

Legendary Tibet: Adventurers Guide

by Roger Sauer, *PassPorter Guest Contributor*

If you have plans for a visit to China that include a few days in Lhasa, Tibet, we suggest you contact your tour group/travel agent to check current status. Despite government statements about opening the region to tourism after major protests in March 2008, as of this writing the Chinese government still appears to have a "hold" on tourist visits to Tibet.

In the fall of 2005 my wife Donna and I were part of a touring group that visited China for three weeks. Five days were spent in Lhasa, Tibet. Prior to landing in Tibet we had been in Hong Kong (where we spent a couple of days at the newly opened Hong Kong Disneyland Resort before meeting our touring partners), Guilin, Yangshuo, Kunming, and Chengdu. All the tour books we'd read could not adequately prepare us for the region we were ready to enter. Flying into the main airport near Lhasa we were met with high mountain ranges of the eastern Himalayas (the airport is 12,000 feet above sea level) and a dry, rocky, moonscape of a country. No snow anywhere, but then, it was October.

The road our bus took into Lhasa is shorter now due to a very long tunnel drilled over the past few years through one mountain range. We dodged a few tuk-tuks (the universal, rural two-stroke engine utility vehicle) on the way through the tunnel. A shallow, boulder-strewn river bed followed parallel to the road, and the occasional concrete block homes on our right featured wind-torn yellow, blue, white, red, and green flags on clotheslines, bearing Tibetan Buddhist prayers. In the distance we saw pillars for a bridge that would soon carry the first trains into Tibet from China.

The most modern buildings appeared to be devoted to civic affairs, with official seals on the gates. We then noticed the soldiers, lots of them. "Police," our guide reassured us, "not military." A little later before entering Lhasa he gave a few details of the city. "No speeches, please," he said. We knew what he meant. He'd been born in Lhasa but left when he was a child to attend school with the Dalai Lama in India. He had crossed the Himalayas into Kathmandu with some other children and some Buddhist monks.

Our hotel was in the western part of the city of Lhasa. Though we'd been ready for cold weather and packed sweaters all the way from Hong Kong in suitcases limited to 44 pounds, we'd never need them. It was shirtsleeve weather; we even slept with our window open in the hotel, a nice place that catered to the western tourist crowd. Our room was

large and comfortable by American standards. There was the ubiquitous hot water pot for boiling water for drinking or brushing teeth. Our room did not feature piped-in oxygen, unlike some others. We did not appear to be affected by the altitude, even when we climbed the hill to the Potala Palace the next day. Occasionally, we'd see people lying down clutching oxygen masks. One day we went even higher, near a large lake at about 16,000 feet. That trip was highlighted by having our pictures taken near or with some yaks.

The restaurants where we ate were large and featured family-style dining, very appropriate for tour groups. Typical Chinese dishes were accompanied by local specialties - Tibetan yak, boiled yak tendon (an acquired taste) and steamed vegetables. Beer and tea were served at lunches and dinners. Yak butter tea is a national drink that we found very salty and best left politely on the table. The hotel where we stayed has western-style breakfasts which, after a couple of weeks in-country, we appreciated more and more.

While it is hard to generalize about an entire country based on a few days, Lhasa seems to represent a good cross-section. The appearance of the indigenous Tibetan people is similar to that of other peoples from high altitude countries, such as Peru and Ecuador. Homespun fabrics of striking colors worn over black predominated. Women with long black hair worn straight or in elaborate braids led or carried their children down the street and through markets. In contrast to these native Tibetans were the "police," who became more apparent near the heart of the city. They were not Tibetan, but Chinese from eastern provinces. The Tibetan Special Administrative Region is similar to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, in that both regions have been brought into the fold of the Chinese government - Tibet through invasion, Hong Kong through a treaty.

The two major tourist sites in Lhasa are the Potala Palace, home of the Dalai Lama, and the Jokhang Temple, the holiest of Tibetan temples. Tibetan Buddhism reveres the Buddha Shakyamuni, the "merciful Buddha." His figure is evident among the hundreds of statues and carvings in the temples. The Potala Palace rises on a hill in the center of the city, a massive white and red structure made largely of very old mud and straw bricks. Walking up the long pathway on the Palace's west side, we met many pilgrims hiking up the hill. Once at the entrance, we followed our guide (who reiterated, "No speeches, please,") through the myriad rooms and hallways. The Dalai Lama's throne and study, his bedroom, and formal greeting areas were featured. Throughout the Palace Tibetan monks were seen working, studying or meditating. And, there were the "police." A mile or so from the base of the Palace is the Summer Palace, the place from which the Dalai Lama went into exile

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after the Chinese invasion over fifty years ago.

Large golden statues were at the top of the temple and the gray and brown hills surrounding the Lhasa plain met the clear blue sky in every direction. Near many of the doorways were "prayer wheels" that pilgrims or curious tourists would spin, sending prayers to heaven. Always spin them counterclockwise!

The Potala Palace faces south overlooking a newer "park" with official Chinese statuary and iconography, like a small Tiananmen Square. Nearer to the town's business district and public market is the Jokhang Temple, the original of which predates the Potala Palace. Here, pilgrims to Lhasa from other countries, eastern China, and rural Tibet come to pray. Many prostrate themselves over and over in front of the temple; others repeat this form of prayer while moving around the perimeter of the structure. The smell inside is rich with the burning of yak butter candles that are continually replenished by the faithful, who bring the rich liquid in any container they can get - cans or old 7-Up bottles.

Outside in the shopping alleys we picked up our prayer wheels and a "singing" bowl. I was told that many Tibetan tourist souvenirs are actually "outsourced" to labor across the Himalayas, in Kathmandu, Nepal. Merchants can be aggressive and haggling is expected. Item quality is always a guessing game. I tried to take a picture of two "policemen." It was made clear to me this was not a good idea.

These faithful who come to worship firmly believe that the Dalai Lama will return to Tibet. This is a fervent religious faith that now has political repercussions. When we visited, we were unsure how this was going to work out in the end. We may see it being resolved now on the nightly news. The Dalai Lama indicates he will not return unless Tibet is free.

The current freeze on tourist travel to Tibet, the presence of the more Chinese military following the major protests earlier this year, and a newly-built train line from more urban areas of China seem likely to change this country in future years, with the possibility that Tibet will undergo a cultural homogenization with the rest of China. We fear that by the time more westerners come to Tibet, things may be different and, regrettably, less Tibetan.

About The Author: Natives of Oregon, Donna and Roger Sauer are retired from the banking industry and school administration respectively. Since retiring they have traveled to Europe for Paris Disneyland, China, and Tibet, and, most recently, Japan. They have been members of Disney Vacation Club since 1993 and have traveled to Florida once or twice a year since joining.

They have three children and five grandchildren. Their next trip to the World will be in December.

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