

Taking the High Road to Tibet & the North Face of Everest

Sept. 27 - Oct. 5, 2014



I first fell under the spell of Everest in 1982 when I trekked Nepal's Solo-Khumbu - the greatest trek in the world.



It was the autumn after the Canadian Everest team in the spring with Laurie Skreslet and Pat Morrow reached the summit. Pat subsequently became a friend and pioneered the Seven 8,000M summit quest. My Sherpa had been on the climb and I bought my Everest '82 team toque from him. I've been wearing it canoeing ever since and it was with me on this trip to Tibet. This is the classic shot of Everest from atop Kala Pattar, a small mountain overlooking base camp.

A Perilous Search for a Priceless Treasure

NEPAL GOLD



JASON
SCHOONOVER

A Novel of high Adventure

It was here that a brilliant writer began his 170,000 word "tour de force" (*Bangkok Post*) in his *Prologue 1959*: "The exhausted Tibetan refugees, strung out thick and thin like a long strand of yak yarn, struggled down the 18,753-foot Nangpa La, or pass, and into the squalor of the Nepalese relief village of Thami... Their ordeal was far from over. It was now a contest less with the Chinese Red Army, breaking in a huge, crimson wave over the rooftop of the world, than with the stark fear of an unknown future... Tragedy of typhoonic proportions was ravishing their land... It was here that one man broke rank and leaned north... Among a people virtually bereft of

possessions, he had fewer still, consisting solely of a rounded bundle...it was late in the afternoon—when he struggled up the rough stone steps to Tengboche monastery...Early the next morning—lightened of his load—he took his leave." *Nepal gold* a.k.a. *Thai Gold*, *The Bangkok Collection*.



I repeated the trek in 2002 with The Dragon Lady. Yes, I had that toque with me then too.



She developed cerebral edema and was projectile vomiting at Gorek Shep, the last stop before base camp, and I had to bring her down - fast - which took five days. Despite that, she'd like to return. The awesome beauty and atmosphere do that to you. But that's why she wasn't with me when I headed into Tibet to see the other side of Everest - the daunting North Face. It's over 5000 meters. That's gorgeous Ama Dablam in the background.



There's only one way to go - on an expensive tour - so the control freak Chinese can keep tabs on you. Christ, if they didn't invent red tape, they "improved" it. It takes two weeks to get a Tibetan visa, and then there's the Chinese one to get as well. Fortunately, this is handled by the travel agent. The road started well from Kathmandu, following a fault line, or gorge, all the way to the Tibetan plateau.



It degenerated into the worst road I've been on, even worse than the old 1995 "road" up to Sapa, North Vietnam, and I thought it was unbeatable.



One huge section was taken out by a massive landslide that also took out three villages and 155 lives. It took over two hours on foot to pick across this mess, and that's with a porter.



We passed this huge muscovite mica boulder (and thanks to Denis and Marc St-Onge for identifying it). It was seven feet long and brilliantly gleaming, the most gorgeous rock I've seen.



So what do you get for \$335CAN a day for an eight night/nine day tour? For starters, a Toyota Land Cruiser, driver and a guide. When I learned my companions would be fellow Dutchmen, I was pleased - and relieved. The thought of spending a week with a legendarily haughty couple from Paris would be awful. Reinier is a bankruptsy and corporate lawyer so he doesn't have to lie as much as his colleagues, and Kim is a freshly minted lung doc. They quickly proved to be A+ company, well read and international in outlook, but then I expect that from the Dutch (really).



And you get this in the beginning, sometimes sharing. The first few days were surprisingly tough, with long days driving - and the altitude quickly kicked in, despite Diamox to fight its effects. Oh, we also got the following the first days....









This one I liked for, as there's no contact between bottom and top, so as to speak, they're more sanitary than our thrones. But for the rest, I took my travel agent's advice and just went out in the wild. Thanking the lucky stars that, before I was born, I got in the right lineup when they were handing out sexes and I chose one with a tap.



But as we drove further east it got more civilized and, indeed, we had great accomo.







Mmmmm. Yak tongue. Delicious. (It was!) Their national beer is, unlike the country, pretty flat though.



The 865 kilometer long "Friendship Highway" isn't that friendly. Not when there's 3-4 military or police checkpoints everyday. Everyone has to go through them and your papers better be in order. Mine weren't at the border and there was a delay of two hours while my guide sorted it out. Photos of checkpoints etc are verboten, so there's none here. But they're not all jerks. At the border bridge a young official was questioning me about the cash I was carrying - then grinned and said, "You look cool!" Well, I guess if that other old guy in the Dos Equis ads can look cool, I guess I can too.... And I was on my way.



The highway is in excellent condition for the most part. It's a show off highway for the Chinese. This is fast developing into one of the most famous road trips in the world.



One of the reasons is Everest, of course, and here we had to leave the highway for 70 k of horrible roads that required a land cruiser. Our driver drove like a rally driver but it still took four hours of being jostled. It often wasn't so much of a road as a web with new trails being pioneered by vehicles.



Our destination was Rongbuk Monastery, the highest in the world and within sight of Everest. Mallory passed through these doors too.



We Dutch tripled up in a room in their guesthouse, the open square at top right. None of us got much sleep. The altitude was getting to us.



The next morning early we drove to an area of tent hotels, then caught the shuttle bus to base camp in time for sunrise over Everest! Incredible! Gorgeous! Magnificent!



Of course I donned my trusty Everest 82 toque. Everest is washed out in the background. It was bloody cold and the highest altitude reached on the trip, 5360m. Actual base camp is the gravelly area below us and there was a set of tents (on the white line just above my head). Spring is the best climbing season, of course. Just to climb this hill for the epic view took our breath away - and it wasn't Everest. It was the thin air. I emailed this picture to Morrow. He asked if I found ancient monk's cave retreats off to the left that was a highlight of his trip but I had to reply that the bloody Chinese didn't let us roam around.



We crossed several passes in the 5000m range, all festooned with prayer flags.



It was harvest season and it seemed like the whole country grew nothing but barley.



Half way through the trip I began to be aware of the size of the houses. Enormous. They were all I could see. Whole villages of them. Farm houses. I didn't see anything small period.



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And I began to question how people with a couple of yaks, several acres of barley and a bit of livestock could afford to live like this.



These are houses heated by yak dung. Those aren't neat loaves of bread. They're a winter's heating supply.



You see it drying everywhere.



Well, of course: they're all Potemkin Villages. The Chinese want you to think they brought this level of prosperity. Away from the highway, the homes are normal sized. This was confirmed to me by a young man I met in Lhasa. So eager was he for the truth to get out he risked talking about political matters with us. Before we left, our travel agent warned us pointedly to avoid talking politics. There's agents everywhere and the Tibetans can get into very serious trouble for speaking openly.



The Chinese control the speed limit in a unique way. Each checkpoint it's noted on your papers what time you arrived. If you arrive at the next early, you're ticketed. They don't post the limits. Cops tend to be jerks everywhere; it's in their DNA. Here they're far worse.



It's so artificially low that the driver has to doddle, then make a "rest" stop for 20-30 minutes before continuing to the next checkpoint.



Shigatse, at 80,000, is Tibet's second city and it's been overrun by the Chinese.



It's also the traditional home of the Panchan Lama, the #2 after the Dalai Lama. Built beginning in 1447 Tashihunpo Monastery is either 700,000 or a million-square-METERS depending on which of their literature you read. It sprawls over a vast area.



It, like the other monasteries in Tibet, once housed thousands of monks. Now each of the majors only has a few hundred. The Chinese would love you to think this reflects a lack of interest, that Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is dying. The truth is that the control freaks in Beijing control how many monks there are to give that impression....



Here we began our exercise in getting monasteried out. Photos inside monasteries are also verboten, but this one was allowed. Colorful Tantric Buddhism is a Tibetan stew made up of Hinduism, Buddhism and the original animistic Bon belief. It's from the latter they get their prayer flags - which send prayers to the gods of the mountains and sky.



These colorful ladies on pilgrimage from the far north were thoroughly bemused at all the people snapping their picture.



The photos are of the last three Panchan Lamas. The one on the right is controversial as he was chosen by the Chinese in Beijing where he's kept. The six-year-old chosen by the Dalai Lama in 1995 is the "misssing" Panchan Lama. The Chinese claim he's in protective custody so he "won't be spirited out of the country." He well could have had a bullet to the head, the preferred manner the Chinese have to eliminate people they don't want.



It looks vaguely like the Potala Palace but it ain't. It was an ancient fortress destroyed by the Red Guards in '66 and since rebuilt. The dark remnant to the right is how it looked previously. Mao may have been a talented revolutionary but he reached his level of incompetence as national leader. The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are both testimonies to that. Both are exactly opposite to their titles.



It was at the village of Guru near Gyantse here shown that that racist, if colourful, British imperialist Francis Younghusband in 1904 slaughtered 600-700 Tibetans while "suffering" 12

wounded while invading the country. His soldiers had Maxim machine guns and wanted glory; the Tibetans flintlocks and swords and got it. Victorian England was outraged. Unbelievably, he later became president of the Royal Geographic Society, though his contributions to the geography and ethnology of the region are impressive.





Small Gyantse was easily my favorite place. You can walk across it. The Chinese influence is minimal.







Finally, after the usual daily gauntlet of checkpoints and "rest" stops, we neared Lhasa. The Tsangpo runs through it. By this time I had a pretty good feel for how tightly the Chinese control this country. Very. It's suffocating.



What can you say about the Potala...? It's just magnificent - and far bigger up close than I imagined. They may be superstitious about other things but the 13 floors doesn't faze them.



The Dalai Lama's living quarters were here, in the penthouse, of course. Unfortunately, photos were verboten as usual. Paradoxically - considering he had all that room - his living space was tiny. His bedroom couldn't have been more than 12X14 feet. Some of the tombs of past Dalai Lamas inside were larger, enormous sarcophagi of gold, silver and baseball sized jewels. Chou Enlai sent troops to protect the palace during the madness of the Cultural Revolution.



This is the tower he lived in. Here, Master takes a picture of Slave Girl Kim. Dr. Kim's ancestors were slaves on Curacao. Reinier loves the names I nicked for them.



We weren't allowed (of course...) to go on the roof to see the Dalai Lama's view. These were shot half way down.





While the Potala was the winter palace, the summer palace was on the palatial and enormous gardens of Norbulingka. That brilliant writer from his *Prologue 1959* again: "Even the Dalai Lama—the Living Buddha, the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet—had been forced to flee, on March 17, from Norbulingka, His summer palace in Lhasa. Disguised as a soldier, He had mixed in with some 30,000 of His loyal followers who had protectively surrounded His compound, not a few of them having been machine-gunned by the Red Hordes."



The Dalai Lama's comfortable final residence built 1954-56. The rooms are large, the feel eminently liveable. The bathroom is modern 1950s: tub, sink and throne. The other throne. One wonders, as he was rushing out in that soldier's disguise, if he turned back for a last, lingering look....



The old town is dominated by Jokhang Monastery, the most important in the country.



The views from the roof are the best. Inside are the usual ancient statues, often humongous.



Overlooking Barkhor Square, you can see the Potala in the distance.



The monastery is about a block in size and it's surrounded by this street. Hundreds of pilgrims circumambulate around it clockwise, twirling their prayer wheels, each filled with paper prayers that are sent to their pantheon of Buddhist gods. They thus gain merit and a chance for a better reincarnation. I got sucked into the vortex a dozen times in my three days there. My hope is to be reincarnated as Hugh Hefner as a young man.



Lhasa has a great feel to it - calm, tranquil, peaceful. Great vibes. The sides streets are narrow mazes fun and fascinating to explore.



One of the greatest people watching cities in the world. A camera battery usually lasts me six days. I burned through one in two. Distilling them down for this Blah Blah was a challenge....



Up and down they go doing their prayers before the temple.



Some slowly work their way around the entire temple to gain merit, like this little girl who was making a ton of money from passersby. I've never seen such generosity anywhere, people giving money to beggars and impecunious pilgrims in from the back country.



But it's not all peace and tranquillity, especially around the March anniversary of the Dalai Lama's escape when the borders often slam shut. Immolations protest his exile and Tibet's loss of freedom. Most are centered at Kirti Monastery in Sichuan. The bulk of the Tibetan population of three million lives along the border with China, or in the proximate provinces. Lhasa is 400,000. According to the Chinese 90% are Tibetan. I don't believe it. the new vast suburbs are all Chinese.



As of this writing, 133 have self-immolated. It peaked in 2012. Surrounding the Lhasa monastery - of course - are more checkpoints with airport type x-ray machines. Baskets at the ends are filled with BIC lighters. There's police kiosks in the square and surveillance cameras. I fell into a conversation in a shop with a thirty-something young man who had been caught up in a sweep at the monastery during the first outbreak in 2008. He described being in a cell with 40 other prisoners so crowded they had to sleep sitting up. He spent eight months that way. He said 70% of Tibetans hate the Chinese for the cultural genocide they have wrought on their country, despite the economic advantages they have also brought. The Tibetan language is even being phased out. If you want to get ahead, you must speak mandarin.



By the time I was to leave, I couldn't wait to get out of the country. The Tibetans are great, but feeling the oppression they live under - and the oppression even directed at me - I was so wired I woke at 1am for a 7am pick up to take me to the airport. I did not want to miss my flight out....



Winging back to countries where I can think and do as I please, as long as I don't harm anyone else.



Tibet was a real eye-opener, and I got to check off a couple of things - Everest and Polara - off my bucket list. I also made friends with a great couple. Well, hey, as I say, they're fellow Dutch so they have to be. The only difference is my ancestors left almost 400 years ago for New Amsterdam, so I'm a little rusty with the mother tongue.



Let's finish as I often do - with a pretty girl. She's Chinese but they're certainly not all bad. It's the ones running the show in Beijing.