to her place. She would show us the way too, how convenient! It was the best offer we had and the only one we were likely to get, so we accepted. About two hours later, we wearily shuffled past a huge, snarling hound, ascended two steep step ladders and unshouldered our backpacks on the earth floor of the third level of our guide's house in Peroochi. The sun was going down and my tired body reminded me that we had ascended and then descended about 900 metres that afternoon, all in thin air above 4,300 metres. I was well and truly ready for dinner, then sleep.

Although our hosts went out of their way to procure little 'luxuries' like eggs for our dinner, we essentially ate what they ate and slept in the same circumstances that they did. It was no luxury tour we had embarked on, in fact, life could not have gotten much more basic. Almost all the amenities we take for granted in the west were absent, no running water, no electricity, no fancy appliances. The most hi-tec articles in the house were a torch light and thermos flask. It dawned on me that we'd walked right into a fabulous opportunity to experience a slice of spartan, rural Tibetan life, largely unaltered for many centuries.

After laying out our sleeping bags on yak skins scattered about the earth floor of the guests quarters on the third floor, we brushed past dried yak and goat carcasses hanging from the roofing beams, making our way back to the main living area, also on the third level. The 'living room' was a large space with soot blackened walls, a small, glowing hearth, low sitting stones and yak skins, a small altar at one end and a few tiny windows. Our hosts, the young guide and her lean, prematurely aged mother, were busy boiling unskinned (and unwashed) potatoes and dried yak entrails and kneading tsampa into little unsightly logs.

While they worked, we explored the rest of the house. The third and highest level consisted of the guest room come storehouse, the living room, a flat, open courtyard used for various tasks like drying clothes and a small hole that I would later discover, was a high-rise toilet.

Via a steep, wooden step ladder, we descended to the second level, consisting of the kitchen and several sleeping quarters. In the dimly illuminated, smoky kitchen the grandfather sat quietly tending the main hearth. In the dancing light of the fire he appeared at least 100 years old. It was too dark to distinguish exactly where the room finished, or what implements lay against the walls and in the corners.



The view towards Chomolungma from Pang La



At the core of the house gapped a square space, open to the sky and partially extending right down to the bottom level. We looked down to the first level, accessed by another wooden step ladder, where pigs lurked, gobbling up anything that fell their way, including the offerings falling through the little toilet hole on the third level. It was a novel waste disposal system that seemed to work quite well, because the stench that I expected to waft skyward was absent. Nevertheless, we didn't bother descending to the first level, content to retreat to the relative warmth of the living room to see how dinner was coming along.

Presently, we each devoured our little plate of eggs, potatoes and mountain grit, tentatively followed by blobs of cool, gritty tsampa. I'm afraid to say that the yaks entrails were never a possibility for me. I also found the tsampa hard going, especially as the last thing any of us needed was a bout of diarrhea. After eating the minimum that we judged to be polite, we thanked our hosts and made our way back amongst the carcasses to our sleeping bags.



Our lodgings at Peroochi

Next morning I didn't have diarrhea, but the mountain grit had worked better than any bran flakes I'd had so, in a hurry, I made my way down the step ladder to what I thought was the only toilet. While squatting contentedly over the longdrop, I heard some rustling noises directly above me. Craning my neck, I saw the little hole in the third level, but in place of the clear patch of sky that I expected, was Chris' bare rear end.

Just in the nick of time I darted sideways, narrowly avoiding Chris' little offering as it whistled past on its way to the pigs. That was when I realized what that little hole on the third level was actually for.

As you might expect, over more boiled potatoes and some congealed curd, the breakfast conversation was rather base, but hilarious nevertheless. In good spirits, we set off under a clear, blue sky in the direction of Pasum, a larger village at 4,450 metres on the banks of the Dzakar Chu River.



Our hosts seated in their living room

We took one and a half hours to reach Pasum, passing a ruined gompa on our way. Stopping for water beside a chorten at the far end of the village, we were soon driven out of Pasum by a swarm of

children begging for pens and sweets. Although in a very remote place, our route traced the main passage to the north face base camp of Chomolungma, which has been the earliest and most frequently climbed route on the mountain. Exposure to western climbing parties over the years had clearly tainted the locals with a voracious propensity to beg.

Two more hours of walking over rubble, up a gradually inclining plain, saw us reach Zaphu (approximately 4,500 metres). Peasants dotted the plain, doubled over at their toils in fields of barley.

Occasionally, we sought directions from them, shouting "Chomolungma?", which got responses of "Ah, ah, ah, Chomolungma!", accompanied by vigorous pointing up the valley.

Mid afternoon, just as we approached Chosang, where we hoped to spend the night, our need for directions ceased as clouds on the horizon cleared, revealing off in the distance a huge snow pyramid with its unmistakable snow plume. In the foreground, a bunch of very unruly looking peasants were gathered, taking a break from their work. I recalled Alex's warning about thieves in Chosang.

As Chris and I began taking photos the peasants became aggravated. I took the hint, but Chris was unmoved by their shouts. Soon they were headed in our direction, brandishing blunt instruments. To our relief, our die-hard photographer quickly put away his camera and we quickened our pace towards the collection of stone and mud dwellings known as Chosang. It appeared that we had encountered another indication of over exposure to westerners.

Just as we must take care with the environment, so must we take care with those who inhabit it. I have always liked the notion that, as visitors to fragile foreign places, we should "leave only footprints and take only photographs". Perhaps this sentiment could be expanded to also include leaving goodwill and taking heightened insights, but that is all.



Chomolungma - that way!

Approaching Chosang, an old woman walked over to meet us. Dressed in a yak skin vest and traditional wrap around skirt, she looked frail and ancient, yet as hard as the hills themselves. Her leathery skin stretched in tight creases across her cheek bones, crinkling even more when she smiled.



Our hostess at Chosang

Of all the micro-environments on the Roof of the World, probably the most inhospitable was this old woman's homeland. Life expectancy was 40 years, with a child mortality rate of 15%. I couldn't even guess at her age, which could have been somewhere between 40 and 80 years.

By sign language, we amicably negotiated the terms of our lodgings. Then she led us through a solid gateway in the fortress-like outer wall of her house, into a little courtyard. Glaring straight at us were two of the most ferocious dogs I've ever seen. There was murder in their eyes as they lunged repeatedly at us. The old woman didn't even bat an eyelid, but the only thing preventing each of the beasts from devouring us was a length of slender twine, tied around two rams horns embedded in the stone and earth wall. Given the size of the animals and the force at which they lunged for us, those anchors looked frighteningly unconvincing to me. We hurried across the yard, up the wooden steps and into the relative safety of the second level of the house.

Although very similar in style to the home we stayed at the previous evening, if anything, this one was even more basic and the family comprised more children, which put more demands on scarce resources. That evening, our meal of potatoes, onions and mountain dirt was shared with the family. A watery meat broth added some much welcomed flavour.

During the middle of the night a couple of us needed to relieve ourselves. The toilet was a little hole, encased by a shelter, beyond the outer walls of the house. Thankfully though, the flat, rammed earth roof was very absorbent, because there was no way that any of us were going to risk passing beside our hairy friends, still tethered near the gate.

Next morning their mood had not improved. In a show of bravado I yelled abuse at them from the safety of the second level landing. The glares I received in response chilled my heart. I abruptly shut my mouth, remembering that we still had to make it past them on our way out.

Over breakfast, we negotiated the hirage of two dzos to lug our packs on to Rongbuk. It seemed remarkably easy until, in place of the two powerful dzos, a spindly ass and its tiny offspring arrived. It was too difficult to rectify the misunderstanding, if indeed there had been any misunderstanding at all, so we tried to make the best of the situation.

Our escort's initial attempts to load all our packs onto the back of the unfortunate ass were ridiculous. If anyone from the SPCA had heard about it we would have surely been lynched.

More than an hour passed as we tried various possibilities, eventually settling for two packs on the ass and the remaining gear rotated amongst ourselves. Given the astronomical price, struck on the basis of two dzos, we had been had, but at least we were on our way again.



My mate the house dog, Chosang

That day proved to be a long one and we were soon glad of the help afforded by our poor ass. After finally getting away from Chosang about 9.30 am, we didn't trudge into Rongbuk until 5 pm.

Initially, our way was just like the day before, a gentle climb across a vast, rubble plain. The sun blazed down from a cobalt sky, offering not a breath of wind. As the day wore on, huge, golden hills closed in around us, once more obscuring Chomolungma from view. We headed west towards a bottleneck in the valley, where the trail swung out of view directly south to Rongbuk and, ultimately, Chomolungma.

Just prior to that turning point were two significant landmarks. The first were the substantial ruins of Chopug Gompa, destroyed by Red Guards and brain washed local peasants at the time of the Chinese invasion. The gompa must have once been an impressive sight, climbing from the Rongbuk River, high onto the mountainside above. Now, only foundations and rubble piles memorialized its existence.



The second landmark was a pleasant looking trail, climbing northeast, into the layers of rolling hills standing between us and Tingri, a truck stop back on the Friendship highway that would mark the end of our trek, three days hence.

As we turned the corner, the terrain underwent a noticeable change. First, we now walked directly towards Chomolungma, which we occasionally saw through shifting clouds. Even when hiding, her icy breath tugged at our clothing. Second, the trail now undulated, gaining altitude more rapidly, up a narrow valley. The valley walls were steeper, sometimes baring hard, black granite amongst the more brittle, golden rubble we had become so accustomed to.

Alex had described to me vividly what the view of Chomolungma was like from Rongbuk so, when we finally bridged a small rise marked by two man sized stone chortens and Rongbuk Gomba came into view, I was disappointed. Further up the valley lay a huge wall of cloud. One Tibetan legend told that Chomolungma is a huge fairy who suffers from severe shyness, hence she is often shrouded in cloud. I hoped that I could make friends with her before we departed.

Rongbuk lay at 4,980 metres in a natural cul-de-sac, ending at the terminal moraine of the Rongbuk Glacier. On a clear day, Chomolungma soared skyward, directly up the valley. The gomba is the highest in the world. From its partially ruined chorten, long strings of prayer flags snapped frantically in the icy wind. It was a strange, remote place.

Although the gomba appeared ancient, lying partially in ruins since 'politically educated' peasants had a go at it sometime before 1975, it was not built until early this century. However, long before that the site, so near to Chomolungma, had been revered as sacred. It became a sanctuary of the birds (and all animals), where all manner of creatures would wander, unafraid, up to humans. Domestic animals were only consumed if they had been slaughtered outside the valley, although the local Yeti population apparently didn't observe the rules. Known at Rongbuk as 'Migyu', they were supposed to eat cattle and occasionally carted women off for supper.



Rongbuk Gomba, with Chomolungma shrouded in clouds at the head of the valley

When I stepped into the main chamber of the gomba, a handful of monks were in the middle of dinner. Their entire number sat cross legged before me, but when the first British reconnaissance expedition

found their way up to Rongbuk in 1921, they found hundreds of monks and pilgrims. In the hope of breaking the cycle of reincarnation, some had even sealed themselves in caves above the gomba, their only link to the outside world a little slit, through which water and barley were passed to sustain them.

The monks I met seemed to enjoy their food rather more, sitting down to huge mounds of warmed tsampa and sweet yogurt. They invited me to try some and I was pleasantly surprised to find the mixture quite delicious.

The only place to stay at Rongbuk, apart from your own tent, was at the gumpa. During recent restorations, a new 'tourist wing' had been built on, offering us cold, but quite adequate lodgings.

Next morning I rose early, hoping to watch the sun rise on Chomolungma. It was deathly cold and dull. For some reason she still suffered from shyness and was not about to reveal herself to me. A little disheartened, I retreated inside to join the others for a breakfast of fried peanuts and beans that we had carried in with us.

Later, we set off along the Chinese expedition road to the north face base camp. This lay at around 5,200 metres, directly below the terminal moraine of the Rongbuk Glacier. It took about two hours to reach the little tent city, situated on a vast bed of glacier smoothed pebbles. The wind howled down off the glacier, whipping the prayer flags anchored to various memorials to dead climbers so stiffly that they sounded like machine gun fire. I wondered whether Chomolungma was trying to tell me something. Here I was, right at her feet and she had still not shown herself. We reluctantly retraced our steps to the gumpa.

During our return, at least I discovered that it was nothing personal. We met a 53 year old American who had been battling to reach the summit for six weeks. He had reached 8,000 metres, but the weather had closed in, adding the 'last straw' to his exhausting exertions. He was now also walking away from the mother goddess of all the snows.

Although the Rongbuk approach to Chomolungma has long been one of the most popular, no route is easy. 1922 saw the first north face attempt, when seven Sherpas died at the hands of the mountain's demons. Then in 1924, the famous George Mallory returned there to make a bid for the summit. He may well

have succeeded, last being seen making steady progress with his companion, Andrew Irvine, above 8,500 metres. But neither of them lived to tell the tale, disappearing near the summit. After that, the Tibetans imposed a nine year ban on any further climbing in the area. The British were back in 1933, mounting four more unsuccessful expeditions by 1938. In 1947, the Dalai Lama banned the issue of any travel permits to Tibet and, with Chinese occupation in 1949, any possibility of the mountain

being conquered first from the Tibetan side vanished. Western efforts shifted to the Solu Khumbu approach, where Hillary and Tenzing succeeded in 1953.

Meanwhile, China and Nepal were locked in a dispute as to who Chomolungma belonged to. The Chinese resolved to be the first to climb it from the Tibetan side, mounting a huge expedition in 1960. This is when the road from below Xegar to the base camp was constructed and it was decided that the border between Nepal and China ran right across the summit.



Chomolungma (Mt Everest), as seen from Rongbuk

The Chinese claimed to have achieved their goal, but couldn't prove it, so foreigners were prohibited from climbing from the Tibetan side until the Chinese did conclusively reach the summit in 1975.

In 1980, the Chinese finally opened the Tibetan approaches to foreigners and, since then, there have been many memorable climbs. Some have been truly remarkable, including Reinhold Messner's successful solo effort, without oxygen, in 1980 and the technically magnificent Kangshung Face ascent by an American team in 1983, which was repeated by a smaller team in 1988.

More than 500 people have stood on the summit of our planet's highest peak, but the death toll is approaching 150. Falls, avalanches, tumbling seracs, exposure, heart attacks, exhaustion and disappearances are all distinct possibilities during a bid for the summit. I have read many accounts about the mountaineering adventures undertaken on Chomolungma since my own first visit to the Khumbu in 1988. It is all fascinating, stirring stuff, but the odds of survival, let alone success, are too low for me to contemplate acting out my own climbing fantasies. At least dreams are free and safe, so long may they stir me.

Next morning was my last chance to look upon Chomolungma from that remote location in the Rongbuk valley. I rose again early, hoping for the best. Stepping outside into the still, cold air, the signs were good. Above me stretched a clear, dawn sky and, just around the corner, beyond the chorten with its now limp prayer flags, Chomolungma should be out in her full glory.

A few quick strides and my expectations were fulfilled. A monolithic, angular silhouette filled the far end of the valley. Dawn rays had only managed to highlight a huge snow slope on the north east section of the mountain and a wisp of cloud floated ominously across the bare section of rock near the summit known as the yellow band. After being so elusive, Chomolungma now soared skyward in silent defiance. Her stature lived up to all her titles, mother goddess of all the snows, head of the ocean, tallest on earth. I stood quietly, trying to take the occasion in.

By 8.30 am we were on the move again, this time retracing our steps down the Rongbuk valley. By 10 am we had crossed the Rongbuk River on a rickety bridge and sat basking in the sun on an incline at about 4,600 metres, near the ruins of Chopug Gompa. We savoured the tranquillity, knowing that our day's work was to begin in earnest when we rounded the bend ahead and started our ascent to the only pass standing between us and Tingri.

From the bottom, it looked like our climb would last about 45 minutes, entailing a pleasant stroll up through grassy meadows and babbling brooks. But I had momentarily forgotten the lesson, about size and scale on the Roof of the World, I learnt on Chhukung Ri in the Solu Khumbu four years earlier.

Two hours later, craning my neck upwards between gulps of air, I tried to determine whether the rounded hump that I was now part way up was going to be the last.



Baked earth near the pass before Tingri



After at least four of them, each revealing itself just before the top of the one before it, I was starting to find the going rather tough. The others struggled up somewhere below me, with Chris going through his toughest ever hiking challenge. He eventually arrived on the vast, tussocky expanse of the pass about 90 minutes after me, vowing never to return. His indignation was understandable, given that we hadn't expected such a tough climb, which I estimated to have taken us to at least 5,300 metres. From our lofty position, I marveled at the diagonal trails that Ibex had worn across the impossibly sheer hillsides above us, making a mockery of our own efforts.

On the descent, Chris quickly returned to his normal buoyant mood as we skipped down the windswept hillside. In places, the earth had literally cracked up under the onslaught of the elements, forming remarkably symmetrical hexagonal patterns, which bore a striking resemblance to the amazing stone columns at the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland.

The surface of the land was so barren that we could find no trace of a trail. About 5 pm we had to make a decision as to whether we swung left or right around a large outcrop barring our progress. We opted for the right and soon came upon a shepherd's dugout, shielded by a sturdy wall of smooth river boulders. There was no sign of other man made structures anywhere, so we resigned ourselves to a night out under the stars.

Once the sun disappeared behind Cho Oyu, which loomed up far off in the direction we would head the next morning, conditions became bitterly cold. Having not carried a tent with us, Cho Oyu seemed intent on teaching us a lesson for our arrogance, sending a relentless, icy wind off her snowclad flanks. If we had not chanced upon the shelter of the dugout

we would have been in serious trouble, as the wind chill factor was well below zero degrees Celsius. It was the coldest situation I had ever been faced with and I was more than a little concerned. After putting on every item of clothing that we possessed, we huddled together in our sleeping bags, hard against the base of the dugout's leeward wall. I resigned myself to a long night.

Once our body heat warmed our inner clothes, we actually became quite comfortable. Blessed with a perfectly clear, alpine, night-sky, the wind completely died around

midnight. Between dozes, I enjoyed a spectacular galactic display, totally untainted by other light sources.

Next morning, there was no way that any of us would leave the warmth of our sleeping bags before the sun's rays had penetrated our dugout. Hundreds of delicate, little icicles clung to my sleeping bag and the water in my drinking bottle had frozen solid. We finally found 'forward gear' at 11 am, shouldering our packs and heading pensively along the ice encrusted banks of a sparkling stream, towards Cho Oyu.



Commencing our descent in the general direction of Tingri

Intensely aware that a wrong turn in such huge country could lead us miles off course, I heaved a mighty sigh of relief when, approaching the narrowest point in the valley, we met a yak caravan moving a tour group in the opposite direction. Two rugged Tibetans coaxed their eight beasts forward, while several immaculately attired tourists strutted along on horseback, unburdened by tiresome backpacks or blistered feet. We must have looked a sorry sight in comparison, but I enjoyed a rush of self satisfaction, knowing that we'd made our journey essentially unassisted.



Warming up after a night out under the stars, about a half days walk to Tingri

After exchanging notes about the route, we bid the group farewell and soon joined a wide, clearly marked trail eventually leading all the way to Tingri. I say “eventually”, because for four hours, we could see the town clearly across what seemed to be a plain only five kms across, yet our concentrated efforts to reach it seemed to make no impact. Once again, the scale of that alpine domain asserted itself upon us.

Part way along that trail, we came upon a junction. Leading off across the plain toward Cho Oyu, I looked longingly at a clearly defined trail leading to Nangpa La, a 5,716 metre pass also known as Khumbu La, because that's exactly where it finishes. The hardy Tibetans I had met in Namche Bazaar at the Saturday market in 1988 quite possibly trod that route, as they had done for centuries, plying their wares across the mountains between Tibet and Nepal. I would dearly love to walk in their footsteps one day, but having just seen the trail seemed to some how complete a magic circle for me.

With aching legs and weary bodies, we finally arrived at Tingri at 7 pm. The 50 kms we had walked from Rongbuk meant that a lovely panorama of mighty peaks had reappeared across the expansive plain. Beautiful though it was, our main preoccupation just then was a comfortable seat and a nice, cold bottle of Chinese beer, which we located at some truck stop lodgings on the verge of the Friendship highway. Toasting our exploits, new found friendships and damp, truck stop dormitories, we settled into an exhausted, drunken state of euphoria for the rest of the evening.



A view of Cho Oyu from Tingri

### Return to Lhasa

Next morning, after bidding a sad farewell to Chris and Johanna, who headed south on the first available bus to Kathmandu, I put my mind to working out how I could return to Lhasa. A bus was due about mid day, but no one could tell me whether it would have any empty seats available. Mid morning, a Chinese jeep, just like Kaytu's one, swerved into the parking lot. After some negotiation, I secured some space in the back seat as far as Shigatse.

At noon, I departed in a cloud of dust, along with a Tibetan driver and a Tibetan couple. The two men sat in the front and promptly began swilling beer at an alarming rate. By the time we reached Lhaze, where we stopped for lunch, they had demolished two large bottles already. At lunch, they guzzled two more and then, to my horror, my front seat companion procured another 10 bottles, loading them onto the floor beside his feet. The first bottle had its cap off before our merry driver had made third gear and their frantic drinking pace resumed.

Call me a party pooper if you will but, given the yawning ravines, hairpin bends and the loose gravel road leading up to the Lak-pa La, I wasn't amused. By some miracle, we made it unscathed to the pass. For me, the last straw broke when, seeing another bunch of drunken countrymen squatting beside their lorry gulping their own stock of amber liquid, our driver pulled over, gathered a couple of bottles from his own quickly depleting stash and waltzed over to join them. Fearing for our lives on the much faster descent from the pass, I got out and 'threw a wobbly', as we sometimes say in New Zealand, displaying my concern in terms that all nationalities can understand. The 'lads' looked at me, shrugged their shoulders, gulped a few last mouthfuls and, to their credit, got back in our jeep to resume our journey.

To my great relief, no more beer was consumed for some time. However, about an hour out of Shigatse, their thirst must have gotten the better of them again but, rather than alarm his highly strung western passenger, the driver pulled off the road beside the Yarlung River. He invited us to join him for a Tibetan picnic and, knowing that the rest of our journey that day was over wide, flat roads, I decided that "if you can't beat 'em, then join 'em".

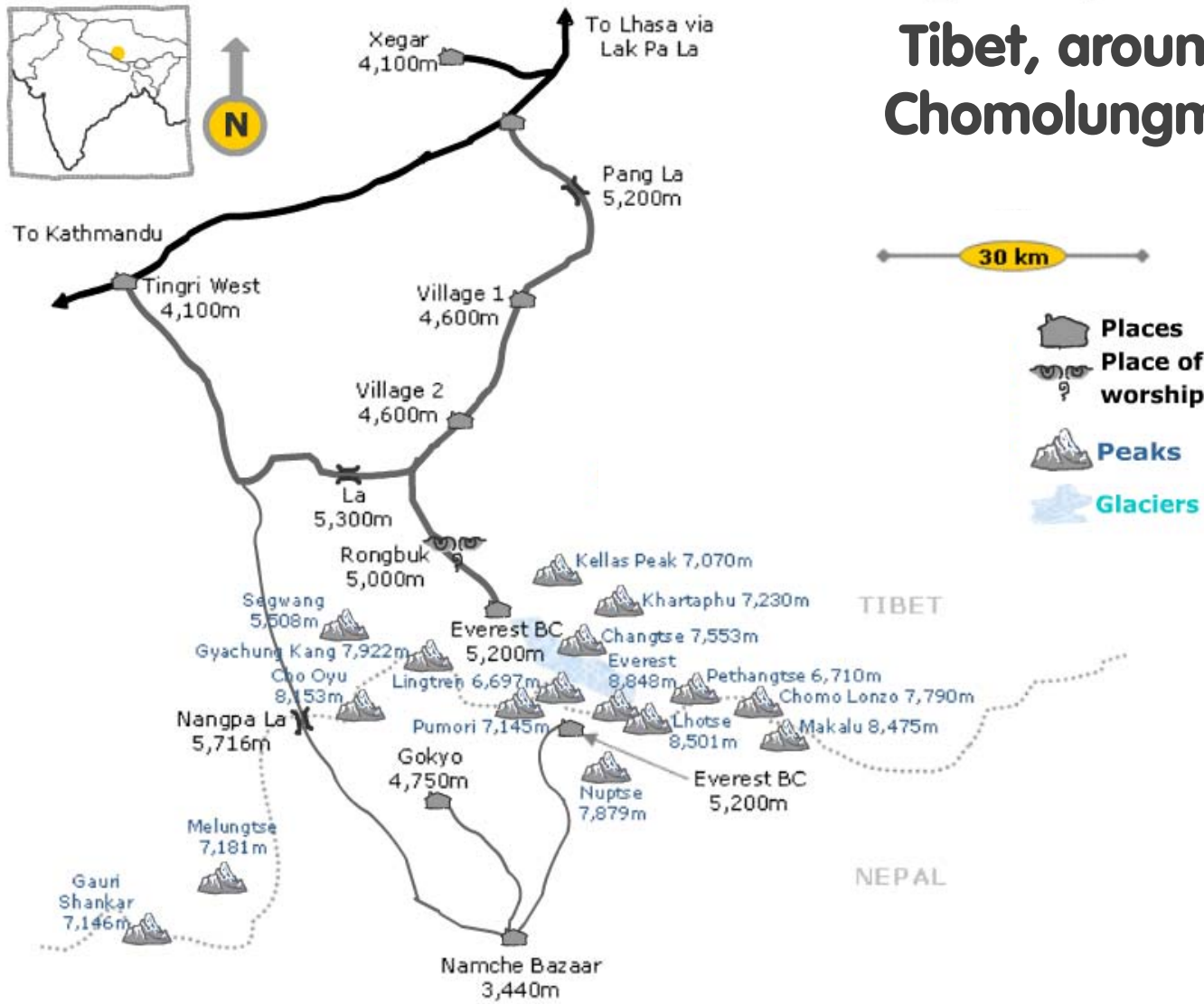
For an hour or so we sat beside the river in the soft, warm glow of the evening sun, eating chunks of the most tender yak meat I had ever tasted, washed down with the remaining bottles of beer. By the time we climbed back into the jeep we were all the best of friends, I too drunk to care any longer about the state of our driver.

In Shigatse, the owner of the guest house where I stayed befriended me. Next morning he escorted me to the bus station, making sure I got on the right bus. By 3 pm, I was back in Lhasa, slumped on the bed in my favourite room at the Snowlands Hotel.

Three action packed weeks on the high plateau had taken their toll. Feeling exhausted, but also exhilarated by what I had experienced, I made my way past the usual throng of devoted prostrators, back up to the most fitting place of all to conclude my journey across Tibet, the roof of the sacred Jokhang.







# Tibet, around Chomolungma

# Tibet

