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## 10 Days in Tibet

*Rachel Stenback*

Traveling to Tibet from "mainland China," as locals call it, illustrates that China is indeed a land of great contrasts. Tibet surprises the senses in more ways than one; when Tomas and I first disembarked from the plane from Chengdu to Lhasa, (3600 meters) we were both quite breathless. Just walking to the baggage claim area from the plane left us panting. However, we soon collected our luggage and met our local Tibetan guide, to whom I will refer as Mr. Wu to protect his privacy. Mr. Wu, a young Tibetan dressed in modern western clothes, met us with a big smile and white Tibetan ceremonial scarves that he placed around our necks as he greeted us, "Welcome to Tibet!" Later he told us that these scarves are considered to be the finest gift a Tibetan can give.

In order to travel to Tibet, the current regulations are that foreigners must first have a China visa, then special Tibet permits, and they must be a part of an organized tour. This is why we booked a trip through a travel agency, and this is why our guide and a driver, in a 4WD, accompanied us for most of our excursions.



After being delivered to our hotel in Lhasa, we decided to take a stroll around the city. (Travel agencies advise resting on the first few days in Tibet to help prevent altitude sickness). We found our way over to the Barkor area, the most popular area for local Tibetans. The Barkor is a loud, lively, colorful area filled with traditionally-dressed locals, the sounds of pilgrims chanting, and the strong scent of incense intermingling with the aromas of food being prepared both at restaurants and street stalls. Walking around, we were soon caught up in the motion of the local pilgrims. In Buddhism it is important to circumnavigate holy areas, both inside and outside of temples, and we found it was impossible NOT to walk in the same direction as these pilgrims due to the sheer numbers of them, so at first we simply went with the flow. The pilgrims, we learned, fill the city especially in

the wintertime, when it is too cold for farming and they have enough time to make the long journey to Lhasa. So, while the cold winter weather kept the throngs of tourists at bay, it brought masses of local pilgrims. It was quite surprising to see these people, almost all who were dressed in traditional clothes, and most of whom looked to be quite poor, and often very dirty. Many carried small prayer wheels as they chanted aloud on their route, and others repeatedly prostrated themselves on the freezing, dirty ground. We noticed that Lhasa is full of seemingly content people—but in almost every corner, and sometimes on rooftops, there were soldiers with guns or shields, more than we have ever seen before in one place. Once I saw eight in one street corner.

In the days that followed, first we focused on the most famous sites in and around Lhasa. The most breathtaking building we visited was undoubtedly the Potala Palace. The Potala Palace, traditionally the heart of Tibetan politics and religion, is hundreds of years old and stands proudly high on a hill, surrounded by mountains. Now local Tibetans make the pilgrimage to visit as often as they can, usually at least once a year in the winter. So, while we were freezing in the cold morning air, we also enjoyed the sight of all of the local people making their way up to the amazing building.



Inside the Potala, just like with all of the other Buddhist monasteries we visited, we were surprised by the amount of money everywhere. Pilgrims walked with fistfuls of bills that they distributed as they walked around. Some people simply flung the bills in the direction of a Buddha statue, or a picture of a former Dalai Lama, or even on furniture where Buddhist leaders once had sat (in one building, people even piled money high on the current Dalai Lama's former toilet!) The atmosphere inside the buildings is one of reverence for the many Buddhas inside, but visitors are also paying their respects to the current, and past, leaders within Buddhism, especially the highest leader, the Dalai Lama. We were asked in Tibet if we had ever seen the current 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, but surprised, we answered that no, we had only read about him or seen photos. This comment was met with a sigh—anything related to him is absolutely forbidden, so most people do not know what he looks like.



*Yak butter candles*



The local Tibetan people looked very curious when they saw us. We guessed that some had never before seen foreigners, since they obviously came from the countryside. Sometimes it felt difficult for us to know how to communicate with these locals; in shops, we spoke Mandarin Chinese (the official language throughout China, which is studied in school) but many uneducated

people could not—or would not—speak Mandarin. A monk said in Chinese, “I won’t speak Chinese”, which left us feeling unsure of ourselves, so the following days we just walked around and smiled and waved whenever locals curiously caught our eye.

Although Buddhism includes a strong belief in reincarnation, where animals can become people and vice versa, we were a little surprised to learn that most Tibetans eat a lot of meat. Tibetan food is quite simple, generally based on simple ingredients such as barley and mutton. Yaks are also very important in Tibetan food; indeed, yaks are important in many aspects of Tibetan life. Hides are used for warmth, yak meat is eaten, and yak butter appears in many forms and



*Drying Yak dung*

places, including in traditional Tibetan butter tea. (Actually, the term yak butter is incorrect because butter is made from milk from the female animal, which is actually called a *bi* in Tibetan). When people visit the temples, they often bring a thermos with them. At first we thought this was for tea, but then we realized that the thermos is full of a special kind of liquid yak butter that is used to offer to Buddha. This special yak butter is also used to make decorations within the monasteries, and instead of wax for candles. In the countryside, yak dung is carefully collected and dried for precious fuel for cooking stoves.

Later in the week we embarked on a long journey towards the Nepal border to the Himalayas, to see the highest mountain in the world, Mount Qomolangma



*Yamdrok Lake*

(Mt. Everest). Along the way we stopped in small villages for lunches or quick bathroom stops (with a “bathroom” usually consisting of ducking behind one of thousands of boulders along the road in the cold wind!) We also visited more Buddhist monasteries and stayed in several freezing hotel rooms. As we approached Mt. Qomolangma, we spent the night in a hotel in the tiny town of Shegar. Some nights during our trip we were the only guests in

the hotel! However, the cold outside was not so much a problem as the cold inside. We were quite surprised to learn that Tibetans do not have any indoor heating. The hotel in Shegar did not have running water, heat, or electricity (except a few hours in the evenings), so the room was only about 40 F (6 C)! This is certainly why we both ended up coming down with colds on our trip! However, the hotel staff was very friendly. Usually we ate our meals huddled around the yak-dung heated stove in the hotel kitchen. Tomas celebrated his birthday there, so the hotel chef baked a tasty homemade traditional Tibetan barley and yak butter cake. They also passed around refreshing traditional Tibetan barley beer and sang local songs for us.

The ride to Qomolangma itself was bumpy and hair-raising. For hours we traveled along steep, curvy gravel roads at 5000 meters, which jostled us so much that I ended up with a splitting headache. But at the end, we were rewarded with an amazing view of Mount Qomolangma, seen from Base Camp, with no other people there at all. At about 5200 meters, we stopped for photos in the freezing wind, panting as we clambered up a slight incline for the best view.



*Mount Qomolangma*

Along the way we stopped to see a holy mountain used for sky burial. Mr. Wu explained the fascinating—but for us rather disturbing—funeral and burial customs of the Tibetans. Although this could certainly vary throughout Tibet and from family to family, generally when a person over the age of eight passes away, first the body is kept with the family for three days of mourning, at which



time a Buddhist monk comes to perform funeral rites and chants. After that, a special person is called upon to perform a sky burial. First, the body is cut into pieces and brought up to the holy place. Then the man crushes the bones and mixes them with bodily fluids and barley. This mixture is then offered to the hungry vultures circling above. Once they have eaten this, then the meat of the body is offered to the vultures. (In one monastery we saw an extremely detailed, gory mural of this rite). If a child under the age

of eight dies, however, they are not given a sky burial. Generally their body is thrown into the river, sometimes cut up first, and sometimes not. We found this to be particularly grotesque, especially since rivers are often so shallow and cold, and since this type of disposal could contribute to spread of disease.

We also learned about different marriage traditions around Tibet. In one place we visited, in order to keep land within the family, several brothers often marry the same woman. We visited one home where the woman was married to three different brothers. This family was clearly more prosperous than others we had seen on our trip, certainly because more income was generated and remained within the same family. Children always call the eldest husband “father,” and the younger husbands are called “uncle.”

After a free day in Lhasa, we took the new Tibet-Qinghai train. The train crossed 5000 m mountain passes that were so high that my MP3-player temporarily quit working. For hours the train passed through vast open spaces, and the only life we ever saw was a herd of sheep, some scattered buildings, or wild donkeys. After about 28 hours we arrived at our destination, Lanzhou, where we attended a conference. On our way to another conference in the Philippines, we passed through Hong Kong. In the bookstores at the pristine, non-smoking, modern Hong Kong airport, it seems one can buy any book under the sun, including books featuring the 14<sup>th</sup> and current Dalai Lama.



Once again we were reminded that China is certainly a land of great contrasts.

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