



Far Out Travel: Tibet



The Lure of Tibet

Story and pictures by David Noyes

A monastery- and spectacular-mountainous-landscape-infused tour of Lhasa and beyond represented the fulfilment of a 20-year dream for **David Noyes**, and he couldn't wait to tell us all about it.

I was shuffling quietly into a small room illuminated by the golden glow of yak butter candles when my eyes unexpectedly made contact with an elderly monk. He smiled at me and asked, in perfect English, "Where have you come from?"

"The United States," I answered.

He took my hand as we walked clockwise past a Buddhist shrine and whispered in a voice so quiet I could barely hear: "You have journeyed a very long way to visit Tibet."

I was overwhelmed by the warm touch of this graceful man. Moments later we made our parting, but before releasing my hand, he looked at me with his gentle smile and instructed, "When you return home... remember to pray for Tibet." I felt a chill through my entire body. It was only my second full day in Lhasa, but at that moment I knew my experience would be unforgettable.

For years I had longed to visit Tibet. Maybe it was a fascination romanticised by movies, or maybe it was the powerful lure of a distant land few western travellers have

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Opening Spread: Potal Palace: Built of granite with reddish-brown walls of willow branches and adorned with golden rooftops, the striking architecture and vivid contrast of red, white, gold, and black is unmistakable. The 13-storey structure is composed of the White Palace and the Red Palace. Work began on the former in 1645 when the fifth Dalai Lama decided to move his government from the Drepung monastery to the heart of Lhasa high on the terraced slope of the 130 metre 'Red Hill'. The Red Palace, by contrast, consists of funerary stupa halls for eight Dalai Lamas and numerous chapels to celebrate the great Buddhas and exhibit a treasure of Buddhist artefacts. As subsequent Dalai Lamas passed, the Red Palace was periodically enlarged, concluding with the stupa built for the 13th Dalai Lama in 1936.





Junba Village - Tibet's Only Fishing Village: In the Tibetan language, junba means 'fishing or catching.' For generations, villagers have sustained themselves almost entirely by fishing the Lhasa and Tsangpo Rivers in these unique boats made from six to eight bull skins.

ever seen. Either way, I could barely contain my joy as I crowded at a portal window to steal a momentary glimpse of a magical snow-capped mountain on the descent into Gongkar (Gonggar) Airport. I was travelling alone on a spontaneous trip, but my journey to Tibet had begun almost 20 years ago. I vividly remember being captivated by a fleeting image of the Potala Palace in a television report that described how this isolated and obscure land was becoming accessible to a limited number of outsiders on tightly controlled itineraries. My pilgrimage started that day.

Potala Palace

Moments after arriving in Lhasa, I felt compelled to disregard the advice of my Chinese tour guide and took a taxi across town to the Potala Palace. I had been advised to take my first day slowly, but felt wonderful and wanted to experience a bit of Tibet before I settled into my comfortable room for the night and the controlled itinerary of my guided tour. I had come from sea level in

Beijing to over 12,000 feet in just a matter of hours, and I knew that the effects of acute mountain sickness could be debilitating.

The drive down Beijing Road revealed what a large and modern city Lhasa was becoming. I was a bit surprised - and a bit disappointed - that the once-forbidden city was now a sprawling mini-metropolis of 200,000 people, packed with contemporary buildings, shopping malls, nightclubs and a sports stadium. I couldn't help but think that maybe I was too late to experience the Tibet of my romantic vision. That feeling quickly changed to a childlike exhilaration when the Potala came into view through the dusty windows of my Lhasa taxi.

Though it was late afternoon there were still dozens of pilgrims wandering the streets and prostrating themselves on the sidewalk in front of the towering palace perched on the terraced slope of the 130m high 'Red Hill'. I took several photographs of beautiful women who seemed unfazed by my camera and presence as they practiced their faith. The



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Tibetan prayer flags have five colours, they should be displayed in a proper sequence (to symbolise the elements of nature). From left to right is blue symbolising 'sky,' followed by white symbolising 'cloud', then red symbolising 'fire element', then green, 'water element' and, finally, yellow symbolising 'earth element'.

Although little remains of the original seventh century structure, the Jokhang is the holiest of all holy places in Tibet. As I listened intently to our guide describe the confusing and unfamiliar icons in the numerous small chapels, I would occasionally feel a little nudge in the small of my back, only to turn and see a tiny Tibetan woman eagerly attempting to pass. In chapel after chapel, devout pilgrims gently made their way past scores of tourists to touch their heads and pay tribute at the altars of gurus, Buddhas and kings. After spending some time admiring the jewelled statue of Songtsen Gampo, I quickly moved through the other chapels of the inner sanctum before making my way back down to the ground floor and out to the Barkhor, Tibet's famous pilgrimage *kora*, or circuit.

sounds of chanting and the clanking of handheld prayer wheels would soon become familiar background music, but for now they were an unfamiliar and authentically Tibetan experience that would permeate my dreams for several nights. After taking a few minutes to absorb the realisation that I was finally standing in front of the Potala, I waved down a taxi and headed back to the Tibet Hotel with a mild but noticeable high-altitude headache.

The Jokhang and the Barkhor

According to legend, Buddhism was received into Tibet's shamanistic warring culture when 400 Buddhist scriptures fell from the sky on to the roof of the Yumbulagang fortress in the fifth century. Most modern scholars, however, believe that Buddhism was rooted in Tibet during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo, who died in 650 AD. Under the rule of Songtsen, Tibetan influence continued to expand through force of arms into inner Asia, northern India and Nepal. It was also during the time of Songtsen Gampo that the Jokhang temple was built in Lhasa.

Before exploring the Barkhor, I stopped at the main entrance of the Jokhang. As dusk settled over Lhasa, I sat reposed for over an hour on the stone steps leading down to a forecourt and watched as worshippers raised their hands in a simple gesture: gently touching their foreheads, mouths and chests before lying prostrate, face down on the stony ground. The air was fragrant with the smell of incense and human sweat, providing an additional olfactory authenticity to my salient experience.

I found it hard to leave the forecourt, but the day was nearing an end, so I reluctantly began my swift walk on the Barkhor. In fact, I was literally swept along the circumambulation route by the force of both pilgrims and tourists. The narrow streets were lined with stalls and shops selling butter oil, wicks, *khata* (a silk offering scarf signifying purity and goodwill) and incense for worshippers, as well as cheap jewellery, prayer flags and other assorted trinkets that I scarcely stopped to notice. Unlike at the Jokhang, where the rhythmic chanting of "*om mani padme hum*" lifted skyward on the soft breeze, the Barkhor was alive with the sounds of chatter and commerce.

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Monastic Traditions

The next morning, the tour group I had joined began a series of short excursions to monasteries and sites on the outskirts of Lhasa. On consecutive days we visited the formally great Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) monasteries of Sera and Drepung. From the 17th century until recently, Drepung was the largest monastic university in the world and home to as many as 10,000 monks.

However, my visit to Drepung reflected a much different time in the history of this once magnificent monastery tucked at the base of a hillside eight km west of Lhasa. Unlike other Lhasa monasteries, Drepung sustained very little damage during the Cultural Revolution. Its complex cluster of white buildings with narrow cobblestone roads resembles a small Mediterranean city.

Fresh from my temple experience at the Jokhang, I was surprised at how few people we encountered here. There were very few pilgrims, and no other tourists. Although we had been told there were 700 monks currently in residence, the only monks we met were sitting in a dimly lit corner of the chapels, diligently thumbing through scriptures while collecting the small 20 Yuan fee we were each charged to take pictures.

After our group negotiated the last of the small chapels, we entered the impressive interior of the Main Assembly Hall. We didn't venture far from the west side entrance, but as my eyes surveyed the massive room I could easily imagine thousands of monks chanting and meditating with the great Dalai Lamas of antiquity. This vision was fresh in

my mind when suddenly a virtual parade of monks descended upon us from every possible direction. As they passed, I approached several smiling young monks and took a few hurried snapshots. Then, just as quickly as it appeared, our photo opportunity vanished like a red tide into the great hall.

The unexpected parade of monks hinted at a time long ago, when the great monastic institutions of Lhasa began to transform Tibetan Buddhism from a simple religion of worship into an active educational program leading to individual liberation and enlightenment. As the monastic conclaves in Europe diminished, Tibet's monastic universities became places of shelter, study and debate for an entire culture. Surrounded by both local Tibetans and tourist spectators I witnessed an ancient remnant of this scholastic tradition in a large courtyard at Sera Monastery.

We could hear the noise and commotion as we approached the entrance to the debating courtyard. Under the studied supervision of scholar monks, a new generation was practicing their rhetorical skills before a large, curious, international audience. With a mixture of playfulness and intensity, dozens of student monks gathered in small groups on a beautiful sunny afternoon to passionately debate Buddhist scriptures in an entertaining spectacle for which Lhasa monasteries were once famous. I wandered the courtyard for nearly an hour, taking pictures and watching the living practice of an ancient rite of passage.

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Out of Lhasa - The Yarlung Tsangpo Valley

After several days exploring monasteries, temples, rock paintings, shopping areas and Junba, Tibet's only fishing village, we packed up our belongings and boarded a big green tour bus for a multi-day excursion into the Yarlung Tsangpo Valley. The Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra River) is referred to as the 'mother river of Tibet' and drains an area of 240,000 sq. km at an average elevation of 4,500m, making it the highest river in the world. With two major east-west roads, travel to the attractions of the Valley is only a few hours from Lhasa and an increasingly popular tourist route.

A short distance outside Lhasa, we made our first stop at the Gongkar Chöde Monastery. As we entered the dark inner sanctum of the main assembly hall, the familiar smell of yak

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The Prayer Wheel: The best known Tibetan ritual object. From the smallest to the largest, prayer wheels contain sacred texts or mantras. The cylinder of the wheel is always rotated counter-clockwise and each turn is the equivalent to an incantation of the prayers enclosed within.



More Potala Palace.



In the 12th century, Buddhism swept throughout Tibet and the monastic foundations imported from India began to transform the once powerful military empire into one of the most spiritual cultures ever known. Prior to 1951, the great monastic universities of Lhasa housed over 15,000 monks and nearly 10 percent of all Tibetans were monks or nuns.

butter candles and the melodic sound of monks at prayer greeted us. Several generations of monks, draped in their burgundy and saffron robes, sat cross-legged on padded benches appearing only mildly distracted by the flashes of a dozen camera-clicking onlookers. The sight of tourists moving freely among rows of meditating monks and taking pictures seemed a bit insensitive, but the opportunity to photograph this solemn scene was irresistible. After nearly a dozen tours of temples and monasteries, I was thrilled to see a room full of monks in an authentic demonstration of piety and devotion. I spent the next hour on the bus scrolling through the images and gleefully humming my own version of a Tibetan chant - much to the displeasure of my travel mates.

We spent the night in Zetang Township at a nice hotel in the centre of a poor village. From here it was just a short 12km drive to our next stop, the spectacular Yumbulagang Palace, which rises like a medieval European castle from the summit of Mt. Tashitseri on the eastern bank of the Yarlung Tsangpo. The bus stopped at the base of a steep mountain approach.

From the parking area, we were offered the option of either walking up the steep switchbacks or riding to the Palace on a mule for the affordable fee of 10 Yuan. Without hesitating

I chose the mule, and was led up the mountainside by a young Tibetan. He held the mule by a short rein and enjoyed encouraging my faithful ride to break into a canter on the sharpest hairpin turns. It was a dusty, hot beginning, but once on the top of the hill, it didn't take long to explore the two interior chapels of Yumbulagang.

After touring the chapels, I followed a path along the ridge to a promontory lined with prayer flags. I carefully scrambled up a hill of boulders and was rewarded with an amazing view of the 11m watchtower and verdant valley below. The golden roof was a striking vision against the brilliant deep blue sky with prayer flags of blue, white, red, green and yellow dancing above my head in the warm midday breeze. I watched from the tower as one by one members of my group walked leisurely back down the hill to where a bus waited.

With just a few items remaining on my itinerary, I began to accept that my Tibetan experience would soon end; that the distant sounds of monks chanting, the pervasive odour of yak butter candles, and the warmth I felt in my soul from the kind toothless smile of a pilgrim would soon become memories from the high plateau that would only survive in my dreams. I stared out the window at a beautiful mountain landscape, lacking the ability to suspend time


or even capture the fleeting images with my expensive camera system. It was all going by too fast.

We drove inexorably towards Lhasa, following the Niyang River. I sat quietly as the threatening clouds finally released their rain, and one spectacular landscape after another sped past my window like a misty motion picture. As we went higher and higher into the mountains, the sun came out, and we could see the black tents of nomads dotting the horizon. We finally reached the 5,013m Mi-La Pass late in the day and nearly tripped over each other to photograph the beautiful distant mountains in the perfect light of a setting sun.

Modern Tibet

Though we had arrived at the Tibet Hotel late in the evening, I awoke early the next morning, ready to tour the Potala on my last day in Tibet. I was glad that my visit would end at the place that had inspired my journey so long ago. But as expected, the 350-year-old former seat of the Tibetan government and winter palace of the Dalai Lamas is an eerily quiet museum with gift shops offering books and trinkets celebrating the long history of this magnificent building. Scores of tourist and pilgrims lined the dimly lit hallways leading to small rooms and chapels that were once alive with activity.

It felt both awkward and disrespectful to be standing in the doorway, voyeuristically peeking into the 14th Dalai Lama's private bedroom, which was propped and presented as if he would be returning at any moment. For the first time in my visit I no longer viewed my experience as a detached traveller drawn by a mystical lure to an enchanting destination; rather, I began to wonder what might have become of Tibet if history had taken a different, less violent, path.

I came to Tibet to see for myself if the magical place of my imagination - one filled with ancient rituals, cloistered communities and an indigenous culture that celebrated profound spirituality - still existed on the roof of the world. The reality of modern Tibet is obviously very different than my romanticised vision of the mythical Shangri La. However, there was a fear not too long ago that the deeply spiritual culture at the heart of Tibet might be lost forever. But with the promise of increasing autonomy and the current 'benevolent' governance from Beijing, prayer wheels are again spinning; prayer flags are releasing "om mani padme hum" to the heavens; monks equipped with cell phones are leading the great monastic institutions toward a new partnership with modernity. 

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