

## Introduction

At last I got here, almost fifty years after the spell was cast by my Aunt Madge's birthday gift of "Seven years in Tibet". John, David, Ilana, Felicity, me and our guide drive along river valleys where farming is little changed from medieval times except peasants now have Chinese tractors and flooding is mitigated by Chinese forestry. We journey through beautiful lands that are forever arid. We visit monasteries where thousands of monks were living when I fell under the spell but only tens live now. From Chinese hotels on streets where Tibetans in traditional dress look like foreigners we visit Tibetan quarters where they worship freely.

Tibet lost its independence to the Mongols in 1239, regained it, lost it again in 1705 for three hundred years when the Manchus invaded China and subjugated Tibet, asserted it once more in 1912, and lost it again for what looks like the last time in 1950. Massive Chinese immigration now threatens Tibet's very identity.

## Aug 30 (Kathmandu -> Lhasa)

Security procedures for this flight are pretty elaborate. Both checked baggage and carry-on are X-rayed, one is body-searched twice, carry-on bags are X-rayed a second time and searched. A woman has her roll of duct tape confiscated.

I get a window seat on the left side of the plane, which is completely full, so I have a fine view of Everest, Makalu, and Cho'Oyu. Immediately north of the mountains it's desert, much like the American West. There's a lot of white cloud, which seems inconsistent with the bare land. A few valleys have some green but there's almost no water until the Tsang Po, which becomes the Brahmaputra when it enters India. It's very wide and brown.







Lhasa airport is modern and efficient and I see no sign of Chinese paranoia. I wasted my time snipping out the picture of the Dalai Lama from my guidebook because there's no baggage inspection at all.

We're met by our guide, D, who takes us to two Landcruisers, not primitive jeeps like those in Nepal and Sikkim. He introduces our driver and we start a comfortable hour and a half ride on a tarmac road west up the Tsang Po, over a long bridge, back down the other side of the river, and north to Lhasa. There's a bridge much closer to the airport that's closed.





The Tsang Po is quite high because it's near the end of the rainy season. Hay is drying in small stacks everywhere there's any dry land. Poplars are growing along most of the roadside and small villages of low stone buildings with flat roofs are inside protective stone walls on both sides of the river.



As we start north toward Lhasa we see modern billboards, a strip of newly built shops, a tall shiny China Telecom office building, and then the two-lane highway becomes six lanes with a central flowerbed. There's a Buick dealer. It's like California. We cruise along, stopping periodically for traffic lights and it feels more and more like California except the pace is much slower. There's much less traffic, and it's a mix of cars, tired-looking big trucks, tuktuks, bicycles and little trucks made from motorcycles with a two-wheeled rear end. Women are sweeping dust off the street with straw brooms.

Lhasa is much bigger than I imagined and it looks like any other modern city. The Potala Palace towers above the modern buildings, however, and it's obvious how it would have dominated the valley. I'm still tired from my cold so I'm not displeased by our modern Chinese hotel. I'd prefer the faded elegance of an old hotel, or a Tibetan guesthouse, but this is fine in my current state. The Service Directory in our room explains all:

*In the event of staying outside overnight prior notice should be given.*

*It is prohibited to bring into the hotel radioactive materials.*

*All guns and weapons must be declared. They may be kept by guests.*

*Do not set off fireworks in the hotel.*

About the restaurant, it says:

*The design is elegant, repairing the luxurious Huichi a Chinese food hall. And provide the exquisite article for the guest Vegetables, living the fierce seafood, the Chinese food hall owns a hall, 7 honored guests, it is the ideal place between wedding, birthday*



*dinner and business social parties. Can not fail to make guest come on impulse, be satisfied with but return.*

I look forward to the exquisite article for guest Vegetable because that's what I am today.

When evening comes we go in search of the Yak Hotel whose Dunya restaurant is the only one in Lhasa John is confident is hygienic. Felicity has yak meat momos and I have a yak steak. On the way back I see several men with red tassels in their hair, some with a thick white ring over their left ear, and all with mustaches. John says they're Khampas.



The atmosphere is cheerful. Tibetans are said to be cheery folk and I guess the ones still here are less religiously inclined than those who fled or were killed. I imagine many are ambivalent about the changes. The infrastructure improvements and the availability of more goods is appealing but replacement of the traditional culture is not.

### **Aug 31 (Lhasa – Sera Monastery)**

I must be allergic to yak meat; it was a night of suffering. As light dawns there's dramatic thunder and lightning in the hills and dark gray clouds over the valley.

After breakfast we learn the Potala is closed for the next few days. The Chinese want no protests to mar the celebration of the 40th anniversary of their "peaceful liberation of Tibet". So we walk to the Jokhang instead. It's closed for the morning because an important Chinese dignitary is visiting.

We drive to Sera Monastery on the outskirts of Lhasa. It was founded in 1419 and was one of the three great university monasteries of the scholarly Gelug order along with



Ganden and Drepung. Gelug was the last of the Tibeyan Buddhist orders to be established and is headed by the Dalai Lama. Sera's colleges educated the monks in a 20-year program which culminated in the equivalent of a doctorate. 6,000 monks lived here at the time of the 1959 uprising when it was very severely damaged. A new Sera, now housing over 3,000 monks, was established in India.



Throng of people are offering ghee in butter lamps and placing small bills at the foot of their chosen Buddha. Many small children get a dark smudge on their nose because it's their first visit. There are also a few tourists and it's like being in a European cathedral filled with tourists and worshipers except here the worshipers predominate. The worship is casual and personal and the monastery feels alive even though only a hundred monks live here now instead of thousands, and most buildings are unused.

Some people clamber under bookshelves where the sacred texts are kept. There's a space about four feet high and by pressing your head against the bottom shelf you can squeeze in that wisdom. There's a sky burial site next to the monastery where a few vultures are circling but because there are so few monks they can perform only a few sky burials. You must now be very wealthy or well connected to get the ceremony.

Many children greet us with a merry "hello". The youngest ones usually wait until we've passed because they're shy. One father gets his baby to say "hello" directly to us and then the child is overcome and hides his face. It's so much better than the "Namaste give me one sweet" on trekking routes in Nepal. A boy asks Felicity her name. She tells him, asks his name, and asks if he learned English in school. He did.

I expected an atmosphere of fear and oppression, that Lhasa would feel like an occupied city, but it doesn't. The assembly hall at Sera has pictures of the last two Panchen Lamas and many people use prayer wheels in the streets. Only pictures of the Dalai Lama, symbol of the desire for Tibetan independence, are banned. Religion seems thoroughly alive. Perhaps there is some merit in the Tibetan idea that Mao was a



reincarnation of Avolokiteshvara whose purpose was to free them and force them to spread the dharma to the rest of the world.

I feel extremely tired by the time we get back from Sera and abandon hope that I'm allergic to yak meat; it's my usual Himalayan belly wobbles. I go to bed while the others visit Jokhang, throw up a few times and start taking prescription medicine. Maybe I can defeat this bug quicker than usual. I spend all afternoon, evening and night dozing or asleep. Next time I come to the Himalaya I'll eat only eggs and bacon for breakfast, bland foods and very little meat at other meals, and no beer. Mexican-style breakfasts and spicy evening meals are good, but better avoided here.

Felicity has noticed that men always go first through doors.

Last night John got a phone call from a Chinese woman. He couldn't understand what she was saying but thought he heard the word "message". Perhaps someone left him a message? Then he realized she was offering a massage. Tonight the phone rings in our room and Felicity answers. There's no reply, then we hear the phone ring next door in David and Ilana's room.

### **Sep 1 (Lhasa -> Samye via Dorje Drak and Mindroling)**

John's retirement is still unsettled. The new Chief drew up an organization chart on which everyone fit neatly except John. Because he didn't fit anywhere it was suggested he might like to retire. The new head of Human Resources, a good friend of John's, confirmed that he would like to retire if he had an adequate pension and was getting that arranged when he had a heart attack. Then the campaign against terrorists began, they realized nobody else could provide the computer support they needed, and asked John to stay on. But he's decided he would very much like to retire.

I'm well enough to travel so we buy crates of drinking water at the supermarket and set off as planned. A young woman carries the crates to the cash register, loads them onto a trolley and brings them all the way to our cars. John offers a tip, which she refuses. We head back to the Tsang Po, over the bridge and back towards the airport.

Our driver is a great enthusiast for the horn. He toots vigorously whenever we approach a slower vehicle or pedestrian. He toots unceasingly when we're forced to stop for a flock of animals on the road. They take no notice because they've met these strange noisy beasts before and know they offer no threat except on rare occasions when they fall on you. Felicity thinks our driver comes from a poor background and despises people like his former self whom he sweeps from his path.

We take the ferry to Dorje Drak, one of the primary Nyingma monasteries in central Tibet. Nyingma is the oldest of the Tibetan Buddhist orders. Dorje Drak is at the bottom of a ridge that is said to look like a dorje. Dorje meaning thunderbolt and diamond and represents irresistible and indestructible spiritual power. It is the chief symbol of tantric Buddhism. Its prongs form orbs on opposite sides of a small central sphere. It is used in many rites to strike a bell. Padmasambhava holds one in his hand.

Dorje Drak was founded in the 16th century by an incarnation of King Trison Detsen, mostly destroyed in the 1960s Cultural Revolution and has been only partly rebuilt.



Around 200 monks lived here in 1959 but only 30 are allowed now. Like Sera, it has been re-established in India.















Further on we head off the main road to Mindroling, one of the six great Nyingma monasteries. It had over a hundred satellite monasteries. A small chapel was built here in the 10th century by Lama Tsultrim Shenrab, a key figure in the Second Diffusion of Buddhism after it was suppressed in the 9th century by King Langdarma. The monastery was expanded in the 17th century by Terdak Lingpa who “rediscovered” texts that became an important part of Nyingma teaching. He compiled thirteen volumes of texts that he said were Padmasambhava’s instructions on how to attain enlightenment and he taught the Great 5th Dalai Lama.





Mindroling was heavily damaged by Dzungar Mongol invaders from Turkestan in 1718, was rebuilt with funding from Polhanas who ruled Tibet with China's support from 1728-47, damaged again when China invaded in 1959 and much more so in the Cultural Revolution when its thirteen story chorten and most outbuildings were destroyed.



Mindroling has been partly rebuilt



Repairing a drum

The dressed stone buildings that remain are fine, however. Inside are images of the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava and episodes from his life. One of the chapels has 2,000 statues of him. In 1965 monks began re-establishing Mindroling near Clement Town, Dehra Dun. It now houses a college that is among the largest Buddhist institutes in India.



A village below the monastery has extensive fields of barley, most of it harvested. A few villagers are still working in some fields piling straw onto trailers pulled by two-wheeled tractors.



We continue towards Samye Monastery, the first built in Tibet, and stop in Tsetang at the office of the “Public Security Division” because we’re entering a different administrative district and must have our papers checked. Tsetang is where the original kings of Tibet are said to have descended from the sky on a rope. There’s a marker where they landed on a hill above the town, which is now very modern and Chinese. It’s an important administrative center but until recently it was very small.

A dirt road leads from Tsetang to Samye with new concrete bridges and supports for areas that are prone to washing out. At the foot of the hills there are great sand dunes that seem incongruous. It’s very dusty.

Samye is enormous compared to every other monastery I’ve seen. It was founded around 779, the first monastery established in King Trison Detsen’s program to revitalize Buddhism. In the previous century King Songtsen Gampo had established memorization of sutras as the path to enlightenment but that had little impact outside the court, partly because the only infrastructure he established was the magnificent Jokhang and Ramoche temples in Lhasa.

To spread the teachings King Trison Detsen invited Shantarakshita from India to set up monasteries outside Lhasa. He chose Samye as the first site but all his attempts to build were thwarted by demons. The storms and upheavals they caused were so destructive that he had to leave. He said only a tantric master could subdue such forces and recommended Padmasabhava. The ascendancy of tantrism in Tibet is attributed to his success after Shantarakshita’s sutra memorization failed.



Tantric practice whether Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Sikh or other is based on visualizing a deity that represents cosmic forces and uniting with the deity, sometimes in an analog of sexual courtship and consummation. Such meditation is usually performed in solitude or in a small group with a spiritual teacher. Tibetan Buddhism developed into large scale monastic tantrism.

Samye is a mandala whose central temple represents the world's metaphysical center, Mount Meru. Buildings at the corners and cardinal points of the site represent other elements of the cosmology.



It is late in the afternoon when we arrive. A chilling wind adjusts the foothill sand dunes to more perfect harmony as we check in at the barrack-style hostel and get a room with three single beds, two coat racks, a TV, a big flask of hot water, two washbasins and a small commode . We will investigate where Tibet's first monks were trained tomorrow.

At dinner I ask Ilana if she met the man she wanted to see in Lhasa. She's representing an American group that wants to make a gift to Tibet and identified this man as a potential local representative. D was able to find him and David and Ilana visited him. He is humble, she says, despite his accomplishments – he has built 60 schools with his own money and donations – and has a real presence – you can feel he would be a leader if he were younger. She bought a copy of his autobiography. He says the Chinese have done much good in Tibet. *"Add anything I missed,"* she tells David.

David has begun reading the autobiography of Tashi Tsering and says it's fascinating. He was chosen as a young boy to be in the Dalai Lama's dance troupe and was excited to leave his remote village but his experience in the monastery was terrible. He was beaten for the most trivial or no reasons like all the other acolytes until he got



protection by becoming the homosexual plaything of the chief monk. He later made his escape to the USA and went to college but then he had a dream and woke up knowing he must return and help his people liberate themselves from the theocratic regime that caused so much suffering. He returned in 1964 and was imprisoned for several years by the Chinese but despite that and although his wife is a very devout Buddhist he believes the Chinese have done much good in Tibet.

I'm now thinking that the view of Tibet in America is like the nostalgia many English people felt when I was young for a world that was gone, the reality of which was privileged for a few and circumscribed for most. It's a view promulgated by the noble families and high placed lamas who pine for their lost privileges. Lamaism was no worse than other institutions that provide an amplifier for power. We all like power, seek to control our lives, and many people will respond if given an opportunity for power over others, some badly, like Tashi Tsering's oppressors. I met a lot of that in the business world. Supporting Tibetans seems more respectable than yearning for Britain's days of Empire because it's supporting freedom of religion and opposition to Communism.

## Sep 2 (Samye)

So many of my preconceptions were wrong. It rained lightly all night and the entire morning sky is obscured by low gray cloud.

A man in a sport jacket, which is unusual in Tibet, and a cowboy hat, which is very common, is lighting the incense burner. The smoke has to climb only a short distance this morning before mingling with the clouds.





D told David the Chinese have had three successive plans for the Tibetans. First was brutal repression, which didn't work very well; things kept going wrong. Next they tried complete religious freedom but when the Dalai Lama's sister visited Tibet, there was an outburst of protests and pleas for help to rid Tibet of the Chinese. Now they're encouraging nightclubs and bars and it's working. Young Tibetans are flocking to the bars, drinking and getting onto fights.

John says the central temple here at Samye is like an Egyptian temple of the Ptolomaic era with its dark, narrow walkway round the wall enclosing the central chamber. Some paintings pose another cultural/historical mystery; they look Chinese.





John thinks people in Europe were never “internally devout” like people here. The pilgrims in Europe were few and wealthy. There was no support system for poor pilgrims as there is here, although if you could get to a monastery they would take you in as a guest.

We spend the morning in Utse, the main temple. Monks are chanting in the assembly hall, led by one on a raised platform who beats time with cymbals. High and mid-toned trumpets sound from benches in the center. On the right, two huge telescopic trumpets are played by monks taking enormous breaths that are just able to power a short blast of sound. Every so often a monk comes round with a big kettle of tea and refills each monk’s cup. During one chant a monk pours splashes of water from an ornate pitcher into an urn on the altar. The senior monks each have their own place on the two benches that face each other. Apprentice monks sit anywhere on the benches furthest from the center. On the second floor, we have the good fortune to find the chapel of the Buddha of Long Living open.



Utse was badly damaged by fire in the mid-17th century, repaired toward the end of that century and more extensively restored at the end of the 18th. After a devastating earthquake in 1816 and a fire a decade later it was repaired again. Samye was declared a protected cultural site in the early 1960s but the Red Guards destroyed Utse’s third floor, leveled Samye’s four great chortens and destroyed or stole immense quantities of statuary and other treasure. Nonetheless, it suffered much less destruction than most other monasteries and it was rebuilt yet again in 1989.

After lunch Felicity and I explore the rest of the site. Two small temples have beautiful flowers in their courtyard. I’m about to enter one of the temples when a monk bars my way. “Bad!” he cries. “Bad?” Has he seen deep inside me and directed a rotten core I hadn’t suspected? Then he touches his chin. “Beard?” I ask. “Bad!” he says with a smile and a nod.



Older buildings are made of large stone blocks separated from each other by layers of small stones for earthquake protection. The walls slope inwards to roof level and the small stones can shift and absorb tremors without the walls fracturing or collapsing.



Late in the afternoon John and I climb to the temple overlooking Samye. This is where Padmasambhava defeated demons who were thwarting the monastery's construction. The view is magnificent and Samye's overall layout is visible. To the east a line of hills has sand dunes piled at its foot. Far beyond on the south side of the river Tsetang can be seen. The harvest is being threshed down in the valley. Samye is surrounded by hills with sparse desert vegetation but the valley is irrigated by a small river that flows down to the Tsang Po.



Padmasambhava's temple



At lunch Felicity said that although she isn't a Buddhist, her feeling when the monks were chanting was the same as she sometimes gets in a Christian church. I tell John as we climb the hill that I'm deeply troubled by that feeling and believe the response at Nazi rallies was similar. There's something deep in humans that responds to crowd music and I believe that thing is much better not developed. John says the Nazi response was to a charismatic leader. We agree it may be the same response triggered in different ways. John says the only spiritual experiences he's had were at Delphi and Troy, places whose history he knows well and admires. The closest I've come was at Robert Frost's house when I touched the table where he wrote.

As I sit leaning against Padmasambhava's temple I feel a sense of wonder and stop thinking. Time passes. I become aware of how blessed I am to be alive. How can I become more often aware of that joy?

At dinner John describes his experience when he climbed Mt. Sinai. He labored up the steep climb, looked back when he reached the top, and saw men trotting up with the greatest of ease carrying trays of tea. Felicity thought he said "*trays of teeth*" and anticipated learning about some new Jewish ceremony. She wasn't surprised to hear about trays of teeth because John has such a store of recondite knowledge.

Later, John tells us that Samye, Jokhang and the Potala Palace escaped damage during the Cultural Revolution because they were put on a preservation list by Chou En Lai.

Later still, I ask John a Hindu caste question that's been puzzling me, why blacksmiths are untouchable? Perhaps it's because they work with fire, he suggests, which is sacred to Zoroastrians. Maybe blacksmiths were thought to be defilers of the sacred fire.

### **Sep 3 (Samye -> Tsetang via Trandruk and Yambulagang)**

When I visit Utse again at 8 this morning fifty or more monks are standing quietly at the entry. The outer door to the courtyard is open but the inner one is locked. Suddenly that door opens and all the monks run to enter. They remove their sandals and close the door behind them. This must be a more important service than the one yesterday at which tourists were present, including a group from Bhutan who financed a fine new statue of Buddha in the inner temple that reminds John of an Egyptian one.

I climb to the small courtyard on the second floor, the one with the Chinese murals. It's very peaceful until I'm chased away by a monk. It's OK for me to be on the outer walkway but I return to the ground floor courtyard. The wall paintings are in very poor condition here and I know far too little to appreciate them. As I walked round the gallery above, a monk came out of his room and walked purposefully off. I wonder why he didn't attend the service. At 8:40 the monks emerge again. Most leave the monastery but a few stay. I guess they live here.

At breakfast a dozen American Buddhists are talking loudly about the Westernization of the world, expressing emotionless outrage. They move on to September 11 and people they knew who had narrow escapes, or not. They're so loud it's impossible to ignore what they're saying. Ilana can't stand it and goes to her room. David will order her breakfast and she'll come back when her mind is clear.



The man at the end of the table has an especially loud voice and he's still going on about the bombings. Felicity goes over and asks him to talk more quietly and change the subject. *"We're in Samye, she says gently. "I know. Asshole! Have a nice day,"* he replies. The American Buddhists' food comes a few moments later and they do quiet down.

When Ilana returns she tells us the loud man is Jewish and David says he's from New York. I'm ashamed because the guy is American. Ilana is more so because he's a Jew. *"He's a stereotype" she says, "but there's always a reason for stereotypes. Almost all the Jewish men I've met were like that. It's because for generations Jewish men have been unable to protect their families. They're deeply insecure and feel inadequate so they over-compensate. They're loud, arrogant and aggressive to hide their insecurity from themselves."*

We travel on to Trandruk Monastery, one of twelve temples built by King Songtsen Gampo before work started on the critically important central one, the Jokhang. Princess Wengchen, his Buddhist wife from China, detected the beating heart of a powerful anti-Buddhist she-demon just where the Jokhang was to be built. Twelve temples were built as stakes through its limbs to subdue the demon. Trandruk pinning its left shoulder is one of four close to Lhasa. Others are much further afield because the demon is so huge. Its left knee and foot are held down in Bhutan at Bumthang and Paro.

Trandruk's site is also said to have been a lake inhabited by a dragon with five heads. Songtsen Gampo transformed himself into a roc, a white bird that could seize an elephant in its talons, killed the dragon then drank the water. A similar legend explains the name Trandruk (falcon-dragon) as the cry a dragon uttered when it saw this propitious place before Padmasambhava turned it into a falcon that drank the water.

The original Trandruk temple was badly damaged by Langdarma, restored in the 11th century, expanded in the 14th, further enhanced in the 17th and 18th and rebuilt in 1988. There's a magnificent brocade thanka in one chapel that is thought to have been a gift from a Ming emperor in the late 14th or early 15th century. It is decorated with 29,000 pearls, 2,000 coral beads, 180 turquoises, two rubies, a diamond and a sapphire. There's also a thanka said to have been made by Princess Wengchen and one of pearls that depicts her as an incarnation of White Tara.

Downstairs a Tibetan woman hands me her plastic bag of butter so I can make an offering. Outside is a toilet that David says is highly encouraging of an out of body experience.

Not too far away, also in the Yarlung Valley is Yambu Lakhang. The original tower is thought to have been the earliest such structure in Tibet. The present one is a 1982 reconstruction of what was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. It is said that Tibet's legendary first king, Nyatri Tsenpo, built his palace here in 127 BC after twelve Bonpo shepherds mistakenly identified his origin as the heavens. There's a fine view over the Yarlung valley from the fairy castle high on a crest.

In the reign of the 28<sup>th</sup> king in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD sacred texts descended from the sky while a voice proclaimed that someone who could read them would arise after five generations, which happened in the reign of the 33<sup>rd</sup> king, Somgtsen Gampo. I



wondered if papers were swept up and blown high over the Himalayas before landing here. John points out it's more likely the papers were left behind by a trader.



Back at Tsetang we go to check in at the hotel and find we have no reservation. We try a different hotel but they aren't allowed to take foreigners. The third hotel is very Chinese with a handsome lobby and splendidly comfortable leather chairs. Our rooms are in a separate building made of concrete that's starting to degenerate. Opposite is a third building where we can have breakfast any time we like between 8 and 9 AM. Red globes with golden ornamentation hang above its door. Above them is elegant golden writing in Chinese and English announcing it to be a Pestaanrant.





We walk up to the nunnery in front of the hill where the monkey who fathered the Tibetan race descended from the sky. There are 18 nuns at this small nunnery as well as a few monks who perform menial tasks. Nuns saved Samtenling from the Red Guards by entirely enclosing it in massive stone walls. The assembly hall is quite small so there can never have been many nuns here.



Felicity with the nuns



We meet a coach-load of retirement age Americans and wait for them to finish their tour. A White Tara is the central figure on the altar. As well as fabric hot air prayer wheels hanging from the ceiling and katas on the statues there are strings of what look like silver dollar plant seed cases but larger, irregular, with the longer edge serrated, and with a brown eye in the center. They're very light and move in the gentle breeze.

We're followed when we leave by a boy of four or five who points up a short flight of steps and says, "Way." David and I climb the steps to be polite. We assume he's showing us where he lives. We come down again and continue along the path but a very old man then also directs us up the steps. We go up and cross a small courtyard guarded by a mastiff on the roof. We enter a small chapel with a large library and are directed into another room by the old man and the boy who is now perched on his shoulders. In here are thankas along one wall and an elderly bicycle against another.

Most of Tsetang is very new and Chinese. As we walk toward the Tibetan quarter we look through archways off the main street and see there's nothing behind the façade. We turn right down a short street that ends in what looks to have been a caravanserai and behind that is a warren of poor Tibetan houses. The outside of the caravanserai is a circle of three-story buildings that look like old hotels, each with a carriage-width door. Places like this were markets. Traders could stay in the lodging houses around the market and the gates were locked at night to keep the merchandise safe.

#### **Sep 4 (Tsetang -> Gyantse)**

It's a Chinese breakfast buffet at the Pestanrant; rice soup, dumplings, hard-boiled eggs and spicy vegetables. A man is supping his soup with noisy grunts and lip smacking and I remember being on a sales trip with a colleague and my recently supplied Taiwanese software architect, a tremendously noisy eater. My colleague looked at him in horror. "Jeez, man," he said. "Don't attack it like that! It's dead already!" The yak butter tea here is very good and it's hard to resist a third cup so I don't.

There was very loud music from the karaoke bar last night. It's raining this morning and the grey cloud is low and continuous, also not what I expected.

D's father and younger sister live on their farm just outside Lhasa and D works there, too, in the off-season. In the tourist months he lives with his uncle who does road construction. His uncle used to have a big house but the government took half of it. Most Tibetans don't like the big new buildings and none like that the Chinese get all the good jobs. When D, who's about 25, first visited his uncle all the shops were owned by Tibetans and the Chinese were doing the menial jobs. Now it's the opposite.

D went to Dharamsala to be educated. It was free. Not all Tibetans are good, he says. A Tibetan policeman came to his room one night and asked, "What are you doing here? What is your occupation? What does the Dalai Lama say?" D replied, "The Dalai Lama says all people are the same. Chinese and Tibetan people should tell each other the truth and be kind to each other. The Dalai Lama is my religious leader. I know nothing about politics." The conversation went on much longer but at last the policeman went away and it was OK.

D says Tibetans like Americans; we're friendly people.



We set off for Gyantse. Tibetan villages are dotted all along the valleys, single story houses with tiny windows. Sand dunes are heaped against the base of many of the arid hills and avalanches of sand cascade down from the peak of some hills. Was the sand formed when this was a sea?

The road winds up the mountainside away from the Tsang Po valley. It's tarmac as far as Ringmo, a small town "*where tourists stop for lunch*", and then becomes a dirt road. D and the drivers eat but we don't because John advises against the hygiene risk. At this height, 16,000 feet at the Karo La a few miles beyond Ringmo, it looks much like Iceland. The valley bottom is gray and stony with small streams among the stones, the hills are rounded by wind erosion and are very infertile, some with only sparse patches of spiky vegetation, others with a thin film of pale greenery.

We stop to see a famous glacier that blocked the road in 1978 but it's very cloudy and the glacier is only just visible. Vendors of crystal balls and obelisks are waiting for us in vain. We stop next at an overlook to Yamdrok Lake, one of four especially sacred lakes guarded by the goddess Dorje Gegkyi Tso.. It is 45 miles long, surrounded by snow-capped mountains and known as the scorpion lake for its shape. Protective deities living in its depths invest it with divinatory power. Since 1996 it has been the site of Tibet's largest power station.



Young men with brightly decorated yaks offer photo opportunities that we decline. Small children press themselves against our windows and shiver theatrically. Over the pass and lower down are a few small fields of barley. Further down are larger fields and some potatoes.

Eight hours after leaving Tsetang we approach Gyantse through a broad valley covered with barley fields. The harvest is being brought in. One field that's already clear is being cultivated with a horse-drawn plow. Felicity and I need to vegetate after the long ride. It's very tiring bouncing around for so long trying to absorb so many new scenes.



The pace is too fast for the human mind; it becomes over-loaded. David and Ilana go for a walk. John is non-committal about his plans but I know he'll search for a safe restaurant. He's already discovered that his favorite one here has closed. We agree to meet at 7 for dinner.

Our hotel appears to be operated by the kind of people aid workers complain about, the ones who haven't grasped the need for maintenance. I reach for a towel and the rail collapses. The toilet seat takes a lunge off the side of the pan. Next time I go for the towel I use my intelligence and instead of replacing it on the rail I hang it on the shower-head, which swivels and deposits the towel in the tub. The tub has a slit in the bottom that's mended with moldering sticky tape. Perhaps someone stabbed it in despair of the tub ever emptying.

Gyantse still felt Tibetan when John was here in 2002 but in the intervening three years it's become almost entirely Chinese. It's a rural town but the buildings are brightly decorated and Chinese looking. The streets are wide and sparsely populated with four- and two-wheeled farm tractors, pedaled and motorized rickshaws, bicycles, and occasional cars and trucks.



Near the outside of town there's a street of Tibetan stores facing a bare park with a heroic Chinese abstract sculpture. The stores have hand-made sickles for harvesting barley, pitchforks made from rebar, and a wide selection of homesteading supplies including metal stoves like those in the wealthier homes in the hills of Nepal.

At dinner Ilana mentions that she noticed a sheep's jawbone in the street when they were out walking. *"Would you care for a tray for your teeth?"* David asks Felicity.

Later, David says he's been puzzling about something. D and the drivers bought strings of yak cheese cubes from a Tibetan woman at Ringmo and D insisted we should try some. It's less hard than the kind I had in the hills of Nepal and not very tasty but it's



edible. It got David thinking. Why, he wonders, when there's cheese from the milk of cattle, buffalo, yak, sheep and goats, does nobody make cheese from pig's milk? Maybe it tastes bad, but there are plenty of bleu cheeses and goat cheeses that some people enjoy. Surely some people would enjoy pig milk cheese? Perhaps the problem is that pigs lie down to suckle, or maybe it's that they have too many teats and it's too much work to get enough milk? None of our theories is compelling.

## Sep 5 (Gyantse)

John was sick last night and will spend the day in bed while we visit Palkhor Chode monastery, the nine story Kumbum stupa, and the fortress. The four of us decide to visit the monastery first because it rained again and the sky is still covered by low black clouds. Perhaps it will clear later and we'll get good views of the valley.



We start through the old town towards the monastery, inspecting all the shops and street vendors. Felicity is looking for a Tibetan knife for Mark and I see a good one, then she spots some jade bowls and I buy a translucent light green one. She buys a pendant and a hair ornament. Now, we're flagged as wonderful customers and are shown all kinds of things, but we've bought enough and set off for the monastery gate.

Several women follow Felicity with objects she's shown interest in. One seems truly desperate to make a sale and Felicity buys an incense holder. Inside the gate we spy what we think will be a good refuge, a toilet, but one of the women runs after Felicity and follows her inside. She has a turquoise ring that Felicity was tempted by, "*This one bigger, it will fit,*" the woman says, but Felicity can buy no more. The woman grabs her arm and Felicity has to struggle hard to make her go away.



It's very peaceful inside the monastery. It feels lighter and airier in the assembly hall than others we've visited. There are much larger libraries in the interior chapels than I've seen before. Most books are wrapped in saffron cloth with new-looking tassels and some have clean new wooden covers. Perhaps some are still used although very few monks can read the old script. One section of shelves is piled with uncovered pages and another with wooden book covers. I wonder if they'll ever be reassembled into books.



There are several good statues of Padmasambhava and his consorts and one chapel has statues of the three kings who established Buddhism in Tibet. Trisong Detsen and Songtsen Gampo have streaks running down their cheeks. A monk says they're weeping for Tibetans' suffering. Felicity and Ilana buy sandalwood prayer beads from him.



An old woman outside the monastery points to my beard and says, "Yak!" so I grunt and put my hands to my forehead to make horns.

We walk over to the Kumbum, the largest stupa in Tibet, and start climbing from level to level, circumambulating clockwise, only entering a very few chapels. There are said to be 108, far too many for non-pilgrims like us. When we reach the top we can see the whole of the old town. The street leading to the monastery is very wide. I wonder if it was a market like the ones in front of European cathedrals.



Later, we walk through a different part of the old town to the carpet factory. These streets are all narrow. A cow is tethered outside many houses. Some have young calves, others are heavily pregnant, and one is being milked. Everyone is friendly, many say "hello", and several point approvingly at their chins, smiling at me and my beard.





The carpet factory consists of eight buildings, some in sections and a couple left open like warehouses. One of these is used to store wool before and after dyeing. The other contains large metal looms at which pairs of people, mostly women, sit weaving. They're delighted to see us and amused by our strange appearance. A man who seems to be a supervisor leads us to a room where men are finishing carpets with shears to make an even surface. The first room we visited, before we met the supervisor, was one where women were spinning. They were all very cheerful and one gestured to an empty place and motioned Felicity to sit down and spin. She did a little but stopped because the thread she spun wasn't very even. As we entered the room an English language propaganda broadcast came on. A woman got up and unplugged the tape player, grimacing at it and smiling at us. After visiting all the buildings the supervisor brings us to the retail store and we buy a chair-sized carpet.

David and I then climb the fort on the inauspicious mountain, one of thirteen Padmasambhava had to subjugate so Buddhism could thrive. Perhaps this valley was a Bon stronghold.. It's a stiff climb to a commanding position from which the cultivated fields are visible to the distant foothills. The entire town is visible and we see the Tibetan part is still the largest. The new Chinese development is in just one quadrant that extends to the east where we approached. That's why the town seemed Chinese. The monastery is very clear in the west and we also see the carpet factory.



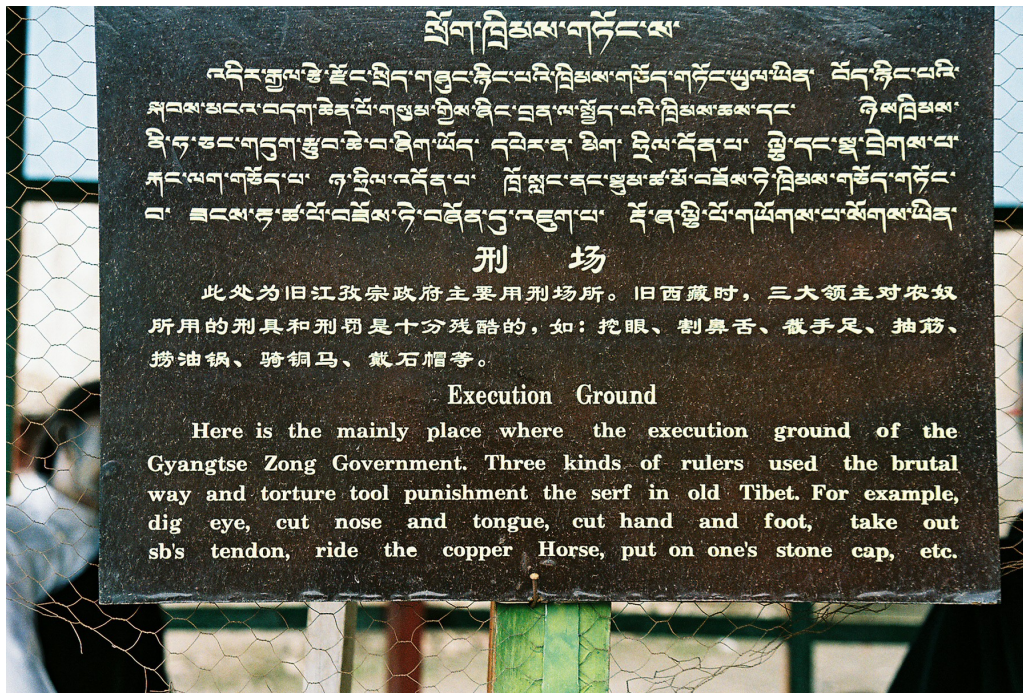
The fort overlooking the town

Although Padmasambhava subdued the enemies of religion here no monastery was established at that time. Princes claiming descent from King Gesar of Ling began relocating here from northeast Tibet in the 13th century when the Sakya under Yuan patronage ruled most of Tibet. They converted from Nyingma to Sakya and built this castle just before the Mongol Yuan dynasty fell in 1368 and the Sakyapa lost their support. They then allied with the Ming and the Gelugpa order established a few years later by Tsongkhapa. The monastery here was built soon after Tibet's greatest Gelugpa monasteries, Ganden, Drepung and Sera were founded starting in 1409 and it was for a time one of the chief Buddhist centers. The fort is now mostly in ruins.





There's an Anti-British Imperialism Museum in one surviving building that presents a colorful revisionist account of the 1904 Younghusband Expedition that stopped here for several months on the way to Lhasa. There's also an exhibit with Tibetans torturing one another and a placard listing some popular methods of torture. These include ripping out a prisoner's intestines and making him eat them, and tearing out the "sb tendons". "Tear out the sum'bitch's tendons, huh?" we say to each other.



A few sheep live among the ruins at the very top. We meet a couple of tourists as we descend. "Watch out for the sheep," David tells them. "They're dangerous?" the guy asks skeptically. "Very," David assures him. "Feral," I add.



We make our way back through the park with the abstract sculpture and I see it's more elaborate than I thought. There's a pond with a gazebo in the middle, and a public toilet. David is considering writing a guidebook about the locations, quality and special features of public toilets around the world, with a rating system. *"1 to 10 on degree of out of body experience?"* I ask. *"More of a Richter scale"* he says. A middle-aged man greets me in the traditional way by putting his tongue out as we return to the hotel.

Ilana has a migraine. David, Felicity and I eat at the hotel restaurant where we had breakfast and it turns out well. We check on John after dinner and I try to persuade him to take antibiotics because he still feels *"rotten"* but he says he doesn't need medication, he just had too much fatty food. I tell him we arranged to meet D at 9 tomorrow and we can decide what to do then. John thinks he'll be well enough to go to Shigatse. He could stay there or come on to Sakya with us depending how he feels.

## **Sep 6 (Gyantse -> Shigatse)**

It's a bright sunny day and John is better. We've decided to go only as far as Shigatse today and make a round trip to Sakya tomorrow because D has heard the road to Sakya is very bad.

We stop at Pala Manor on the outskirts of Gyantse, an estate of almost 1,500 acres that had close to 2,500 workers. The family that owned it was headed by the Galun, who was second in importance only to the Dalai Lama. It's like a European estate except in detail. The house has two fancy rooms. The fancier, which feels Chinese and is a suite, is the place of worship. A big statue of Padmasambhava is in the main chamber and Avolokiteshvara is in a side chapel. The other fancy room is the master's bedroom. On its wall is the skin of a snow leopard and an even rarer cloud leopard that John says must have come from Sikkim. There are many fine carpets. There's also a dining hall filled with objects that belonged to the family. There's a stereoscopic slide viewer with pictures of a street in Paris and the Government House in Algiers. This noble family was not so cut off from the rest of the world as histories of Tibet suggest. Placards throughout the house and outbuildings shout that we are viewing evidence of *"a society based upon privilege and slavery"*.

We go round with a group of Chinese military officers and their fashionable wives, who are fascinated by my beard and ask me to pose for photographs with them.

Many serfs got a better life when they were liberated by the Chinese. They each got a plot of land and some also got a tractor. D says farmers must sell their produce at a price the government fixes (the nomads in the West must sell their butter at a fixed price and Chinese officials are everywhere making sure the regulations are followed) but they can also barter with each other. *"Is life for someone like your father better or worse now?"* I ask D. *"It wasn't possible to have a small farm before the Chinese came. All the land was owned by noble families and monasteries"*.

We drive along the main road to Shigatse and take a track across the fields to Shalu (Small Hat) Temple, a Chinese-looking monastery with a multi-level, dazzling turquoise-tiled Chinese palace roof. The original building, one of the first monasteries of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism, was completed shortly before Atisha came here for three



months in 1045. It grew prominent a couple of centuries later when Yuan emperor Kublai Khan made Sakya the dominant sect with Phagpa as its leader.

Phagpa invited 80 Newari artists from Kathmandu to work at his Sakya monastery then Kublai Khan summoned their leader to his court to establish a painting school. In 1306 Phagpa's successor arranged for Shalu's renovation by graduates of that school whose fusion of Chinese and Newari art was a primary inspiration for Tibetan art.

Shalu's enhancement continued under lama Buton who became abbot in 1320. He was the scholar who restructured more than 4,500 sacred texts into a consistent form to compile the canonical 227 volume Tengyur and Kangyur. He also wrote a History of Buddhism in India and Tibet and 26 volumes on tantrism that define the rules for all tantric images. He made Shalu an important learning center about long distance travel in a trance, generation of internal heat and other tantric secrets.



As we walk through the outer courtyard to the ticket office I'm stopped by two monks, one of whom wonderingly runs his fingers through my beard. We get our tickets and wait our turn at a very primitive toilet in a place where three men are working. One is on scaffolding but the others stop work and want to know all about my beard. Do I take special medicine to make it grow? How old am I? One of them is 76 and has a magnificently wrinkled face.

While we wait Felicity points out that these squat toilets without doors are much more hygienic than flush ones with doors because you don't have to touch anything other people have touched so diseases aren't spread. She remembers an aid organization in Africa tried to reduce the spread of typhoid in a village where people were using the traditional practice of going to the woods to relieve themselves. Portable toilets were installed and soon everyone had typhoid.

The center of this monastery escaped damage in the Cultural Revolution and it has a good feeling. It's easy to see why the fine murals here were such an inspiration for Tibetan artists.



In a side chapel we're shown a stone on which there's a most implausible self-formed Om Mani Padme Hum and another with an equally improbable self-formed face of the Buddha as well as a bowl of water that never empties. Two other chapels contain libraries and one has wooden plates to print sacred texts. Another chapel contains splendid protective deities.

I'm seized by another monk when we emerge. This one insists on braiding my beard. He gets it tightly plaited and then realizes he has no way to keep it fastened so he directs me to keep a tight grip where it should be secured by a band.

John was OK this morning but is very tired now. We go on to Shigatse through a wide perfectly flat valley that's all farmed, chiefly barley but also some small stands of corn. The technology used here is the same as farmers were using in England just before I was born, small tractors to transport crops from the fields, horses for plowing and hand tools for reaping. That's not so very long ago, it seems to me.

But the life of the farm workers at Pala Manor, for example, even allowing for the distorting lens of Chinese propaganda, was very much worse than for those English farm laborers. It was a lot like the life of slaves on plantations in the Old South. The serfs at Pala Manor were housed in mud walled cabins around small courtyards and given only just enough grain to sustain life. There was no real possibility of a better situation.

It's almost 3 PM when we reach Shigatse, the second largest town in Tibet with a population today of around 80,000, and we decide to rest for half an hour before visiting Tashilumpo. I wonder if the "bad road" D was told about is the one to Shalu because the road to Sakya is tarmac covered, at least at this end. I ask D about it but don't understand his reply. Felicity changes the subject gracefully and asks about the children being taught English in school.

They're taught the sciences in English, beginning when they're five or six. Some other subjects are taught in Chinese and some in Tibetan, so the next generation will be trilingual. My view of what the Chinese are doing is growing rapidly more confused. Their intent is positive but Tibetans end up with only the poorest jobs. I can't tell how much oppression exists.

Shigatse is where the kings of U-Tsang ruled. Their dzong, destroyed by China in 1961, is being reconstructed in concrete faced with stone to look like the old photographs. It will become another polemical museum. All state-supported history is polemical. That self-evident truth came to me when I saw how different events looked in my father's US High School history textbook from what I was taught in the UK.

Tashilumpo Monastery is on a hill in the center of town. It was founded in 1447 by Tsongkhapa's nephew who was later named the 1st Dalai Lama. Two centuries later the 5th Dalai Lama recognized his teacher as the latest of four incarnations of the Panchen (great scholar) Lama and an incarnation of the celestial Buddha Opame (Sanskrit Amitabha). The Dalai Lama is an incarnation of one of Opame's two chief disciples, Chenrezig (Sanskrit Avolokiteshvara).

The Great 5th seems not to have thought it through. He is Tibet's spiritual leader but an incarnation of a follower of the second highest lineage. Political rivalry seems inevitable.



Tashilumpo was looted by an army from Nepal in 1791 and the dormitories where its 4,000 lamas lived were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution but the major buildings survived with little damage.

Visiting Tashilumpo is like visiting a Roman Catholic cathedral in Europe, lots of gold and masses of tourists. The immense statue of the future Buddha is spectacular. Like other statues, it's constructed of mud and gilded. It must have a very strong armature to support such weight.

The next chapel is for White Tara, the female aspect of Chenrezig, who was a Hindu mother goddess before being re-imagined by 6th century Buddhists as White Tara who counteracts illness and Green Tara who protects us from fear. Some chapels have hand-lettered English explanations of which deities they honor. My favorite is the chapel of the "Five Bubbas".



D explains why some doors in monasteries are so short. It's because the living dead can only walk upright and therefore can't get through these low doors.

Many books in Tashilumpo were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, D tells us. He says they contained every kind of knowledge, nuclear technology, everything.

D prays to the White Tara at her chapel and explains that when you pray you should not hold your palms tightly together but place your thumbs between them to separate the palms. That's because when Buddha holds his hands so, he has a conch shell between them. The conch is sacred because its spiral is clockwise and the penetrating hum it makes is the sound of the gods. It puts one in the proper frame of mind. Once when D was young he got angry about the Chinese and his uncle told him he must not be angry because it would be very bad for him.

Tashilumpo monastery is in effect a small town. Young Yellow Hat monks in full regalia are hastening to evening service as we leave. Nyingmapa wear red robes, Gelugpa wear yellow. Outside we meet three young people from Beijing who want to practice



their English. They ask where we're from and respond that America is great. I can't tell if they're just being polite.



Back at the hotel we decide not to go to Sakya after all. John has discovered it would be a very long day and he's the only one with enough knowledge to appreciate the subtle differences. He's not feeling well enough, so it wouldn't be worthwhile. Instead we'll go back to Lhasa, which I wasn't well enough to appreciate when we started out.

Our hotel in Shigatse is more up-market than the one with a similar name in Gyantse but it has many of the same properties. Most of the lights in our room are controlled by switches in the bedside table, but none work. The towel rails seem solid but the tub is surrounded by a dense growth of mold.

There's a bar at the top of the stairs to our floor that's quite well stocked and when we return after dinner Felicity asks the woman behind the bar, "Could I have a beer?" "No," she replies and reaches for the phone. We decide not to stay and discover the nature of our offense.

Back in our room I read the instructions on the back of the entry door:

#### *DECLARATION*

- *Please don't worry if a fire is occurring. Our hotel have owned succor scattering facilities to sure you transported safely.*
- *Please follow the direction route to the information corridor and there safeguards will take you out to the security belts.*
- *Point profess your excellency seat.*

I continue my inspection. All three legs of the coat-rack are attached, unlike the one at Gyantse that had to lean against the wall because one leg was missing, but four of this one's six arms have fallen off.



## Sep 7 (Shigatse -> Lhasa)

The sun rises much faster here. I never understood the line in "The Road to Mandalay" (*On the road to Mandalay / Where the flyin'-fishes play / An' the dawn comes up like thunder outer China 'crosst the Bay!*) Now I do.

We drive east by the Tsang Po which Tibetans say runs with butter tea for its color.



John tells us this valley is the most sacred place to the Bon Po. The old trade route runs along the north side of the river but the new road is on the south for engineering reasons or maybe to depopulate the villages. The valley narrows and becomes a gorge then opens up again to the broad plain where we turn off towards Lhasa.

We stop at Nethang Drolma Lhakang monastery (Drolma is Tara) where Atisha, one of the most revered teachers of his era, died in 1054. He was invited from Bengal in 1042 and lived the rest of his life in Tibet.





This modest old monastery is said to have been protected during the Cultural Revolution by Chou En Lai. There is an excellent protector of the north here, the one who will be honored at the dance festival we're going to in Sikkim. A young monk hands a bottle of Pepsi to a monkey who lives up a tree in the courtyard.

We arrive back at Lhasa's Hotel Jon Bo. We rest for a while, have an early dinner, then walk round Jokhang, Tibet's earliest Buddhist temple built in about 642 by King Songsten Gampo. Legend says the site identified by his wife from China where the anti-Buddhist demon's heart beat was a lake that had to be filled. Ever since Atisha taught here Jokhang has been considered Lhasa's most important temple.

A stone pillar in front records the 822 treaty whereby, *"Tibet and China shall abide by the frontiers of which they are now in occupation. All to the east is the country of Great China; and all to the west is, without question, the country of Great Tibet. Henceforth on neither side shall there be waging of war nor seizing of territory."*

Pilgrims and devout locals prostrate themselves 108 times at the entrance to Jokhang wearing protection on their hands and knees. The women wear a band round their skirts to prevent peeking. We circumambulate the monastery with the evening ritual crowd and return with thinning crowds through the Barkhor past the barley wine shop, tea shops and noodle shops.

Some young men have set up goal posts using metal drums and are trying to get their soccer ball past the skillful goalie. Two monks watch from a rooftop. We're targeted by many beggars including a pathetic little girl with a prayer wheel. John is taller than everyone else and is greatly admired by three Khampa men who are accustomed to being the tallest ones in any other crowd.

At dinner we discuss the possible future of Tibet. John hopes China will disintegrate as the USSR did. I don't think it will because China's economy is developing strongly and social revolution doesn't happen in such cases. Anyway, the Tibetans are already outnumbered and I'm not convinced it would be better to go back to the old society even if it was possible. Who would benefit? Only noble families. I think the question is what's best for Tibetans given the high probability they'll remain part of the Chinese empire. John disagrees. *"You can't ignore the past,"* he says. *"Over a million Tibetans were killed. What if I jump across the table, punch you in the nose, steal your money and then get back in my seat and say, 'Oh, that was all in the past. What shall we do next?' How would you feel if I did that?"*

Back at the hotel Ilana finds a TV documentary on the English language channel and calls to let us know. I didn't think there was an English language channel. The program is one of a series called "Exploring China" and is about Tibet. Daniella, a young American woman in fashionable Western dress, is being photographed exploring Barkhor. You should come here, she explains, because it's colorful and there are French Fries and rock and roll. She tells us mountains are nearby that some people visit but most of the film is of Daniella shopping.

## **Sep 8 (Lhasa, Summer Palace and Jokhang)**

It's a clear sky, a great day to visit the Potala Palace. But first I shall have a shower and a cup of instant coffee. Since they're available I shall seize the opportunity.



In my dream last night I was filling the lake where Jokhang was to be built. Every so often someone came and watched me work and then went away again. I wished someone would bring me a shovel because the only way I could make any progress was to find large rocks and hurl them into the water.

Ilana is beside herself when we meet for breakfast. She's going to write a letter to Daniella, one Jewish woman to another, castigating her for dressing so inappropriately with bare shoulders, cleavage and all, and her portrayal of Tibet as Lhasa and Lhasa as a place where there are Internet cafes with coffee, hamburgers and beer, a place just like home. David says that's how the Chinese want Tibet presented. Ilana replies that we shouldn't go along with that.

We visit the Summer Palace this morning. There are mature trees in the garden and it's very peaceful. Ducks potter about and there are masses of flowers for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Inside, we visit the Dalai Lama's rooms, which overlook the gardens. The palace is light, airy and calm. It was built between 1954-6 for the present Dalai Lama and it's obvious why he liked it so much. In one room there's a stuffed tiger, formerly his pet. He also had pet elephants.



In the main room is an intricate mural depicting Tibet's entire history. D shows us some of the more famous events. He met the Dalai Lama seven times while he studied in Dharamsala for nine years, starting when he was eleven. The Dalai Lama is a humble man, he says. He had bodyguards who tried to protect him from everyone but he ignored them and spoke directly to D, asking if he was studying diligently. D answered but was unable to raise his head and look directly into the Dalai Lama's face.

We stop in the shop on the way out and Felicity buys a small hot-air prayer wheel. We both buy protective bead bracelets made from bodhi tree wood. Felicity asks the monk at the counter for small beads but he says, *"No, they're just for tourists; they don't really work. You should get one of these,"* handing her one with larger wrinkled beads. All those bracelets are too big so he hands her one of darker brown smooth beads, also the wood of the bodhi tree, and I get the same kind. The Buddha achieved enlightenment under such a tree.



I ask the monk if it's OK to wear the bracelet on my right wrist because I have a wristwatch on my left. *"Definitely not"*, he says, which puzzles me because most people hold their prayer wheel in their right hand. The monk asks where we come from and is pleased *"because Americans have a heart and speak straight from the heart. Americans do not speak crooked,"* he says, gesturing with a snake-like movement. He says he prays for President Bush.

After lunch we walk round the Jokhang, starting in the assembly hall and progressing to the original part of the building where the statue of Buddha brought by Princess Wencheng is kept, then we walk the inner kora admiring the murals, and then to the roof for the view of the Potala Palace. It's crowded inside and there are many groups getting explanations of what they see, but it's peaceful behind the main building.





On the way back to the hotel we stop in a thanka workshop where three young people are painting. A young man shows us a picture of all 8 or 10 students who come here along with their teacher, and books that show how to lay out the outline for each figure on a grid. If the head is at an angle the illustrations show the exact angle with additional lines so the eyes can be positioned correctly.

We are tempted by several Wheel of Life thankas. John has a drawing of the God of the North at home and wonders how he could get it here to be painted. The work here is exquisite. Perhaps he could send it to Dhiren and he could bring it by bus.

Someone has set up a demon catcher in a cardboard box in the center of the street outside. Trucks drive carefully round it and some passers-by place small offerings of food in the box. The web of colored threads is similar to an American Indian spirit catcher but larger.

## **Sep 9 (Lhasa – Potala Palace)**

It's another sunny day. A hat with a broad brim is essential here because the light is so strong and the sun's rays burn. A breeze flutters the flags outside the hotel. They look like darchoka, strings of prayer flags, but the Chinese government put them up and they say "1965-2005". Smoke from sangkangs, pot-bellied incense burners, hangs over the valley. Felicity says I should make one on our patio.

This morning we'll visit the Potala Palace on Marpo Ri, the 'Red Hill' 1,000 ft above the valley. Its thirteen stories rising 384 ft made it perhaps the world's tallest building before the first skyscraper. Only a few of its 1,000 rooms, 10,000 shrines and 200,000 statues are open to tourists. On the climb up, D points out the lakes, which "*some people say*" were excavated for material to raise the hill on which Songtsen Gampo built a small temple. The present structure was started by the 5th Dalai Lama in 1645 and took half a century to complete. It suffered little damage in the Cultural Revolution but its library of 100,000 texts was destroyed. .

In one room there's a credible footprint of Padmasambhava. In another there's a spectacular three-dimensional mandala. I can't imagine holding all its details in my mind as one should. Perhaps the aim is not to hold every detail in mind simultaneously but to understand the significance of every detail? That would be hard enough. Charming little animals cavort round the periphery of the mandala because, D explains, all sentient beings are equal, just at different stages of evolution.

Each incarnation of the Dalai Lama is memorialized with a separate stupa here where they all lived. The 6<sup>th</sup> has a distinctive place in Tibetans' hearts because he was a poet and a friend of the common people, too much so some say. He liked to escape from the palace every night to go drinking and carousing.

Maybe the explanation for the early death of so many incarnations is not just that the Regents wanted to stay in power? Perhaps other incarnations became rebellious or couldn't master their lessons and were killed to avoid discredit to the Dalai Lama. As John points out, the selectors did a pretty good job on the whole, though: "*Four incarnations including the present one are truly exceptional. That's a better average than US Presidents.*"





One stupa for an incarnation of the Dalai Lama is covered with gold leaf and precious jewels, one of which, a huge pearl, the placard says grew in an elephant's brain. The placard says it's a rarity.

As a large tour group overtakes us, I hear a woman asking the identity of a statue. "That's the Kissing Buddha," the guide tells her in his thick Chinese accent. As they draw ahead he gives a most peculiar explanation of the next chapel.



A chapel containing eight types of stupa is impressive but Songtsen Gampo's meditation cave is not; to my impure vision it's just a dark cubular room. Several chapels contain Bon reversed swastikas, as Christian churches in England are sometimes decorated with pagan holly and ivy. The mix of Bon, Buddhist, Hindu and other symbols is freer because there is not a book like the bible, so there isn't the same fuss over orthodoxy.

Our vehicles are nowhere to be seen when we leave. D gets a taxi but can't find a second one so John flags a rickshaw and the two of us ride to the Dunya restaurant for a drink. Afterwards, John, Felicity and I explore an antique shop across the street. There's an interesting leather quiver and other good stuff but we're shopped out.

We walk back to the hotel to rest. On the way I'm struck again by what a merry people Tibetans are. It's more than just cheerfulness or good-humored adaptability. The Buddhist tradition must have contributed to developing their outlook and behavior.

David and Ilana stay in the hotel when evening comes. They're both fighting heavy colds and Ilana has twisted her ankle, so John, Felicity and I go back to Dunya to meet John's friend, Mike, who was seen in Lhasa a few days ago and who wants John to take notes when we're in Mustang. John emailed to let him know where we could meet but he may not show up because he never stays anywhere for long.

We discuss the movement of peoples, their origin myths, and how one can infer a people's origins from linguistic clues such as whether they have their own word for birch trees, which grow only in restricted situations, or if they borrowed the word from another language, in which case they must have come from where birches don't grow.

Academicians now believe that cultures were dispersed by traders, not by mass relocation, so the current movement of Chinese into Tibet is a rare chance for study. We discuss how flood myths probably originated in real floods at the end of the last Ice Age, and how the Lepchas have no ark in their myth but survived on a mountaintop.

John talks about the puzzle of the Tibetan Shambhala myth. The guidebooks are specific about the distance and direction to Shambhala but they originated in southern India, so is that the point from which Shambhala is distant, in which case Shambhala is in the Himalayas, maybe Tibet itself, or is the origin in Tibet, in which case Shambhala is, as Tibetans believe, in Siberia?

We discuss the origin of the Celts, just north of the Hindu Kush, John thinks, and how the art of Western Tibet, Afghanistan and the rest of that area was influenced by Greek art, so cultures must have been spread by more trading and exploration activity than is known.

We discuss the history that must be in books in Tibetan and other monasteries and how much of it hasn't been read for centuries. Few people can read classical Tibetan now, a very different script from modern Tibetan. Someone will do that research and who knows what they'll find? Very little was known about the Bon religion that preceded Buddhism in Tibet even twenty years ago but a good deal of material is being published now.

John's friend does not show up.



## Sep 10 (Lhasa -> Kathmandu)

D says today is the first day of a seven-day bathing festival in Tibet. One should go to the Tsang Po at night when the stars are out. Some people say it's OK to bathe in Lhasa but it isn't, D says,. He'll go to the Tsang Po with four of his friends.

Tashi means "good luck" in Tibet, like Namaste in Nepal. One greets people by saying "Tashi Delek", which is pronounced "delay". David says that means, *"Good luck, but you won't have any for a while."*

On the way to the airport we invite D to visit us. *"When we are free I will try to come,"* he says. Tibetans can't get a passport except for a few who are government officials. With his nine years in Dharamsala in his background, D will be one of the last to get a passport and who knows when that will be? *"We'll visit you again in the meantime,"* we reply, and hope we will.

The Chinese officials at the airport are again friendly. I smile at them all and say "hello" and they all smile back.

We fly over the scorpion lake that we passed on the way to Gyantse and over mountains that are green on the south and brown on the north. Water finds its way down the valleys and the wider ones have flat alluvial bottoms. An occasional snow-covered peak is visible above clouds in the distance. A gigantic mountain towers above all the others; Kanchenjunga. On the trek last year it looked only a little higher than others but its uniqueness is clear from up here. To its west there's a jumble of rock, mountains if we were on the ground among them, and it's just what you'd get if you compressed dinner plates until they fractured and then kept compressing the fragments.

Next time I'm in the mountains maybe I'll sense the enormous thing stirring beneath and feel the truth, that I'm on precarious fragments under which something unimaginably powerful is pushing inexorably north.

Back in Kathmandu we check in at the Garuda and hotfoot to the Northfield for eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast and coffee. Life is good, except for David, who's running a fever. After breakfast I ask at Pilgrims if Gandhi is back yet. He was due five days ago but hasn't been heard from. I'll start making a list of must-buy books tomorrow. I plan to carry them all this time instead of mailing them so I'll have to exercise self-discipline.

Back at the Garuda, we unpack, rest, and then walk to Durbar with John. A persistent guide whom we don't need because John knows more than any guide tells us the Kumarii, a prepubescent incarnation of Taleju, will appear in 20 minutes at a window of the ornately carved wooden building where she lives with her minders.

Virgin worship dates back 2,000 years in India and at least to the 6th century in Nepal but the Kumari originated in the 17th century under the last Malla king. A red serpent brought a woman, Taleju, to his room one night when he was playing dice. She promised to return every night if he never told anybody, but the queen came to see who the king met secretly and Taleju angrily told the king that to keep her protection he must henceforth find her among the Newari. She would incarnate among them as a young girl, the Kumari. The Kumari does not appear among us today.



Another guide, who claims to recognize John from previous years, engages him in conversation while Felicity and I wander round admiring the magnificent wood carvings and photographing people. A couple of adult monkeys and their tiny baby with wobbly legs are on one of the roofs.





Then we visit the market. Felicity is intrigued by a tiger and goat board game and likes the young man at the stall. I leave her to negotiate and notice an ornate conch trumpet on another stall. The vendor explains the symbols on its silver handle and demonstrates its sound. I show mild interest and ask the price. It's more than I want to pay even though a conch trumpet is the one thing I hoped to get this year. I offer half and we agree on 60% of the original price. We're both pleased.



At dinner Ilana says she's been trying to imagine how life would be if, as D must, she always had to be careful what she said and couldn't say what she thought. I said most of the time there isn't a serious conflict. My life in the corporate world was that way. It's easy if you're low in the hierarchy because nobody is interested in what you think. If you're higher, you're OK if you have a more powerful protector. It's only impossible when you're close to the center of power because there you're watched very closely and if you're only pretending to conform, rivals will sniff you out and use their discovery to advance their own prospects.

### **Sep 11 (Katmandu)**

There's a big thunderstorm during the night. The monsoon has another three weeks to run here. The Maoists have declared a ceasefire if the king will do the same. The newspaper supporting the king reports that Maoists abducted several dozen schoolteachers and others the day they declared the ceasefire. I wonder how their command and control system works. It's not real-time, of course.

After breakfast John and I visit Indra because he wants to confirm about tents, sleeping bags, and food that we do and don't want on the Mustang trek. No cheese, we remind him, because John is allergic, and plenty of porridge and eggs because breakfast is the key meal. Indra says our stuff will be carried by yaks.

After lunch we go to the Tibetan refugee area because John wants a carpet and Ilana was recommended to a couple who sell carpets there. Felicity and I fall in love with two carpets, one for the living room that will complement the one we got in Bangkok and

one for my study. John does the negotiation but these people aren't bargainers so he only gets a small discount, but what we end up paying is very little compared to US prices for carpets of this quality.

On the way back to Thamel we stop at Patan, the center of one of the Malla kingdoms that has survived in a fine state of preservation despite hundreds of years of monsoon damage and human use. John says the pagoda style of architecture originated here and was taken by a Nepali architect through Tibet to China. Almost all temples and shrines in Kathmandu are Hindu although there is a small Buddhist stupa at Patan. I need to research the history of [religion in Nepal](#).

Hinduism became the state religion when Nepal was unified two hundred fifty years ago. It came to India at the time of the Aryan invasion but when was that? When did Buddhism arrive and how widespread was it? John says Hinduism as we know it wasn't developed until about 200 AD and Nepal was first Buddhist, so its religious practices are Hindu overlaid on earlier Buddhist rituals. It's an inextricable blend of both.

John suggests I should write an introduction to Nepal and Tibet for people like me when I first came here. There is no such book and he thinks it would be useful.

Indra from Green Hill is taking us to dinner this evening less than half an hour from now and torrential rain has just started. The air was cleaner after last night's rain but it's been very humid all day. Now the monsoon season is ending there are more Western tourists.

Just before we leave, the man from Pilgrims phones. It will take about six weeks but the Post Office can probably trace what happened to the books they shipped to me last year that never arrived.

The restaurant is in an early twentieth century palace. The Nepali tourist board established it for tour operators to entertain their clients. It's hokey but Felicity and I thoroughly enjoy it. John says it will destroy his street cred if he's seen here and we must never tell Andrew. Nepali dancers perform half a dozen native dances. A Tibetan dance by the men is similar to Cossack dancing. One woman looks like a grownup version of the Kumari..

We'll have two English speaking guides in Mustang, both of whom are here. One seems genuine, has been to Mustang several times before and is knowledgeable, intelligent and friendly. We're less confident about the other one. He's over friendly and looks miffed when John says his friend, Dhiren, will be coming. John notices at the start of the meal that the guy is not served with any of the "Nepali wine", which tastes like grappa and which the serving woman pours gracefully from high above the table from a pitcher with a long neck into our tiny earthenware dishes. Indra gets a phone call and has to leave soon after we arrive to vote at an important meeting of a tourist organization. After he's gone, the too-friendly guide asks for Nepali wine and John wonders if he's an alcoholic who Indra was trying to keep off the sauce.

Indra reminds me of Kishore. They're both very attentive to detail and more effusive about their determination to provide exactly what we want than a Westerner would be, but they have a Western approach to service; they'll do what they say they'll do. Gobardhan was more typically Nepali. He said what he sensed his clients wanted to



hear, but that wasn't necessarily what he would do. One of the best salesmen I ever knew was the same, very smart, and with a remarkable gift for sensing what prospects wanted to hear and saying what would dispel their fears and amplify their desires. At the time he said those things he believed them to be true. That's not the kind of person you want organizing your expedition into a potentially life-threatening wilderness.

## **Sep 12 (Kathmandu)**

I go to the Garuda lobby for a large pre-breakfast pot of sweet, milky Nepali tea and a leisurely read of the local newspapers. The World Bank has threatened to cut aid to Nepal from \$150 million a year to less than \$50 million after giving Nepal an F on a scale of A to F for effectiveness of government.

Two thirds of children attend primary school but only half attend secondary school, two thirds of adults are illiterate, gender equality is poor, and so on.

The annual Miss Nepal contest just ended and one paper reports there was also a contest for canines. The winner of that contest said she sees a bright future for Nepal because she's heard the country is going to the dogs. Nepal was recently rated 162 out of 167 countries for freedom of the press (the USA was 22<sup>nd</sup>).

One of the other papers reports that the old Silk Road through Sikkim to China is to be reopened early next month, just as the Garuda's owner feared. It's bad news for Nepal because they'll lose the taxes on that trade. China has acknowledged Sikkim to be Indian territory although large areas west of Nepal are still disputed.

The friendly young waiter at the Northfield who wishes us a cheery "*good evening*" every morning and jokes in English with perfect fluency turns serious today after bringing our food. He's leaving for Iraq in a few weeks to work on an American base for two years. He hopes he won't be killed because he has a wife and 4-month old child but he can't support them on what he earns as a waiter because there aren't enough tourists. He wanted to work in Qatar or one of the other Gulf countries but the only place he could get a visa was Iraq because so few people will work there.

John tells yak anecdotes over breakfast. The definition of anecdote, he says, is telling a true story in such a way that nobody believes it. One time, he and Dhiren were walking down the narrow trail that he and I followed from Tortong last year. They noticed an unusual noise in the distance but paid no attention until it grew very loud and they suddenly knew what it was, a deranged yak racing toward them. John leaped to the right and grabbed a tree root. Dhiren leaped left into the river just as the yak roared past.

Another time, John was on a narrow trail that opened into a small area where a man was selling sodas. John set his camera bag down in the center of the area and sat down to enjoy his drink. Then a yak train came. The lead yak noticed John's bag, left the trail, walked slowly over and trampled the bag. The rest of the train dutifully followed his example. John then retrieved his bag of fragments.

After breakfast we pack for Sikkim and I realize I'll have to buy another of Andrew and Shona's expedition bags to carry home the carpets and other stuff we've bought. Andrew and Shona are cheerful as ever despite the fact that the 86 Peace Corps

volunteers were recently pulled out of Nepal along with other ex-pat workers. The Peace Corps folks couldn't work because Maoists made it too dangerous in the villages, so they were flown to Bangkok and paid off. Most of them immediately came back and went trekking.

Andrew and Shona serve mountaineers so they're doing OK because the top end of the market hasn't been affected by Maoist troubles. There are fewer trekkers this year but they're enjoying not having the store so crowded and they can work on their house before they open the store. *"The house in Australia's paid for and so's the one here,"* Andrew says, *"so I only really need money for beer."*

I stop at Pilgrim's and give Kirian a list of which books they mailed last year arrived and which didn't. He hopes the Post Office will let him know where the missing packages went. *"This is Nepal,"* he says. *"Sometimes they might send things to Australia instead of America."*

I don't have enough cash left for Sikkim so I try to get some from the ATM but it rejects all my cards. I go into the bank, complete a form and give them my UK passport because Indra has my US one. My card is now accepted. I buy another 30 rolls of film from the store John recommends. The film at most stores is too old or has been stored where it's too hot, he says.

Felicity and I meet David in Pilgrims' restaurant. Ilana left for the airport after giving him strict instructions to spend the day resting because his cold is worse. John has errands to run today, including the purchase of a coat of many colors for a friend, so we shan't see him until this evening.

After lunch I go to the Tibet Bookstore and find a collection of biographies of Guru Rinpoche and a book of tales by Tibetan elders, a companion to its author's book of American Indian elders' tales.

I get back to the Garuda just before Felicity, who was having a T-shirt shortened by a local tailor. Six riot police were outside the hotel, she says, pushing a young Nepali man along the street. She asked the doorman what was happening and he made a motion with his fingers to his mouth. It looked as if he was pulling the pin from a grenade. *"He had a bomb?"* she asked. *"Yes."* *"Where is it now?"* *"Gone"*. It's rather mysterious. She asks the man at the reception desk to talk to the doorman and see if she understood right. The young man was smoking hashish in a bong.