

Life, the Universe and Tibet

An Accidental Travel Guide

Laurence J Bonner, Australia, 2015

Disclaimer: I am not responsible for any actions of any humans, aliens or animals taking advice from this document that results in any incident detrimental to themselves, their best friend's uncle, their possessions or investment bonds. It is recommended that you buy insurance to cover all possibilities and more. The text here is given as entertainment based on experiences over several years. No apology is offered for the humour injected herein, except for the bit about the squirrel. It is a requirement that you are slightly insane to get the best from this document. Any slight resemblance to an intellectual work would be a phenomenal aberration and should be reported immediately to the [Galactic Arts Nobbling Council](#).

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Note: This document is [Peppered](#), within the text, with links to relevant or interesting websites thus: [Website](#) . Many of the links are to Wikipedia. Donations to Wikipedia have been made. External map links are, in general, to [Wikimapia](#) where you will find a wealth of information, publicly edited, including village place names and other locations such as monasteries, glaciers, mountains and rivers, and including latitude and longitude for your GPS, and sometimes relevant pictures. Longitude and Latitude is given in decimal notation within each link. Mostly because I have only 10 fingers. For other GPS formats check on Wikimapia.

There are links to internal parts of this document shown thus: [HERE](#) .

Another Note:

Other links, say to a YouTube video, may suffer from non-existence issues over extended time. If you have a deep interest in a particular location, event, subject or definition then a [Google](#) search will help you. If you are having trouble searching for a desirable lifestyle etc., then read Slarty Bartfarst's "Norwegian Fjords in Africa: a justification" published by [Betelgeuse](#) University. This will not help you one bit but it does make interesting reading if you can find a copy. When you've read as far as page three you will realise that a trip to Tibet is just what you need to reconnect with reality.

One More Note:

The author contracted a very mild case of plagiarism from touching a door handle in a remote Chinese public lavatory. But mostly it's almost, but not quite, all my own stuff. If you have any issues you may contact the legal department as soon as he's back from lunch. The author also suffers from an incurably biased viewpoint. Some have suggested surgery. The use of Accidental in the title is purely accidental.

Second One More Note:

This symbol ¥, in this document, is being used to denote the Chinese Yuan or Renimbi (RMB). Additionally I have used a comma to indicate where to take a breath. At high altitude, with low oxygen levels, this is useful.

An Extra Note:

No pixels were injured during the making of this document. Anything out of focus was inflicted by a camera. Towards the end there is an extended [image galley](#) for some of the locations.

A Penultimate Note:

You need a very relaxed mind to read this dissertation. For best results try a small Jim n Tgonk or a Wheezgy before you start.

Note:

You need an active Internet connection to enjoy to the fullest the external informational links in this document.

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SUMMARY

“Let’s go to Tibet” invariably means Nepal and Lhasa. This guide expands on the equally interesting and the very culturally pure area of Eastern Tibet known as Kham and its people the Khampa - Kham; the [Area](#) 🗺️, Pa; the [People](#) 👤. They are renowned for their bravery, marksmanship, horsemanship and fierce sense of independence in an awe-inspiring and dramatic mountainous landscape.

Lhasa, in the Chinese designated Tibetan Autonomous Region, is fast becoming a theme park. There are cultural icons in Lhasa that are worth the visit, like the Potala and Jhokang, but you will have to go in a group, obtain a special permit and be accompanied by a Chinese Government “Minder”.

Whether an on-the-ground explorer or an armchair adventurer, this guide, whilst primarily as entertainment, is meant to encourage you towards the possibility of some adventurous and unregulated travel in Eastern Tibet. It is based on several years of travel to Kham which straddles the Dri Chu (river), the headwaters of the Yangtze that flows out of the Tibetan Plateau.

You will find enough knowledge needed to get there and home again. With locations, experiences and photographs, that once you’ve read this guide you will feel you have been there.

FOREWORD

From assembling your gear, to buying tickets, to trekking the route. All you need to know to accomplish a memorable journey. Travel Safe.

PREFACE

My journey started long before my feet trod the stones of Tibetan Mountains. Having read Harrer's "Seven Years in Tibet" when I was knee high to a grasshopper and later watched black and white archive film from a 1930's Tibet, a seed was planted. It took 40 years before it began to grow into a realisation that conditions were perfect and I could actually go to Tibet. The final germination was sparked by the discovery of the practical application of Tibetan Buddhism. Not only had I a desire to walk the self-improving spiritual path but also to cross the mountain passes, like the [Tro La](#), into the Land of Snows, on a path of self awareness, adventurous travel, friendship and frostbite.

A trip to China's Nanning, in 2006, proved to me that you could travel successfully without a single word of the local lingo. The key seemed to be extensive research beforehand. Maps, obscure books and hours of Google searches brought confidence and a mountain of colloquial information. After a first trip to Tibet, in 2007, via Northern Yunnan, flying alone into Lhasa from Yunnan's newish Deqen airport, in the days before the rigorous application of the permit rules, I sought a more pure, almost Chinese free, Tibet. And I found it at Degé and Dzongsar. An area that was healthily Tibetan.

This guide includes snippets from real life travels which became progressively more exploratory as time and experience allowed. From my first trip to Lhasa in 2007 to being pulled off buses, at gun point, in 2008 and 2009, to successfully reaching Degé and Dzongsar in 2010 and Degé in 2011, to three years of traversing the mountains on a Chinese motorcycle from 2012 to 2014. Each trip lasting three to five weeks.

Having met many helpful people, making lifetime friends and helping some on their path through life, I am deeply indebted and grateful to all. Some, who gave me critical help, I met fleetingly. Others I have grown to know well, both them and their family. I treasure every meeting, every moment and every footstep that I have made, and will make, in that "Land of Snows".

Pull up an atlas and read on...

KEY WORDS

Before you start, some key words:

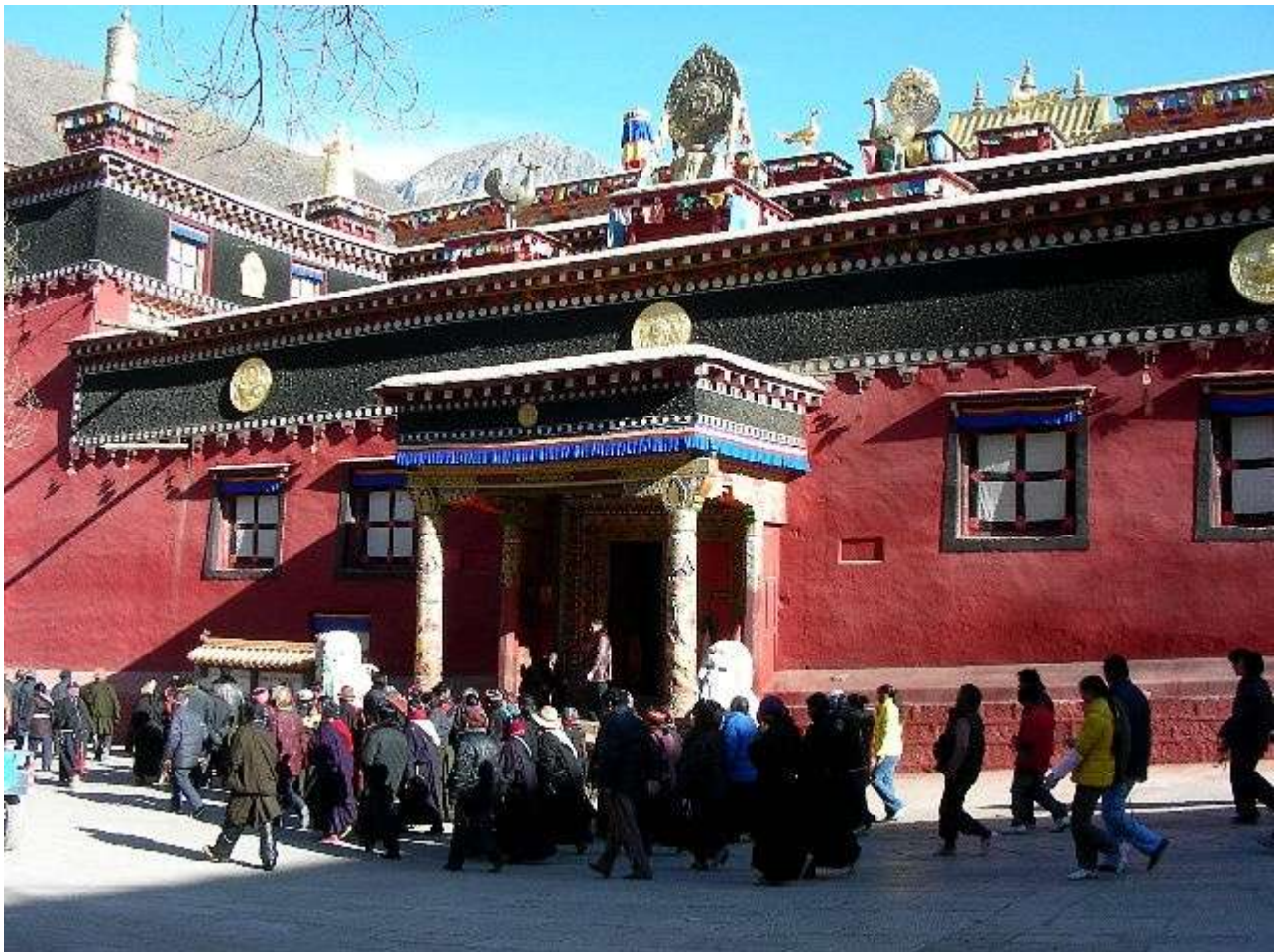
Gompa	Buddhist Monastery
Shedra	Buddhist Teaching establishment – University
Bön	Prevalent Tibetan Religion prior to Buddhism – also extant now
Terrorists	The Chinese Communist Government
Bias	The perfectly correct political view.
Chinese	Dictatorial Communist Government

INTRODUCTION

Tibetans are friendly, helpful people that gladden your heart to meet. The landscape is dramatic and awe-inspiring. You will not be the same person when you return. We will start with the story of my first successful trip to find Degé and Dzongsar as a Tale-From-the-Fireside introduction:

Road Block and Guns at Dartsedo

In April, 2007, I visited Lijiang in Yunnan Province, China. Stayed at [Wenhai](#) 📍, a small [Nakhi](#) 📍 village up behind the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, for a few days just to acclimatise to altitude at 3,260 metres. Then travelled north by bus to Gyalthang and flew out of there to Lhasa, Tibet. I fulfilled a forty year old dream to visit the Potala and discovered the Jhokang temple, the [Bharkor](#) 📍 and [Drak Yerpa](#) 📍.



Degé, the goal that took three years of journeys to reach. More pics [HERE](#) 📍 © LJBonner

On returning to Australia I had the notion to visit somewhere within the Tibetan cultural area in 2008. Somewhere that was a fully Tibetan place. I found, at Degé in Western Sichuan, a monastery that still printed books by hand. The text pages cut into blocks of wood then hand printed. Then I discovered that just south of Degé was the interesting Meshö valley, all in good detail on Google Earth. All this area, and more, is

known traditionally as Kham. Now, temporarily since the Chinese invasion, part of Sichuan but very, very, Tibetan. It has a long and involved history, sometimes independent of Lhasa or the Chinese, sometimes under the sway of one or the other but always with an independent spirit.

Over several months, to March 2008, I had been researching and planning a trip to Degé and the Meshö valley. I had printed out detailed screen shots of the area from Google Earth. Researched everything I could find on the Net. Amassed a small library of books on the area and became a very minor armchair professor on Khampa culture and history.

Air tickets to Chengdu via Guangzhou were bought and the bus journey from Chengdu to Degé explored in detail. It would take 5 days to reach Degé from Sydney, Australia, if the roads were clear of snow and weather permitted. Two days of flying and three by road. As the departure day of March 21st approached I was full of trepidation. On March 14th in Lhasa, a few days after an important [Anniversary](#) 🗓️, there had been some violent conflicts between Tibetans and the Chinese. This mortal clash had spread to other areas outside Lhasa, in particular the eastern area that I was to pass through and was my goal. Never the less I boarded the plane and set off for what was hopefully to be a journey of a lifetime.

The net result of which was a heartbreaking, but not unexpected, moment at the outskirts of Kangding in Western Sichuan. The only local foreboding I got was from the hotel receptionist in Chengdu who thought “it might be a little bit dangerous up there”. The Internet of course had lots of stuff indicating a likely shut down of Tibetan areas. The Chinese were shooting Tibetan protesters. On top of that I met an American couple who were locked in their hotel at Manigango with a police car outside overnight. They had got through but had to turn back because the man had been bitten by a Tibetan mastiff and needed rabies shots. So my thinking was; if the mouth of hell appeared on route, I would pass through at any cost. How naive. It only took a light automatic gun to stop me dead, figuratively speaking.

The report below was one that I emailed home from Chengdu.

Tuesday 25th March, 2008, Chengdu, Sichuan:

Report from the Field

“A bus ticket was easy to buy in Chengdu, no restrictions, and the ticket clerk was very helpful. Boarded the bus to Kangding up in the mountains, early on Monday morning and off we go. The first 8 seats of the bus are occupied by a Tibetan family of 6 adults, a Buddhist Nun and me. The rest of the bus is filled with Han Chinese and a young Tibetan woman who got on outside of Chengdu.

One incident along the way was where the bus left behind the young Tibetan woman at the lunch stop. Half an hour later a car caught up with the bus at a petrol filling station. Three Tibetans got out and dragged the bus driver away and proceeded to beat him, though I think it was only scare tactics they were using, he seemed none the worse for it. After half an hour all settled down and the three Tibetans drove away. I noticed they had thoughtfully removed their number plates from the car. Smart cookies. So off we go again.

Well, after a total of 6 hours on the bus we arrive at the outskirts of Kangding, at a military road block. On gets an armed soldier and a policeman who proceeded to check ID cards. They get to me very quickly, sitting up the front surrounded by Tibetans. In almost, but not quite, perfectly bad English, they ask for my passport then motioned me to get off the bus. The Nun was made to get off too, but she later returned. There were about 4 soldiers and 5 police with 3 riot squad soldiers in the distant background. They dragged my bag out of the hold of the bus and parked me in their little tin hut command post. None of them can speak a word of English so the conversation gets a bit stuck. The upshot is that they want me to turn back. I try and barter for options like one night in Kangding but this seems to make them a bit angry so I change the subject, and with my map in hand ask where I can go next. They indicate Chengdu or Luding. I opt for Luding being only about an hour back down the road.

Got to Luding and found the bus station hotel and headed for reception. If you think the above was a bit scary then the next bit was almost an international incident. Approached reception, showing my pearly

white teeth to give a good impression and asked for a room. They seemed to be a bit agitated at this and make a phone call. After much misunderstanding it seems they want me to sit and wait for someone. Great, they've sent for an English translator, how nice.

But wait, there's more.

Twenty minutes later four police and two senior officers who looked like the usual "secret police", arrive. It's only a small town so I think this was almost their entire police force. None of them at this stage have a word of English. The guy in charge was continually giving me the evil eye. I used a great deal of "I don't understand". Works beautifully if you don't want the conversation to go anywhere. They kept asking me the same question and got more and more agitated when I just shrugged. The bus station ticket clerk, at this point, came over and solved the problem with a bit of old fashioned sign language; I had to give them my passport. She also had the notion to show the police my ticket from Chengdu to Kangding to support my claim to have been turned back earlier. Smart young lady, she should have been chief-of-police.

Finally a police woman turned up who had reasonable English skills considering the area we were in. Lots of questions at this stage. Why was I in Luding, was I an imperial spy, did I know George Bush, stuff like that. She told me that Luding was no-go and that I would have to return to Chengdu but at first they couldn't find a seat on the next long distance bus. It was then suggested I stay the night in the hotel which sparked off a chain of paperwork, everything in triplicate all handwritten. Then horrors, they found a seat on the slow local bus to Chengdu on which I got, escorted between 2 police officers across the bus station yard.

So briefly I was famous in Luding. I won't say there was a crowd watching but there were enough loosely grouped spectators outside to have formed one. Well, after 16 hours on the road, 12 hours of bus travel, half-an-hour for lunch and the rest in police and military custody, I finally made it back to Chengdu at 11.00pm feeling very dejected and more than slightly anti Chinese. ”

I spent 2 more days in Chengdu. Enough time to visit the heavily policed Tibetan Quarter of the city and to arrange an air ticket to Tokyo, Japan, where it was Cherry Blossom Week.

Now for the bread and butter dialogue...

BACKGROUND

Data from [SaveTibet.org](#)

- Size: 2.5 million sq. km.
- Capital: Lhasa
- Population: 6 million Tibetans and an undetermined number of Chinese
- Religion: Tibetan Buddhism is practiced by 99% of the Tibetan Population
- Language: Tibetan (of the Tibeto-Burmese language family). The official language is Chinese after Chinese occupation in 1959.
- Staple Food: Tsampa (roasted barley flour)
- National Drink: Salted butter tea
- Typical Animals: Wild yak, Bharal sheep, Musk deer, Tibetan antelope, Tibetan gazelle, Kyang (wild ass), Pica
- Typical Birds: Black necked crane, Lammergeier, Great crested grebe, Bar headed goose, Ruddy shel duck, Ibis-bill
- Major Environmental Problems: Rampant deforestation in eastern Tibet; desertification, poaching of large mammals, mismanagement of water resources by Chinese
- Average Altitude: 14,000 Feet or 4,250 Metres
- Highest Mountain: Chomo Langma (Mt. Everest) 29,028 ft or 8,847m
- Average Temperature: July 58° F or 14 ° C; January 24° F or -4° C. Night temperatures can bottom at -40°C in mid winter
- Mineral Deposits: Borax, uranium, iron, chromite, gold
- Major Rivers: Mekong, Yangtse, Salween, Tsangpo, Yellow, Indus, Karnali
- Economy: Tibetans: predominantly in agriculture and animal husbandry. Chinese: predominantly in government, commerce and the service sector
- Provinces: U-Tsang (Central Tibet), Amdo (NE Tibet), Kham (SE Tibet)
- National Flag: Snow lions with red and blue rays. Outlawed in Tibet. Prison sentence for possession
- Religious Leader: The 14th Dalai Lama. In exile in Dharamsala, India
- Political Leader (2016): Sikyong Dr. Lobsang Sangay
- Government: Communist (after Chinese occupation in 1959)
- Relationship with the People's Republic of China: Colonial
- Legal Status: Occupied

Independent Tibet

Tibet is an [Independent State](#) under illegal occupation. Tibet, which is rich in natural resources and has strategically important territorial borders, is under unlawful Chinese Communist [Occupation](#) since 1950.

[1.2 million Tibetans](#), one-fifth of the country's population, died as a result of China's occupation policies; many more, today, languish in prisons and labour camps. More than 6,000 monasteries, temples and other cultural and historic buildings were destroyed and their contents pillaged.

Important Fact: From Webster's online dictionary " Terrorism - the calculated use of violence, or threat of violence, against civilians in order to attain goals that are political or ideological in nature; this is done through intimidation or coercion or instilling fear." That clearly makes the Chinese government as terrorists in Tibet.

Why Tibet

Tibet, for centuries, has been in the western collective mind as a mysterious and unreachable place beyond the Himalayas. Since the 15th century, and before, people from many countries have struggled to [explore](#) the plateau and reach Lhasa, the capital. In the first half of the 20th century European and American seed collectors hiked into the region, particularly Eastern Tibet, and came back with a lot of the plants, previously rarities, that flower in modern gardens today. This is merely for information, I'm not suggesting you take a small collection of flower pots with you. Many of these exploring botanists, along with Christian missionaries and spies from the British Raj, wrote books of their adventures. These are well worth a read if your interest is greater than only travel. There's a list of my collection [HERE](#).

If you have a more scientific interest then read “An Introduction to Saline Lakes on the Tibetan Plateau” by Mianping Zheng. In spite of its title the reading is very dry. Perhaps it’s the salt.

For the winter months Tibet can be cold and like a Martian landscape, wild and rugged. If you enjoy being on another planet, seek a little bit of adventure, or are escaping payment for your university fees, then Tibet is for you.

What is Tibet.

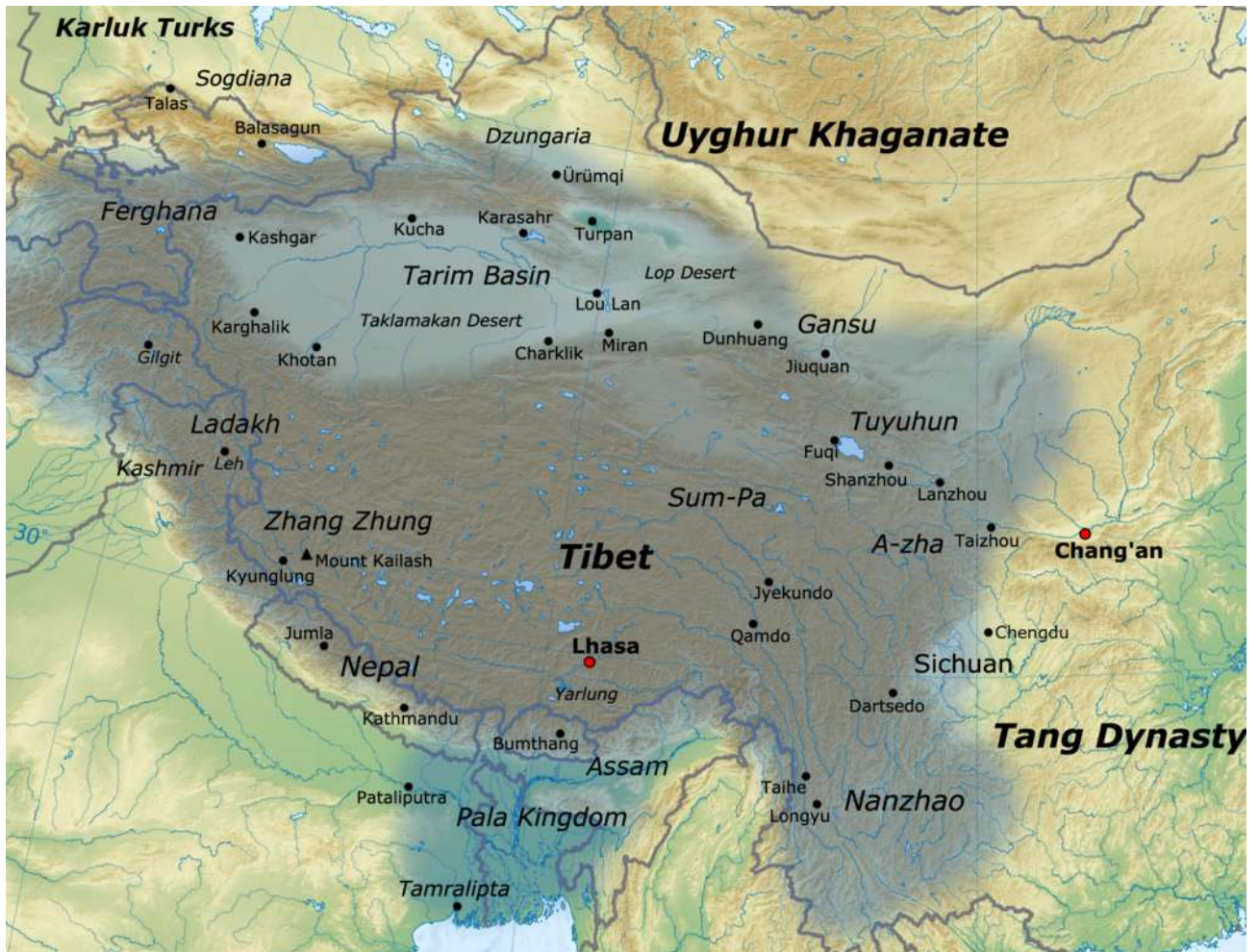
From [Wikipedia](#) :

“The Himalayas are among the youngest mountain ranges on the planet and consist mostly of uplifted sedimentary and metamorphic rock. According to the theory of plate tectonics, their formation is a result of a continental collision along the convergent boundary between the Indo-Australian Plate and the Eurasian Plate. The collision began in the Upper Cretaceous period about 70 million years ago, when the north-moving Indo-Australian Plate, moving at about 15 cm per year, collided with the Eurasian Plate... ...The Indo-Australian plate continues to be driven horizontally below the Tibetan plateau, which forces the Tibetan plateau to move upwards; still rising about 5mm per year”.

Note: According to my pocket calculator 70 million years multiplied by 5mm per year of increasing elevation, which equals 35 kilometres, would put the Tibetan Plateau almost into space !

Tibet isn’t Mars but it can be wild and extra terrestrial to those from a lower altitude. Roaring rivers, snow capped mountain ranges, pine forests and wide plains. Every corner opens up a new vista. In autumn, winter and spring the nights can be seriously sub-zero but days warm and clear, the landscape painted with snow. In summer a garden of luxuriance but a trifle rainy. It’s possible to experience snow storms in summer, so always take some winter woollies. Tibet is an intense and unique cultural area where everyone twirls a prayer wheel chanting the Buddhist “Om Ma Ni Pa Mi Hūm” for the benefit and salvation of all mankind. Friendly, helpful people that gladdens your heart to meet. You will not be the same person when you return. Check out your school atlas to see where Tibet is. This is incorrect.

Tibetan Empire



MAP: The true extent of the Tibetan cultural area would make it the 10th largest country in the world. © Others

Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces have considerable Tibetan populations.

The cultural area of Tibet covers a wider scope than what the Communist Chinese and map publishers call the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) or Xizang. In the 7th to 9th centuries the [Tibetan Empire](#) 𑄧 included large territorial spaces of what is now China lying outside the current TAR. The provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Western Sichuan and North West Yunnan are some of the places that are culturally Tibetan and now incorporated into Chinese provinces.

During the Tibetan Empire the Tibetans were, as a military power, dreaded throughout Asia. Their founding king of this period [Srong-btsan sGam-po](#) 𑄧 demanded and received in marriage a Chinese Princess, who on her travels, in 641 A.D., to central Tibet, founded a temple at Gyêgu; Princess Wengchen's Temple.

Buddhism

Buddhism came to Tibet during this period and within a few centuries changed Tibet from a nation of feared warriors to a land of peace-loving people. The goal of the ordinary Tibetan is rebirth in [Sukhāvātī](#) 𑄧, the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha. The goal of the Buddhist monk is Nirvāna; the serene stillness of mind after the fires of desire, aversion, and delusion have been finally extinguished.

Script

Tibetan writing, specifically imported from the south during the Empire, is derived from Sanskrit with an alphabet of 35 letters reading from left to right, the same as modern European languages. Very different from the Chinese [idiotic](#) ideographic script where you need to memorise over 2,000 characters to read it and read it vertically. Whilst the written word is common to all in Tibet, the language has dialectal diversification. Nomadic areas speaking in an older style of pronunciation.

Historical Timeline

- Tibetan Empire founded c.608 A.D. (608 to 866 A.D.)
- Tibetans invaded China, beat them up and stayed for a while (763 A.D.)
- Mongols invade Tibet (1244)
- The Mongols appoint the first Dalai Lama, known as the Third* Dalai Lama (1569)
- British attacked Sikkim - Tibet border defences. Stayed for a bit, then went home (1888)
- British invaded Tibet, made them sign a trade treaty in Lhasa, then they all went home (1903) (Communist comment: "the ancient holy city was trampled under the iron heel of imperialists")
- The Chinese Republic invaded Eastern Tibet, got beaten up, and mostly went home (1912)
- Chinese Communists invaded Tibet and haven't gone home, yet (1949).

* This is mathematically correct if you use your calculator upside down.

Where is Tibet ?

Where it's always been.

Most taxidermists will say "I don't know". It's North of India, Nepal and Burma, south of Russia and Mongolia, east of Kashmir and Afghanistan and west of China. On Wikimapia it's [HERE](#) 🗺.

In the 19th century the Russians and the English knew where it was and both were quite keen to exploit the strategicality and trade opportunities of the place. The French were keen too. They built a narrow gauge railway from Vietnam (French Indo China) into Yunnan. The British even [invaded](#) 🗺 Tibet in 1903.

The Chinese, historically, were not equally so keen. They called the Tibetans "Barbarians". This is probably due to the Tibetans beating the [Hell](#) 🗺 out of China in the 8th century. Though they too, the Chinese Communists particularly, also became quite keen when they took over and eventually manacled Tibet to China by, to use their own words, "[in a peaceful liberation](#)" 🗺.



MAP: The Communist Chinese redistribution of the Tibetan cultural area into Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan. © Others
Traditionally Tibet was divided into the regions of Ü-Tsang 🗺, Amdo 🗺 and Kham 🗺. Ü and Tsang covers central and some westerly regions, Amdo the north eastern area and Kham, the focus of this paper, in the

east abutting China's Sichuan lowlands. During the empire these geographical regions were as one and administered from Lhasa or wherever the Emperors court was camped. After the 9th century collapse Kham and Amdo broke up into small kingdoms and tribal groups.

Ü-Tsang and the capital, Lhasa, was controlled by the Dalai Lama, the major Buddhist monasteries and the lay government from the 17th century. Kham and Amdo were only occasionally under Lhasa's sway. Kham was a loose grouping of independent kingdoms such as [Chakla](#), [Nangcheng](#), [Degé](#) and [Nyarong](#), and a bit later, the social groupings of the [Hor States](#).

In Afgan's Kabul museum there used to be a chalice with an image of the Kushan *second century* emperor Kanishka on it. The emperor is shown wearing a Tibetan [Chuba](#)! See Michael Woods BBC The Story of India: Spice Routes and Silk Roads. The Kushans originated from northern Tibet's Tarim Basin. Their empire stretched deep into India.

Who are the Tibetans

Nobody knows. Their origins in remotest antiquity are obscure. There was certainly occupation of the Tibetan Plateau in Neolithic and Bronze Age times. The Plateau is central to everywhere in Asia so influx to the area would have been very varied and multi-directional over time. The language phylum is purported to be Tibeto-Burman. The darker skin colouring of some may support partial origins from the south but I believe that the mixture is much wider than this. In Lhasa you can see Nepali and Indian influences in looks. In Kham you can observe a mixture of Mongolian, Caucasian and Middle East facial types. Take a true Khampa man out of context and your first guess might be Turkic, Caucasian or even First Americans.

The Communist Chinese might say the Tibetans are descended from them, but I knew a boy at school who also told lies. How better to morally support the occupation of Tibet than to say they are close relations. I dare say there has been some little influence in recent times but the essential Tibetan stock has more of an international flavour than that. The Chinese, over millennia, have had a deep dislike of the "Western Barbarians" in the mountains of the setting sun. There has always been a fairly clear delineation between the Plateau and the Chinese lowlands.

Tibet is the roof of the world.

And just like the roof of your house, there's more water flows off it than you can use to clean your teeth in a week. Some of the greatest rivers in the world flow off of the Tibetan Plateau. Here is a scientific formula for the calculation of this flow; that goes

$$W=(Y^{42}+PB)/D$$

Where D is the number of days it's been raining since you decided you would like to go to the beach and Y is the number of videos you've watched on YouTube in that time, plus the movies you've downloaded from Pirate Bay. The answer, W, is in litres, gallons or pixels; your choice. The number is appropriately staggering. Be staggered.

Some of the rivers are the Mekong, Yangtze, Yellow, Sutlej, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Indus, Ganges and Duck Creek. This last is hotly disputed, has yet to be confirmed and requires an academic research expedition to substantiate or refute. Volunteers are requested to do this but must have a PhD in "The Misuse of the Agricultural Landscape and its Social Effects on the Inuit Settlement of Qikiqtarjuaq" or something similarly obscure.

Scenes from the Map Room: Tibetan Rivers (For clarity Duck Creek is not shown).

Tibet is high

If you think the top level of your local multi-storey car park is a bit knee wobbling then be prepared.

This is what [Wikipedia](#) says:

“With an average elevation exceeding 4,500 metres (14,800 ft) it is the world's highest and largest plateau, with an area of 2,500,000 square kilometres (970,000 sq mi) (about five times the size of Metropolitan France).”

Note: the Tibetans do not speak French.

ALTITUDE ACCLIMATISATION

- *If you have any reservations about being at high altitude then consult your Doctor for professional advice before you go.* •

Acute Mountain Sickness 🏔️ (AMS) is something you should be aware of and be able to recognise the symptoms of in yourself and your fellow travelers. Do your own research and take professional medical advice. If you are fighting fit and go to the gym seven times a week and think it will not affect you then think again. AMS has no respect for your gym membership card. I am not a medical practitioner so I can only relate my own experiences.

If you live on the beach, swamp or any other low life part of town you will need to adapt to the altitude. Best method is to engage in what mountaineers do. Go half way up, rest and adapt for at least one night then continue to the next level. This can be practiced on a kids climbing frame in the park before you go. Step up and rest, then go higher. If you don't have much time before your flight then practice in the lift at work or in the multi storey car park on the way home.

In practical terms if you are going to trek on foot over mountain passes then this means a lot of heavy breathing trying to suck oxygen from the thin air when walking up anything you might call a respectable slope. Hire a horse.

If you are going to stomp around places worth seeing and sit on the bus looking out the window then most states of health short of being unconscious seems ok. When walking up a slope the trick is to consciously breathe deeply during and prior to making the ascent. Heart rate and breath cycle will increase significantly as you start upwards, which is expected, so don't panic. Stop frequently to give your body time to top up its oxygen content. Walking on the flat is easy. The prolonged mountainside climb is a different matter.

At 4,000 metres the oxygen content of the air is at 60% compared with sea level. For altitude Ginkgo Biloba could improve your blood flow, and iron for increasing the volume of oxygen carrying red blood cells. There is no evidence that this actually works, but I'm still alive (and I smoke). The one time I had any marked altitude sickness was when I did not acclimatise. Went from sea level in Australia to 3,800 meters in 24 hours and paid for it painfully.

If symptoms are severe the only course of action is to go back down into an oxygen rich environment. I also found, even when acclimatised, that whenever I spent any time above 4,000 metres I get a slight headache. I can also attest that some off-the-shelf chest medicines, taken at altitude, produce prolonged heart palpitations. If you have an athletic body, rippling muscles requiring more oxygen, then altitude issues are just as likely to kick in. Consult your doctor, your mother or some obscure website on mountaineering. Do not be discouraged. See [HERE](#) 📍 for acclimatisation locations.

TIP: Rest and sleep before exploring your new and high environment. Introduce exertive activities gradually. Minimise the consumption of alcohol. Wandering around town on the flat is mostly just as easy as anywhere else. Atmospheric **pressure** 📉 in the area we are going is higher in the winter, lower in the summer.

Little Bit Scary ?

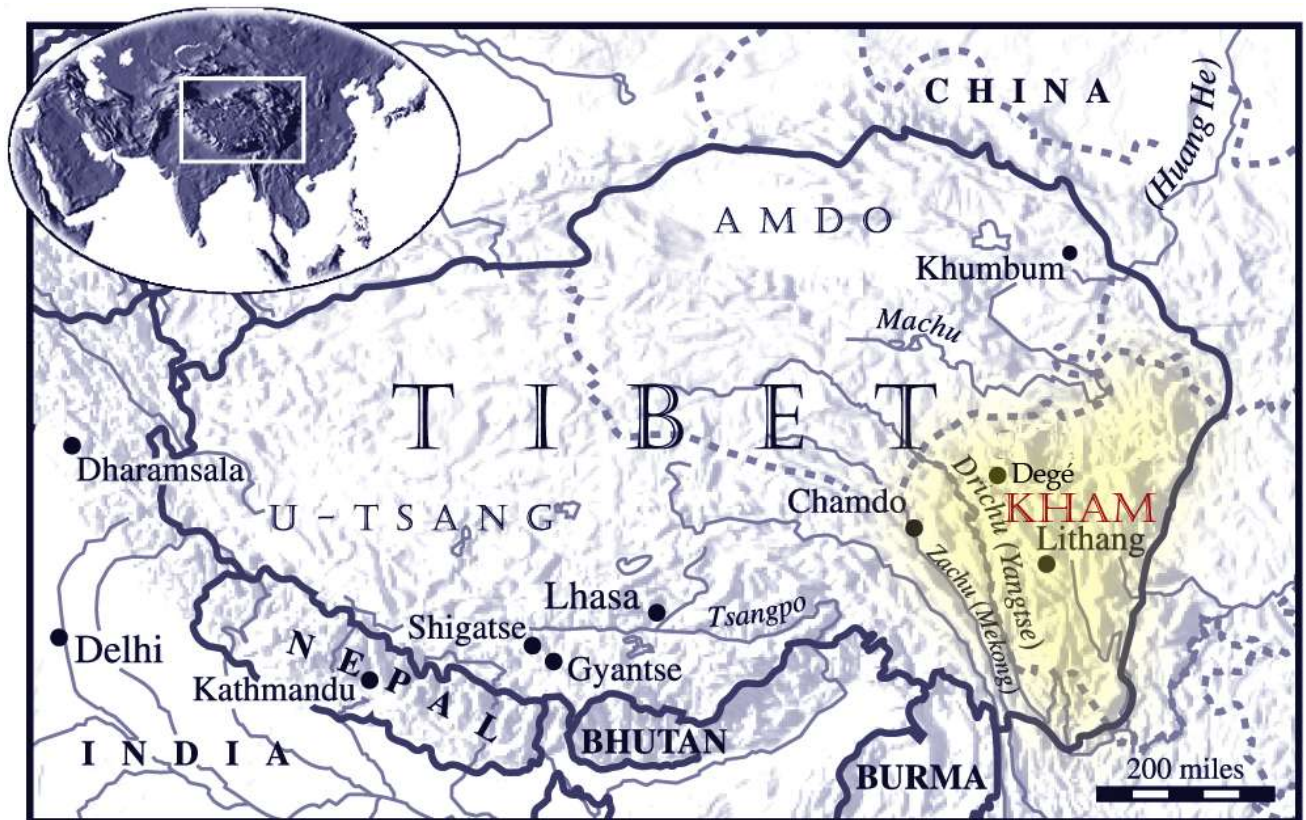
To go to Tibet you need a tiny bit of stamina but mostly stubbornness. For alternative reading try “Going to the Beach” by More Mundane; Published by Sonne, Burne & Creame Pty in their series “Ordinary Holidays for Ordinary People” at \$49.98 plus postage and tax. For armchair travelers and true explorers, read on.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

Before we proceed further you need to know that this little pocket guide does not really cover the “Tourist” trip to Lhasa from either Nepal or China. The foci is getting into Kham i.e. the Tibetan areas of Western Sichuan and Southern Qinghai. You will see more things Tibetan here than travelling with a formal government guide, which is now a requirement for a Lhasa trip along with a permit.

Kham

Kham is where we are going, in the wild borderland mountains between central Tibet and the Chinese lowlands. The goal is Degé and the Meshö Valley; approaching from two different routes or a round trip.



Cultural Tibet outlined

Lhasa Permit

For Lhasa in the TAR you need a special regulated permit, the hiring of a vehicle and guide and stay at approved hotels and see approved things and go in an approved group. The Chinese Communists being the ones doing the approving. To travel anywhere outside Lhasa you need an additional *Alien's Travel Permit* which you can only get when you arrive there. There is a further *Military Permit* for certain sensitive areas. These permits *cannot* be obtained from your local Chinese embassy or consulate.

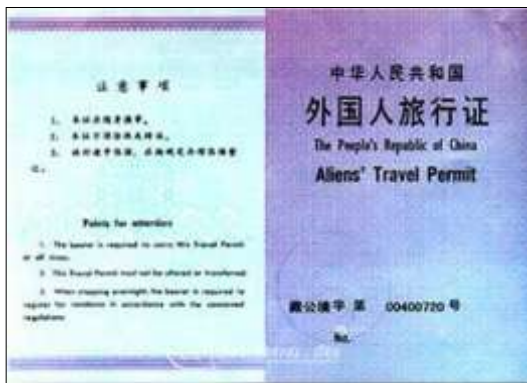
Aliens can obtain them from the Chinese Attaché on Alpha Centauri where the Chinese are claiming half the star system as traditionally being within their sphere of influence through Chinese Astrology.



Chinese Visa



Tibet Permit



Alien's Travel Permit



Military Permit

For Kham and Amdo all you need is your Chinese visa and a little bit of get-up-and-go. It's more of an adventure. The Chinese are turning Lhasa into a theme park. Whilst it is worth a side trip you will see more of the true Tibetan environment and culture in Eastern Tibet. Depends on how you label yourself, Tourist, Traveler or Explorer. Some pointers as we go for travelling to Lhasa.

WHEN TO GO

Weather

My journeys into Kham have been at the end of winter. February, March and April. Tibetan winters are long. February is cold and bitterly so at night with more than minus 10°C temperatures. Daytime can be quite reasonable and in deep narrow valleys almost hot. March and April are progressively warmer but still very cool at night. I have never been in summer when temperatures are enjoyable and the raw dusty landscape becomes verdant. On one occasion I went at the end of October and into November (2014). Conditions were pleasant in the day but again subzero at night with no rain and only a little snow. Night time subzero figures don't reach double digit until mid December.

The reason I travel at these times is that I dislike stomping through the rain. Snow and cold, I love. The snow is soft when you slide off your motorcycle into it. Summers can be wetter. Tibet suffers from the Indian Monsoon season but only a very little rain cloud gets over the Himalayas and onto the Tibetan plateau. It's a dusty place in winter wherever there is no snow. I can't imagine what the roads and tracks would be like after a heavy rainfall, mud up to your eyeballs. In winter the air is exceedingly dry. Take lip balm, otherwise it will be painful to smile.

Most afternoons, in the autumn / winter / spring, towards 4:00pm there is, almost invariably, a change of weather. Coming from the west it is sometimes just a darkening of the sky but it always looks as though it's about to dump a deluge of snow. Be prepared to hunker down early.

TIP: Wind. Tucked away deep in steep sided valleys, you will not, probably not, maybe not, most of the time not, experience windy conditions.

If you are coming from the southern hemisphere, like Australia or Terra Del Fuego, where it is summer, you will arrive in the northern hemisphere in winter. This will require you to get on the plane dressed like an Eskimo 🐻 when the temperature outside the airport is +30°C.

[Wunderground.com](#) 🌐 is a great site for researching weather and climate history. You can examine, month by month and year by year, past weather conditions in any one place that has an airport nearby. This will give you a feeling for what you might meet with for the time of year you choose to go. Unfortunately it does not predict the future. I've tried. But you can extrapolate the past.

Spoiler Alert ! Summer snowstorms are not unknown in Tibet. Be prepared.

Weather Records

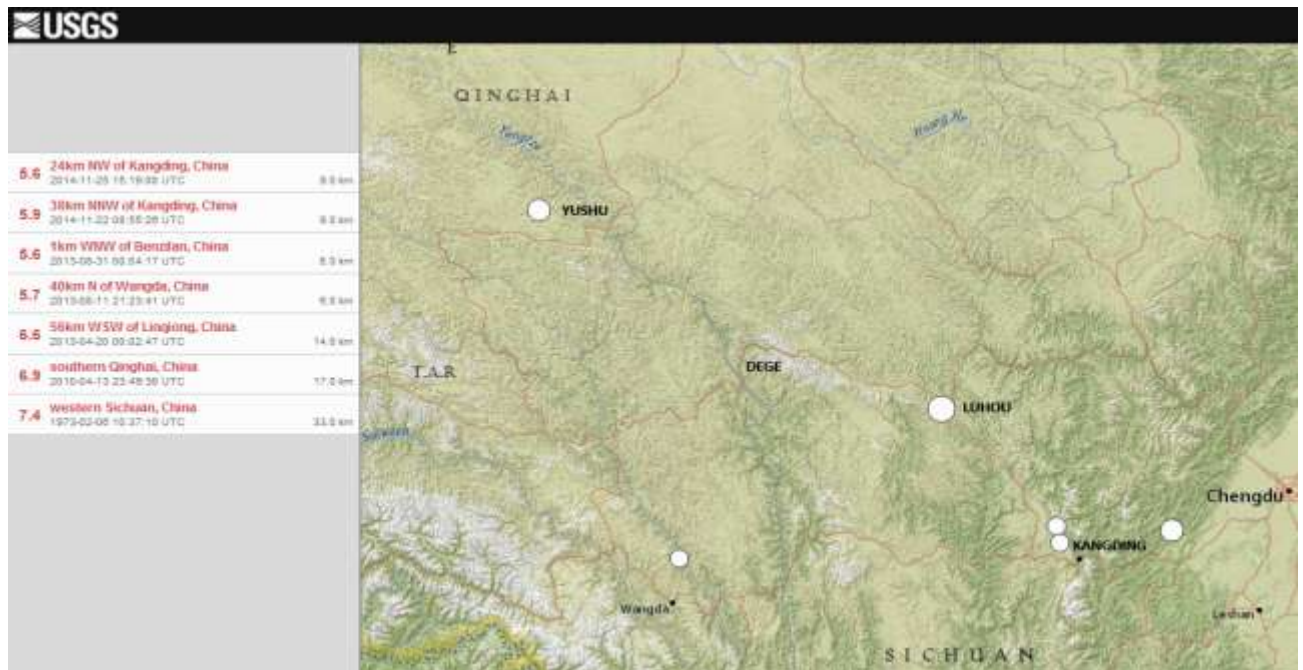
Here are useful geo-links for weather. You can look up historical data for the time of year you are going.

[Yushu](#) 🌐 Monthly chart for August 2010.
You can change year and month to see alternative timelines.

[Degé](#) 🌐 Monthly chart for October 2014.
There can be a real difference in temperature between Yushu in the north and the more southerly Degé.

Quakes

Large earthquakes are few and far between in this area. This [USGS](#) 🌐 map below shows significant quakes over the last 43 years from 1973 to 2016. In preparation for a possibility keep your passport and a significant amount of cash in your outer jacket. Keep all your major articles of clothes in the same spot overnight so you can grab everything and run. Make sure you know the quickest way out of the building and the escape door at corridors end actually does open. This, of course, would also apply if the building was burning or aliens were attacking. If it is aliens do not stop and say "Take me to your leader." Invariably you will be zapped.



© USGS

POLITICAL

In the months leading up to your journey you should watch the local situation for signs of stuff that might make the Chinese authorities nervous and consider mounting road blocks and closing the TAR to tourists. Lonely Planet's [Thorn Tree Forum](#) 🌐 is where you can get information about TAR permit availability and the likelihood of closure.

In the area we are going to, if asked, the Chinese would say there are no problems when it's obvious that unrest is evident. These two websites will give you a blow by blow of what's happening, if anything. They are

worth monitoring: [Phayul.com](#) and [DossierTibet.it](#). Situations change daily and there is always something happening in highly localised places that may not affect ability to travel within Kham. You are looking for an overall pattern that suggests escalating tension over a wider area. In 2008, when the [Lhasa incidents](#) escalated to include Eastern Tibet, I was called a fool for going, but then I'm a stubborn person and went.

Human Rights

A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, "China: No End to Tibet Surveillance Program", released in 2016 reports the intrusive surveillance of Tibetans including "questioning them about their political and religious views, subjecting thousands to political indoctrination, establishing partisan security units to monitor behaviour, and collecting information that could lead to detention or other punishment". The report states that 21,000 communist cadres, fanning out in groups of four or more, live in each of Tibet's 5,000 villages. The teams pressurise villagers to publicly show support for the ruling Communist Party and to oppose the Dalai Lama.



TAR Open, TAR Closed

The TAR was closed, in 2008, when the Olympic Torch runners passed through and again for the Olympics itself. Annually, March 10th and into early April is another time it may be closed; an anniversary, [Tibetan Uprising Day](#), with heavy political implications. It makes the Chinese very panicky. In 2016 Tibet was closed from 26th Feb to 30th March for this reason. All foreign visitors had to leave Tibet before 25th Feb. The TAR was closed for the first two weeks in September 2015. This was for the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) by the Chinese Communist invaders. You will only get a Permit to the TAR during what the Chinese think are stable political conditions. Where we are going, [Kham](#), you have a much better chance of completing your travels. It does not need a regulated permit.

Do not raise the Tibetan flag or shout "Free Tibet!". You won't last long if you do, and you won't be helping the Tibetans either. You will put at risk any Tibetans that have had contact with you. The Tibetan flag is banned by the Communists and carries a considerable prison sentence for possession.

Tibetan Flag

Contrary to popular belief the Tibetan national flag was *not* designed with the help of the Japanese Buddhist monk Yasujiro Yajima, who only translated military manuals for the Tibetan army. Both the Tibetan and Japanese flags are based on the "Sunburst" symbolism, a universal symbol of light and life, and can be found in the Tibetan rock art tableau. For Tibet it has origins in the western ZhangZhung འབྲུག་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་ and Sumpa སུམ་པ་ལྗོངས་ pre-Buddhist civilizations of the 11th century BCE. The Great Thirteenth Dalai Lama had a hand in the modern design, based on earlier extant flags. The Snow Lions depicted have origins in the Tibetan Empire and before.



General Derge-sé at [Markham](#) (Smar khams rdzong / Garthog). The Ta-dang regiment waiting to fight the Chinese, 1949. ©Photo: Karen Boatman collection.



1940's Flag of the Ta-dang Regiment.



Tibetan Flag 1960's. Hoist on the right. The sun-burst representing the tribes of Tibet.

Tibetans brave imprisonment, torture and even execution for possession or displaying the flag in public.

Internet Rules

©Adapted from the New York Times: original by Didi Kirsten Tatlow Jan. 8, 2016.

There are Internet speech rules which were laid out by the director of the Cyberspace Administration of China, Lu Wei, in 2013. They require Internet users to respect China's laws, state interests, socialist values, moral standards, social order, people's rights and the truth. (One suspects it's the Chinese version of the truth though).

The rules state that if a blog post or video is just to be a commentary on something, without its being disseminated in China, then it has nothing to do with Chinese law. But if the text or video is to be disseminated on websites in China, or to have other people repost it in China, then it comes under Chinese law. President Xi has said that, "Although the Internet is virtual, there is sovereignty. Internet sovereignty means that you can do things within your network as long as you don't harm China. But if you enter our network, you must obey Chinese law."

So, if you are an Inuit in the village of Qikiqtarjuaq and post derogatory comments like Mao is the Chinese version of Hitler you are likely to be arrested. But by whom?

CIA

If you are passing through Lhasa's Gonggar airport the CIA might appreciate a few on-the-ground photographs. The airport is home to eight combat planes and four kilometres away is a Missile base.



Information from www.bellingcat.com Jan. 2016 © Google Earth.

GETTING A VISA FOR TIBET

Don't. You should only get a visa for China. If you intend entering the TAR you need an additional special [Permit](#) which you organise when you arrive in China or secure it through an online Chinese travel agent beforehand. Be aware that it will take time to secure your TAR permit.

Under no circumstances mention Tibet in your China Visa application.

For your Chinese Visa you will need at least a couple of blank pages in your passport. Your passport should have at least six months or more validity. You will need to show flight and hotel bookings also. All this needs to be photocopied, including the detail page of your passport, a copy of any previous China Visa and with a copy of any other pertinent visa (i.e. permanent residence in your country, if you need one), together with a head and shoulders colour photo and all submitted with your application along with your actual passport. The whole thing can be done by post. If you front up at their office you can do it within a week. Less if you want to pay more for express processing. You can't do it in one day. At the Australian office Americans pay extra.

For my trips I pre-book a couple of nights at a Hostel which seems enough to satisfy the Hotel Booking requirement. It only costs a couple of dollars online. In the form, where it asks you where you are going I list a few Chinese cities that would appear logical from the standpoint of where I'm going to arrive. Mine is usually Xining, Chengdu, Kunming and Guangzhou. My flight tickets show that I arrive in Xining with the [Hostel](#) (Lete Hostel) booking in the same city. I do not submit hotel bookings for all the places I am actually or pretending to go to, only the point of arrival. For Chengdu this is a good travelers [Hostel](#) (Holly's Hostel).

Tibet is a sensitive subject with the Chinese government. Political and social tension in Tibetan areas can be high at times, both inside and outside the TAR. This makes the Chinese nervous. Events can flair up at any time without notice. March 10th is a hypersensitive date relating to the Lhasa uprising and the escape of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959. Entry into the TAR can be closed suddenly without any warning or compensation to Tourists booked to go. Even if you already have your permit. On the 50th anniversary of Tibet's official inauguration as the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, all entry into the TAR by foreign tourists was prohibited for two weeks in early September 2015.

Areas outside the TAR, like Kham, can also come under the censor's spotlight. A high level incident will have road blocks in place and refusals given to travel onwards. That's after checking your passport for two hours. The reason for this is that the Chinese do not want anyone, especially foreign visitors, to know what's going on. For this reason you do *NOT* mention on your Visa application form that you are a journalist or anything remotely associated with media. My attempts to get to Degé in 2008 and 2009 were thwarted by gun toting checkpoint officials.

I worked in the Publishing industry, in the admin side, but always put down the vague occupation of Clerical Administrator. Some years back I was stopped at a road block, south of Garzê heading for Kangding, pulled off the bus for an hour by a group of police, one of whom had a little bit of English. The only question he asked was “are you a reporter”. This is also the reason you do not mention Tibet on the Visa form - taboo.

Check out your local Chinese Embassy or Consulate website. You will likely find a copy of the application form and rules and regulations on how to complete it. Be creative.

TIP: Try LP's [Page](#) with some indigestionable detail. You will discover that if you are travelling for a holiday you are permit grade 旅行 (lǚxíng).

HELP AND ADVICE

Like any advice it's given from a personal viewpoint. All that is set out here you need to blend with your personal preferences and ideas. If you have questions or submissions email me at ljbonner@bigpond.com

Language

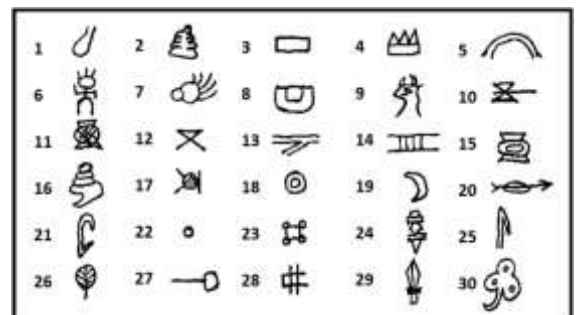
Being able to speak any language is not really a strict requirement. You don't need Tibetan or Chinese other than a couple of phrases like "Hello", "Thank You" and "Will this Sprocket Grommet fit my iPhone?" Speaking English does have some benefits. You will come across a few Tibetans with "a little bit" of English. Even some with immaculate Queen's English accents, having been educated in India. Chinese too have varying **Chinglish** ability. You may come across people who think they can speak English but actually can't. This will test your ability to be a compassionate human being.

The best thing to learn is body and sign language. Being able to read facial expressions and body language is a very useful skill. Not the formal Sign Language 🙌🙌 but the ability to ask for a Chinese fast food chicken burger by flapping your elbows and squawking like a hen. This always gets a laugh and, surprisingly, a chicken burger. It's not advised to practice this on your boss at work. The Zulu war dance he thinks you are doing may induce the thought "instant dismissal". Practice on your family at home. They already know you are insane.

Take a small plain paper notebook, or post-it-pad, or both, with you to draw little pictograms of beds, bus, chopsticks, nuclear reactors and other requirements that need to be elucidated. Counting is by putting up fingers with crossed index fingers being 10. Be careful about the 10 it can be very fluid. It invariably means a number different from what you have in mind. Crossed fingers could mean 10, 100 or a 1,000. Always use the notebook to clarify the exact figure and avoid tears later. Do not ask for a tax receipt, otherwise you will spend two days explaining GST/VAT using only a can opener and an empty credit card as communication tools. It can be even more helpful if you take a pen too.

I took the trouble to make flash cards with hand written Tibetan and Chinese phrases on them copied from [Google Translate](#) 📄 (Chinese) and the Net (Tibetan). But, disappointingly, after all that effort never used them once successfully. The one time I tried, the ticket clerk wrote the answer on the back of the card. In Chinese! The assumption being that if I could write Chinese then I could read it. The harder you try the more trouble you get into. The best way to communicate is to start with a smile and leave with a thank-you. Give what you expect to get. Karma will reward you appropriately.

There are a couple of endangered archaic languages, **Ersu** and **Muya** 📄, that are still extant in the Kham area, particularly to the south towards Yunnan and areas surrounding Kangding. Muya has approximately 10,000 speakers and is divided into two dialects, not mutually intelligible. **Ersu** 📄 uses a pictographic writing system, today mainly for religious and tourist purposes. Created in the 11th century, colour is an integral part of its use. The Ersu speaking population numbers around 20,000.



Ersu Shaba pictograms. © Asian Highlands Perspectives 2009

"Useful Phrases" and explanations

English	Tibetan
Are You Well ?	Chu Demu (Choo Demoo)
Thank You	Thu Je Che (Too Jee Chay)
Good Luck	Tashi Delek (Tashi Dellay)
To Ride Horse	Ta Shöm Pa

My hovercraft is full of eels	Nge lung dek dru sing ni, nya man li yi gang gi du. (Not to be confused with the Lhasa dialect phrase “My bicycle tyre has exploded”)
<i>Tibetan</i>	<i>English</i>
Chuba	Coat of Sheep skin, wool inside, long arms
Yak	Long-haired bovid found throughout the Himalaya
Kha-La	Food
Momo	Steamed Dumplings, Yak meat inside
Shan	Mountain Range
Kang-Ri	Snowy Mountain
La	Mountain Pass
Chu	River
<i>Other</i>	<i>English</i>
Ouch!	Pain felt after paying for a minibus hire
Binguan	招待所 Hotel / Guest House (Chinese)
Five Star Binguan	A gross exaggeration.

TIP: An English-Tibetan colloquial dictionary can be found [HERE](#) 📖.

TIP: There are apps for your smart phone that will translate typed English and speak it in Chinese. Use carefully. Particularly vigorous intergalactic wars have been fought due to a minor language miss-translation.

Interesting Fact: In George Lucas’ movie *The Return of the Jedi*, the [Ewok](#) 📖 aliens speak Tibetan.

Place names

Gyêgu: Je Goo | Yushu: You Shoe | Xining: She Ning: | Dartsedo: Dar Say Doh

Place names here can have multi alternatives between Tibetan and Chinese. There are also historical notations from pre-Communist explorers that may give a localised or older version. Chinese Kangding is also known as Dartsedo in Tibetan but is marked on [Google Maps](#) 📖 as Garze and Dardo. Both can be written as 康定市 or རྒྱལ་ཁོང་གི་རྫོང་། Local Tibetans will have their own dialectal versions; Ganzi (or Kandze) you will hear shouted as Ganza ! Ganza ! by minibus drivers touting for passengers in Manigango.

The Chinese also have a bit of a habit of changing place names to suit themselves. Tibetan Gyalthang (Chinese: Deqen / Daocheng), in Yunnan, is now called Shangri-La; just to attract the tourists to the new ski slopes out of town, mega hotels and cultural concrete. But in spite of that Gyalthang has a magnificent monastery on the north side and in the old town a temple on a huge mound with what seemed to me to be the world’s biggest prayer wheel. I had to get the help of a small boy to turn it.

Internet and Comms

It would be a good safety feature to be able to make phone calls or at least send an SMS home. The smart thing to do with your smart phone is to get a Chinese *pre-paid* SIM card. Many years ago you could buy one as you left the baggage area at Guangzhou Airport for ¥100. But no longer. There is now a formal registration process. A Google search reveals a plethora of online possibilities to buy a Chinese SIM card. Check very carefully before you buy. Anything around US\$20 or 30 is about right. There are some websites that ask for over \$200 ! Some are not a Chinese SIM but a form of international roaming card.

Interesting Fact: In Japan you can buy a SIM card from vending machines.

You may be lucky enough to be able to buy a SIM at a small city outlet in China. Though you will probably need to have your passport with you and maybe the address of where you are staying in Chinese. Smile when you go in and don’t attempt to speak Chinese unless you are semi-fluent. Do not point at anybody; taboo. I once walked into a Bulgarian restaurant, which was full of East Germans, with my very young family trailing behind me. In an attempt to tell the waitress, in German, that I did not speak German, we were promptly put in the midst of Deutsch sprechend gönner! See what I mean? If you are going to blurt out badly formed Chinese they are not going to respond in English or anything else that you might understand. I

bought my second SIM card in a Xining back street shop and got two miniscule packets of tissues as a freebie. Not a word of English was exchanged.

For simplicity get a China Mobile pre-paid card but do not expect breathtaking speeds. Dripping water onto a rock comes to mind as a connection speed in remote areas, although they are improving year by year. What little high speed 4G/3G services that are available use incompatible settings. However, after you buy your SIM card buy a stack of refill cards when you get off the plane or in the city. Otherwise recharge online, but still get some refill cards. If you are going to surf the net without a data enabled sim card it will suck up your credit like a Florida sinkhole. In Yushu, and other remoter places, I have been refused when trying to buy a refill. Had to get a local to buy for me. Perhaps someone at your accommodation place might do it for you. Available credit and refill prompts are usually available in English from your Chinese service provider.

A sad fact: Tibetans can get several years in prison for contacting and sending messages to international destinations. Be careful.

Do not even think about webmail. You probably can connect to, say, Gmail but by the time you've written your description of the last three days of travel the connection would have dropped out and all your beautifully crafted words will be lost. In the mountains it's probably best to do SMS and wait for more lengthy emails when you get back to the core internet. There are many areas in the mountains that are in wireless shadow. The only way to connect here is with two tin cans and a bit of string.

TIP: Before you hit send and discover your email has dropped into a black hole use Ctrl+A then Ctrl+C. Then, if your connection has dropped out re-establish it and do Ctrl+V into a new email window and hit send. That might work as a recovery procedure.

Deep in the mountains away from any sizable place you will have big patches of non-reception. There will be occasions when you cannot make a call due to the political tension in the area. The Chinese block everything except maybe very local calls. I have experienced this but at the same time was able to send international SMS. If you can send SMS then be aware the system monitors content, in English too. If you mention politically sensitive place names in your message then the whole thing will get scrambled. [Garzê](#) is a well known hotspot, as is the sensitivity of the name Tibet. You have to disguise these and other place names; "We are in T/b:et", "Tomorrow we go to G@rz@". The scanning software they use does not seem to be sophisticated enough to pick this up.

The [Great Chinese Firewall](#) surrounds the country. This means that Twitter, Facebook and heaps of other websites will not be available to you. Google has given up with China but is still available as a Hong Kong search engine, but still with restriction as to what sites you can view. That doesn't make the above any more accessible unless you do some complex stuff with VPN's or the [TOR browser](#). TOR can be run off a USB flash drive for portability and there are versions for smart-phones. Two or three weeks without Facebook is not the end of the world and may even cure your addiction to it.

Where to Charge Your SIM

If you are not in China: [chinamobile.mobilerecharge.com](#) Credit card or PayPal. They will, in fact, charge any pre-paid SIM card from most countries of the world.

You can buy a SIM card here [china-mobile-phones.com](#) and they do recharge too. Based in Shanghai, China, they will deliver within China or worldwide.

\$ Cash ¥

Take wads of it. In the past I have taken around ¥12,000 in notes. I distribute the cash in multiple locations between my luggage and self. Each ¥1,000 wrapped in a paper band. The only issue with this strategy is that, when you dive into the lower inside left zipped jacket pocket that you thought had ¥2,000 in it and only contains a chocolate bar wrapper and broken plastic teaspoon, it tends to make you a little paranoid about pick pockets. Every wad that you open you should make a little tick in your notebook. Try not to lose the notebook when you rip out pages to use in your "ablutions".

This symbol ¥ in this document is being used to denote the Chinese Yuan or Renimbi (RMB).

The amount of cash I take is after I have paid for international tickets. Out of this sum comes the purchase price of a cheap Chinese motorcycle and all my local travel, food, temple donations, phone top-ups and accommodation expenses. Theoretically I should come back with some unspent excess. But I never do. It's always a disappointment when I exchange my last few Yuan for Aussie dollars at the airport. It barely buys me a cup of coffee and a train ticket into the city.

ATM

Although I start off with the intention of never using an ATM in China, but do, I take both Visa and Mastercard with me, if only for emergencies like irrational spending. Most ATM's have English options and are easy enough to use. They are not universally available in remote locations. You can also find small, local, savings banks with an ATM but may be limited to one of either Visa or Mastercard. Best practice is cash.

In general you will want to find a Bank of China, China Merchant's Bank or ICBC. These banks are friendly to foreign cards. ATMs have a limit as to how much money you can take out at once, usually capped at about ¥2,500 depending on the bank. If you are somewhere that the only bank does not have an ATM you can still get cash over the counter. It will take forever whilst they verify the authenticity of your card, so take a book. Something like Tolstoy's War and Peace. Expect to finish it.

Dogs and Bears

If you think Mrs. Grimbley, next door, has a big dog, then you haven't seen a [Tibetan Mastiff](#) 🐕. Stay away from them, especially if there are no Tibetans around. Everyone keeps one or two chained up in their back yard as guard dogs and they will bark furiously when you go anywhere near them. Sometimes, in small villages or at a remote Gumpa, they will be on the loose. Tibetans have a command word that these dogs respond to; I wish I knew what it was. So if you are on your lonesome stay away from them.

How to Get Bitten

Do nothing. In eight trips I have only been threatened once when on foot and once when riding through a small settlement on a motorcycle. When on foot a local called the dog off. When on the bike I went faster in spite of the bad track condition. In 2008 I met an American in Chengdu who had been bitten before the owner could call the dog off. He had come down to the city to be stitched up. A two day journey. You may have read that saying "good dog, sit" or lying down with a paper bag over your head might help. It doesn't. I can assure you that when the lips are curled back and the fangs are showing you will wish you had gone to the beach instead.

If you're not keen on biting back I suggest carrying at least half-a-dozen pebbles in an outside pocket and maybe a pointy hiking stick. A good idea is to get a rabies inoculation or at least a tetanus shot a few months before you arrive. If a bite happens, wash the wound with soap for as long as possible and get yourself to the nearest hospital for some treatment. Yes, you will have to pay, heaps. Sorry, did you say that you hadn't got travel insurance ?

TIP: Carry half a dozen pebbles in your pocket AND a Big Stick.

Dom Gyamuk

Also known as the Himalayan [Blue Bear](#) 🐻 or Snow Bear, Tibetan Brown Bear, or the Horse Bear. In Tibetan it is known as Dom Gyamuk and found on the eastern Tibetan plateau. One of the rarest subspecies of bear in the world, the blue bear is rarely sighted in the wild. The bear is actually brown and may have whitish patches on the upper chest.

TIP: If seen take video or pictures and upload to YouTube, then run. Don't wait for the upload to complete.

The Unmentionable

Due to the sensitive nature of this undisclosed subject, no mention can be made.

But we can talk about the toilet arrangements:



"Nü" is the character for a female; resembling a woman.



"Nan" is the character for a male; big build and head.

To avoid embarrassment choose wisely.

Hotels have better than normal toilet arrangements but it's highly likely, the further west you go, you will have to squat over a hole in the floor. After you have experienced some of the remoter public roadside facilities you will consider the description Primitive as a luxury. In the bigger Chinese cities visited I have found only one public toilet, in Chengdu, that you could consider clean and nice to be in. Airports are ok too. Mostly everything else is a horror. Forget about western style toilets. Think concrete trough, no cubicle doors or even a sink to wash your hands. There may be a tap somewhere. In places like bus stations and small towns there will be a woman outside collecting an entry fee. So make sure you have some coins or half ¥ notes on you when the call arises. They do not take credit cards or indenture bonds however desperate you may be.

If you're on a bus that stops for a break then follow the other passengers. It's permissible to stop the bus if you are double-desperate even if it is in the middle of nowhere. There will not be any bushes to hide behind. Several will get off with you, so follow their lead.

Toilet paper ? Forget it. Carry either fresh picked broad leaf tree leaves or antiseptic wet wipes. The wipes are very compact so you can carry a good amount. A sack of tree leaves might be difficult to manage on the plane. Wipes are great for the hands and face too and can be used for other, keep-me-clean, purposes.

I mention elsewhere to use an eatery that was busy. Whilst this increases the likely freshness of the food it does not mean that it's squeaky clean. [Diarrhoea](#) is a spectre that haunts many places. Take your own utensils and wipe them and your hands before you eat. When I suffer I drink lots of *clean* water and don't eat all day until nightfall. Take suitable medical supplies in case you get caught short. Extra underwear is always recommended.



Scenes from everywhere: This is a particularly nice one, almost clean, with partitions. Note the basket for used poop paper. © Others.

BACK TO TRAVELLING

Getting there Internationally.

You can get there by most means of transport but walking is not the preferred method unless you are raising money for charity. By bicycle is pretty hard going too, although I did come across an English Doctor, at Degé, cycling in stages from Vietnam to Europe. By boat is impossible, mostly due to the mountains and the lack of sea-side beaches. By air is the best choice.

Using Euro-American mainline carriers will cost you a second mortgage. Chinese airlines are probably the cheapest. Picking up a flight with one of their carriers, say China Southern or China Air, direct from your international airport, if you can, might be the most cost effective. Train might be possible too, if you're on the same landmass as China. You can catch the train from Beijing or Xining that heads for Lhasa in the TAR.

By car is expensive because you would have to hire one, including a driver. You cannot drive legally in China without taking the local driving test. There is no recognition of the International Drivers License permit. You could though, if you were so inclined, but not recommended, "Just do it". I did, but with a motorcycle bought locally in Yushu.

China's fleet of planes are all fairly new, with internal flights going into Tibetan areas; where they are building combined civil and military airports as if they might be thinking of starting WW3. Internal flights in China are relatively cheap but do not be startled if the plane you are about to board is run by an organisation called Lucky Air. I can attest that when I used them to fly from Dali to Kunming the plane had all the luck it required to reach its destination. In Xining you will find Ok Airlines. This is ok.

Your arrival in China could be at any one of a number of [International](#) ✈ airports. There are only local airports in Tibet except for a direct international flight into Lhasa's (LXA) * Gonggar from Nepal's Kathmandu (KTM) Tribhuvan airfield. Most of the airports are brand new. Incoming international flights will be into Beijing (BJS), Shanghai (SHA), Guangzhou (CAN), possibly flights from Germany into Chengdu (CTU) and flights from Finland and Japan to Xian (XIY). Hong Kong (HKG) hosts many international carriers. There are other International Airports but they mostly serve countries in Asia.

*Airport codes.

Of Interest: [Here](#) ✈ is a good internet PC web application to research flight routes throughout the world. Does not give prices but can uncover some good possibilities that you wouldn't have guessed. From Xining, China, there was a direct flight to Bangkok, Thailand, but only for two weeks during November 2015 ! Your route search results will give you flights codes and times that you can use researching a ticket price. It gives the schedule validation period too and the days of the week that the flight operates. The site is multi-language.

Of Interest: Tibet Airlines new 2016 route links the regional capital of Lhasa with Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi Province and Qingdao in Shandong Province.

Recommended reading for the flight: [Boole's](#) ✈ "Researches in the theory of analytical transformations, with a special application to the reduction of the general equation of the second order", printed in the Cambridge Mathematical Journal, February 1840 (Volume 2, no. 8, pp. 64–73).

Spoiler Alert !

$$\text{mes} \left\{ x \in \mathbb{R} \mid \Re \frac{1}{\pi} \sum \frac{a_k}{x - b_k} \geq t \right\} = \frac{\sum a_k}{\pi t}$$

Note: Be careful when using this equation at home. Your pet rabbit, or younger sibling, disappearing into an alternative dimension could be an unexpected, or perhaps desirable, consequence.

How to Book Your Flight

Online. Whilst your local travel agent can get you tickets to rather exotic places, where you can sip a Martini on the beach, you will probably max out your credit card booking to Kangding or Yushu. That's assuming they know where they are. And that's where the problem lies. They will suggest mainline carriers at ridiculous prices. Best bet is online for the international leg with someone like Skyscanner.com and the internal

Chinese legs with a Chinese travel agent such as Ctrip.com or Chinatour.net. With both these people you can pay with PayPal; nice and secure. I have used all of these websites to buy eTickets successfully. Using a flight agent based in China makes it easier to rearrange dates for internal flights. Make sure you have their contact phone number with you. Check that the really cheap international flight you are booking does not have a three day layover in Madagascar ! Book at least three months in advance to get best prices.

Choose flights that arrive in China early in the morning. That way you are more likely to connect better with the internal flights and save on overnight accommodation. When I head for Xining my flight arrives in Guangzhou (CAN) at 5:00 in the morning. With time to recover my baggage and stretch my legs I pick up the next leg within a couple of hours. A short stop at Xian (XIY) gets me to Xining (XNN) in the afternoon with easy travel into the city before dark. Same applies to Chengdu (CTU), the other route you might take.

Some travel site searches will not bring up Yushu (YUS) as a bookable destination. The airport was new in 2009 but after the major earthquake in Yushu in 2010 the bookability of flights to Yushu was taken down off the net. Except for Chinatour.net. After five years the flight is now becoming generally available again but I use Chintour.net for price and PayPal ability. Chinese airline schedules change each year, sometime in January, with the schedules being announced late in the previous year. Because of this you cannot book too far ahead on Chinese travel sites.

Luggage



• 45 litre Wheelie Bag covered in mountain dust at journey's end.



• Carry-on Day Bag with sleeping bag strapped beneath.



• Do not overload. You don't need to take a Tuxedo ☑ "just-in-case".

Currently (2015), on China Southern Airlines, you are allowed two bags in the hold **totalling** ☑ 23 kg plus your carry-on. This applies to international flights, at least from Australia. If you join their Sky Pearl Club they allow you a bit more. Double check your flight allowance. You don't want to be charged exorbitant dollars for being overweight. Women are allowed a handbag plus their onboard cabin luggage. If you are a man, or similar macho gender if an alien, take a shoulder man-bag too. You can get heaps in it.

Try to travel light. Avoid all those gadgets that you think you can't do without. You will soon discover that most stuff will not get used. Essentials only plus a minimum of "home comforts" and anti-boredom things. Extra socks and first-aid come before your X-Box™.

The two bags pictured above have been in use since 2008. They were my preference after down-sizing from a 75 litre backpack used on the Lhasa trip. When I started using a motorbike to get around I found the wheelee bag, at 45 litres, fitted comfortably on the back seat of the motorbike. The day bag I use is a bit small but it has to be strapped on top of the wheelee bag. A small shoulder man-bag completes the collection. I do, on the outbound flights, take a second bag, of around 40 litres, that allows me to accommodate a lot of the stuff that will eventually end up in the bike panniers once I've bought the motorcycle. This second bag and

the shoulder bag are low cost items. I leave them behind with whoever wants them at the start of biking in the mountains. The wheelie bag used to have shoulder straps that tucked away in a big pocket at the back. I cut these straps off so I could get the soft-foldable pannier bags in there.

Deciding Where to Go

The exact route can vary depending on what you decide you really must see. My focus on early trips was to see the book printing at the Degé monastery and the Meshö valley and later to meet up with friends in Yushu. Draw up a skeletal itinerary that you can further flesh out and explore in detail when you are on the ground. Make notes of possibilities.

I'm going to describe a couple of routes through Kham with variations that will take you to some interesting and sometimes wild places but always with inspiring people and landscapes.

THE ROUTES: MAPS

Most journeys start at Gyêgu in the North (Chinese: Yushu, also known as Jyekundo) with Xining as the launching point. Others at Dartsedo further South (Chinese: Kangding) launch from Chengdu. I'm going to set the primary goal as Degé which has a remarkable monastery (Gompa) that prints books ([Pecha](#)) by hand from hand carved wooden blocks. There is a secondary destination easily reachable from Degé which is [Dzongsar Gompa](#) ^{YouTube} and the Meshö Valley. A prolifically interesting place.

At this stage, without reference to maps, you are probably a little confused. I was, until I plotted the routes on Google Earth and Google Maps.



From Xining by plane to Gyêgu then Xiwu, Shiqu, Manigango to Degé and on to Dzongsar by minibus.



By bus from Chengdu to Kangding – Degé – Dzongsar

You could travel from Gyêgu to Dzongsar then on to Chengdu via Kangding without retracing your steps.

Paper Maps

There are many map publishers that purvey Maps-of-Tibet. Some on waterproof paper. In general they do not show much in the way of close detail or even contours. There are a number of maps that have conflicting name places and some inaccuracies like spot heights. You should buy one or two if only to get a feel for the topography of where you are going.

I've taken one or two general paper maps with me but have never used them seriously out in the field. Best of all are the Russian maps, mentioned below, in high detail with contours, buildings, footpaths and roads. They are with Russian place names but just compare with your English map or Google Earth. This is not really an obstacle, if they were in Chinese or Tibetan you wouldn't understand them anyway. Be cartographic.

Russian Topographical Maps

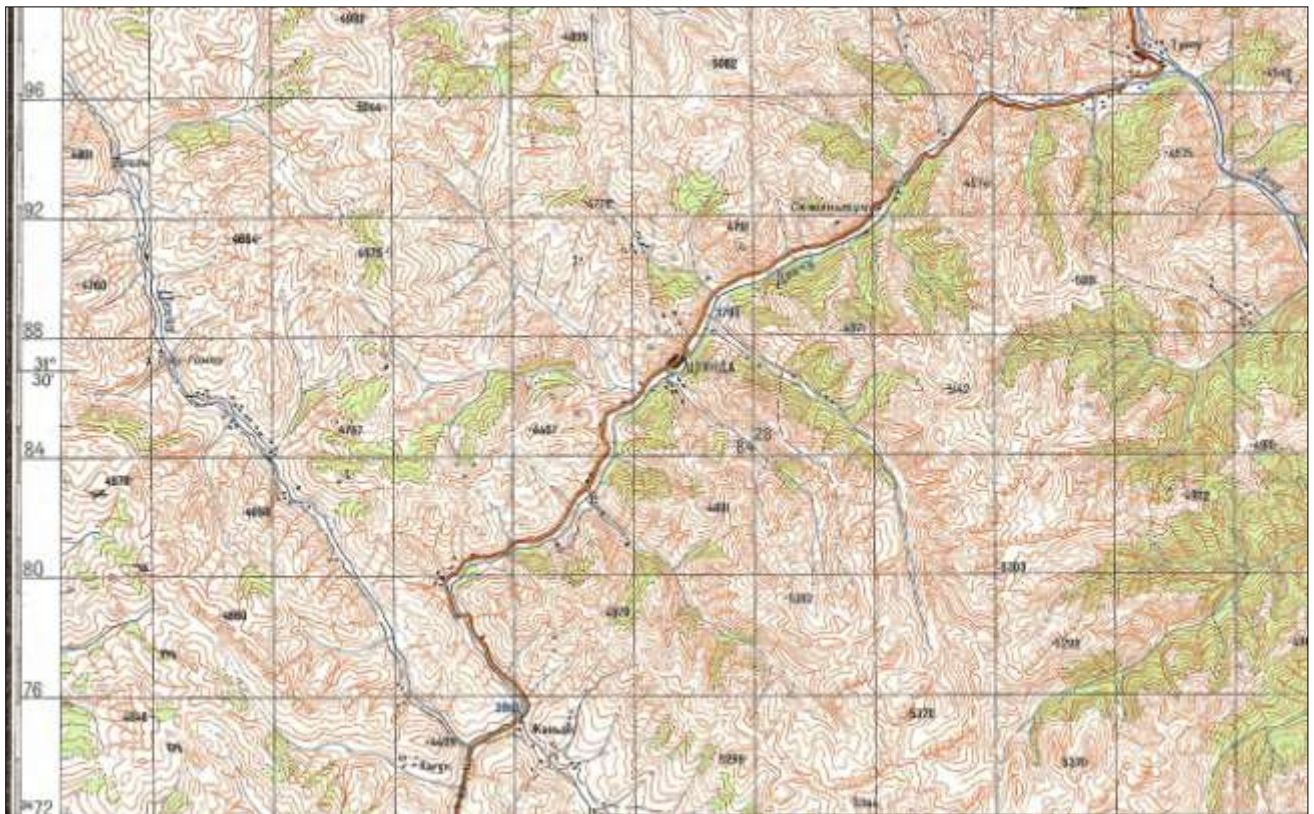
Here is what [Wired.com](#) has to tell us:

“ The (Russian) maps were part of one of the most ambitious cartographic enterprises ever undertaken. During the Cold War (1947 – 1991), the Soviet military mapped the entire world, parts of it down to the level of individual buildings... Given the technology of the time, the Soviet maps are incredibly accurate. Even today, the US State Department uses them to place international boundary lines on official government maps.”

An excellent map for research and out in the field.

These maps can be downloaded digitally. This is the [LINK](#) to download the map illustrated below which covers Degé and most of the Meshö Valley. This [MAP](#) is the adjacent one that will complete the coverage of Dzongsar. Less tediously you can buy the whole relevant set from [HERE](#) for a few dollars - 381 maps. Scale is 1:200,000. For easy viewing try them in MS Office Picture Manager.

Tip: Maps are in Gif format. Convert to JPeg and 200dpi for best results before printing. Files will be large.



From the Map Room: Russian topographical map of Jomda, across the Dri Chu from Degé, in the TAR.

These maps seem to date from the 1980's. Whilst they show major and minor roads and tracks, in the 30 odd years since, there have been many changes to highway conditions. Some tracks, shown as — — —,

could have been upgraded for vehicular traffic and some even paved. Some will remain as foot or horse tracks. There will be locations on these maps that show no road at all. The Meshö Valley for instance. But if you check on Google Earth you will find that a road has been pushed through Mesh up from the Dri Chu. If you are venturing off the beaten path you need to do your research.



I have a collection of 25 of these maps in printed paper form. I cover the back with schoolbook clear self-adhesive film to improve robustness and I give the sheet a [Map Fold](#). Their flat size is 56x42cm (22"x 16¹/₂").

This gives you greater confidence of where you are when travelling out in the wild. In combination with your GPS device and having previously notated and correlated routes and roads in Google Earth, Google Maps, Wikimapia and Bing Maps you can be, almost, certain of not taking the wrong direction and having to back-up 50 kilometres. You can also make notations on them as you go. In Wikimapia you can locate monasteries which I then mark on the maps, in red, as possible places for overnight accommodation or just to see their impressive architecture in the flesh.

New laws in January 2016 state that if you enter the PRC with a map that does not show the world as China sees it then you may be prosecuted. The Chinese make several major claims to territories that are hotly disputed by others. Mainly the guys that really own the places. China's pig headed attitude is that if "it's on our maps then it belongs to us" and will fabricate stories to justify their claim.



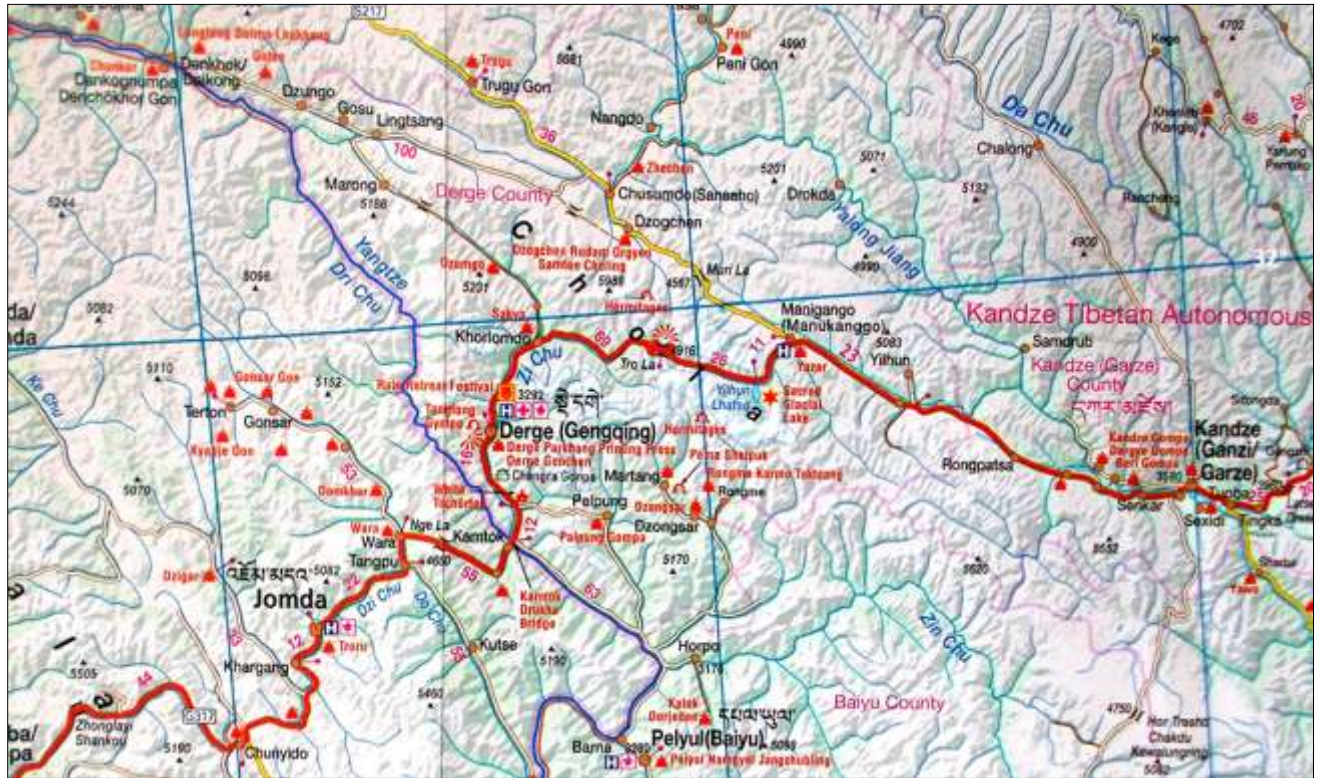
From the Map Room: Same area as the previous map but with GPS and distance annotations.

TIP: When marking a GPS position at the junction of two valleys set the co-ordinates about half a kilometre up the valley that you need to take. This will then serve as a direction finder. Useful if the topographic layout is chaotic.



My general map recommendation is [HERE](#). Gecko's Eastern Tibet at 1:1600 is the best I've found. Great detail but you may need to use a magnifying reading glass as you would on the Russian maps. It covers Chengdu across to Lhasa. Place names are Latinised. There's not a single Chinese character on it and with larger towns in Tibetan script as well. Not as

detailed as the Russian maps in terms of minor tracks and contours but does give some very good information like locations of hospitals, monasteries, river and mountain pass names and heaps of other stuff. My copy is dated 2014, so well worth getting for being reasonably up-to-date. It shows the new road to Dzongsar in the Meshö Valley. It seems to have been compiled with sympathy for Tibet; Kham and Amdo etc. are marked. There's also an insert map showing historical Tibet before the 1950 communist invasion. Under the new Chinese regulations this map would probably be classed as "prohibited". It has the Chinese / Indian disputed areas indicated only as a pecked line without the standard notes on being a disputed area.



From the Map Room: Gecko's Eastern Tibet, ISBN 978-3-906593-42-5 © Gecko Maps

Map of Checkpoints



© International Travel Maps This map, from ITM, shows lesser tracks more clearly although some of the spot heights are inaccurate. Like all the Western maps of Tibet it is not exhaustively accurate but it is adequate for a general overview. Printed on waterproof paper it would be a very good companion for the Gecko map.

TIP: The Gecko map is not printed on strong paper. You need some clear contact adhesive plastic, the stuff you cover books in. Cut some small squares of about 30mm (1¹/₄" for those of you with 12 toes to the foot) and stick them over the intersections of the map folds. This will considerably extend the life of this or any map.

GETTING THERE LOCALLY

Once you've arrived in China you'll head for either Chengdu or Xining. Both airports in these cities are a little out of town. Watch out for the bus that will take you into the city. By far the cheapest way at ¥25+. A taxi will put you back around ¥100+ but will give you the opportunity to go direct to your accommodation.

Where to acclimatise: Kangding town (coming up from Chengdu) at 2,500 meters and Xining city at 2,400m.

Of course if you normally live half way up Mount Everest then you won't have any problems other than getting your Yeti through immigration. It's recommended that you spend two nights at these locations, more to be comfortably sure. But that does not guarantee immunity. In Lhasa you can buy aerosol tins of fresh air at a local sports shop. Don't bother. I tried two of them and it made no difference. Do not be disillusioned by all this. As a cigarette smoker I had minimal problems so long as I stopped off at Xining. I come from a sea level location. The key, when you get to the second stage above, say 3,500 meters, after your initial acclimatisation at 2,500, is to take it easy, especially on the first day, until you get a night's sleep at the new altitude.

Air & Bus

Be aware at communication hubs of security. If a really nice person approaches you with offers of help ask to see their ID card. Don't give anyone, who is not a bona-fide official, your passport.

China Eastern Airlines and, luckily, Lucky Air both fly to Kangding (KGT). The airport is the third highest in the world at 4,280 m (14,042 ft) above sea level.

Most of the major Chinese and a few minor airlines fly into Xining (XNN) including Okay Airlines.

China Eastern Airlines and Tibet Airlines both fly to Yushu's (YUS) Ba Tong airport at 3,890 meters above sea level.

From Xining to Gyêgu there is a long distance bus service daily. The bus station is next to the main railway station at Jiangguo Road, Chengdong District, Xining City. The journey by bus will take 12 to 14 hours via Madoi. As of 2014/15 the whole rail/bus complex was being rebuilt.

From Chengdu you can also take the bus to Kangding. A four hour trip but if the tunnel avoiding the high pass is closed then it's an all day thing. They run about every hour from the [Bus Station](#) on the corner of Linjiang and Xinnan Road on the south side of the Jinjiang River bridge. The route our bus takes pursues the expressway south until Ya'an then turning north and passing through Luding. From there it's up an impressive river valley to the [Long Distance Bus Station](#) on the eastern edge of Kangding.

Be aware that there are some new internal routes being promoted, by the Chinese, into the Eastern TAR that will take you into "permit required" areas like Chamdo or Nyingchi. They will not tell you this in their announcement. They will not tell you that you cannot go. You are unlikely to achieve your destination even if you've bought a valid ticket online. But of course, if you have a Chinese ID card there won't be a problem.

Interesting Fact: There is a smoking room at most Chinese airports, though not in Beijing and some other larger internationals. You have to join the crowd of smokers outside.

Railway

Trains to Lhasa originate in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, Lanzhou and Xining. The line has been extended south from Lhasa to Shigatse and there are proposals to take it on to Nepal. In Sichuan there have been plans to push a rail link from Ya'an near Chengdu through Kangding to Litang and on to Lhasa since 2009. However, plans for advancing its construction are likely to have been impacted by China's dismantling of its Railway Ministry with debts of 2.66 trillion Yuan (\$428 billion) following the imprisonment of former Railways Minister Liu Zhijun for corruption. Plans for the Lhasa-Sichuan route was under the oversight of former Minister Liu, who was arrested in April 2013 on corruption charges and was sentenced to death in July 2013, commuted to life in prison. The former deputy chief engineer of the ministry was also given a suspended death sentence for corruption, according to Chinese media.

The [construction](#) of the primary sections of the Chengdu - Nyingchi - Lhasa rail began last year with the whole project not expected to be completed until the early 2030's.

Interesting fact: Xining to Lhasa railway construction. The Qinghai Taxation Bureau discovered 1,154 fake invoices worth 128 million Yuan (\$18.7 million). The invoices were used to evade taxes.

ACCLIMATISATION LOCATIONS

Xining / Yushu

Your initial acclimatisation should be in [Xining](#). There are things to [see here](#) like the Tibetan [Museum](#), [Markets](#) in the city centre, temples and other stuff. There's a neat [Buddhist Temple](#) not far from the central market.

For a place to stay try [Lete Youth Hostel](#); reasonably priced and frequented by backpackers and travelers from everywhere. At the bottom of their website front page is their address in Chinese that you can print out and show the taxi driver at the airport or in the city.

They serve western style light meals, have a bar/cafe, a pool table and laundry facilities. Free Wifi and you can pay a small fee to use a computer to surf the Net. Out in the street are a couple of places to eat and places to buy drinks and snacks. A fresh fruit [Market](#) is nearby. There's usually someone that can speak a bit of English and they will book a taxi to the airport if you require. The place is cleaned daily and comfortable; if you're not looking for five star hotel accommodation. They have rooms and dorms. There is a

lift, except for the stairs to the final floor. There are other hostels in Xining but this one is recommended from personal experience over five years. It's not only 2,400 meters above sea level but a further fifteen storey's high with smoggy views over the city and surrounding hills.

Lete Youth Hostel 📍, Jiancaixiang, Guoji Cun Gongyu #5 Building, 15th Floor, Xining 810000, China.
+86 971 820 2080 & +86 971 820 2090

Greenhouse Café, a short walk from Lete Youth Hostel, is great for western food and pizza :
古林房 810000 城东区夏都大道. [GPS 36°36'48"N 101°47'11.7"E](#) 📍

Yushu

There were a couple of places I could have recommended but they have been demolished after the 2010 earthquake. One was run by monks and had coal fired central heating. Yushu has changed dramatically since the quake. It's looking much more like a Chinese town than the quaint and interesting place it was before. None the less it's a primary jumping off point and is worth staying more than a couple of days, if only to buy a motorcycle.

Yushu Centre Hotel 📍 Address: 玉树中心大酒店 815000公主桥边文成公主庙和勒巴沟谷口交界

Sanjiangyuan Hotel 📍 21 Zhaqu South Road, Yushu, Qinghai. 三江源酒店21扎曲小號路。青海玉樹

There's a hotel [HERE](#) 📍 that I have stayed in, post earthquake. People very helpful and one young man had a little English. It's on the top floor with some interesting shops on the mezzanine. A sort of mini shopping plaza for things Tibetan.

Others: [Booking.com](#) 📍

Chengdu / Kangding

Taking this route you need to acclimatise in Kangding, Chengdu is not high enough, but you will probably spend a couple of nights in Chengdu, either going into the mountains or coming out. There are options here that I can recommend and have used many times.

Interesting Fact: The geo-military headquarters for the TAR is in Chengdu.

Holly's Hostel

Between the [Wahouci Temple Gardens](#) 📍 and the [Tibetan Quarter](#) 📍 of Chengdu is [Holly's Hostel](#) 📍 tucked away in an interesting little back street. A great place to be. Lots of travellers from all over and a rooftop garden where you can enjoy an egg and bacon breakfast whilst sampling the smog that's always extant in Chinese cities. The Tibetan Quarter, around the corner, is worth a few hours just wandering the streets. You can buy everything Tibetan from a giant statue of Buddha to a Pecha and jewellery.

People at the front desk have always been helpful and usually more than one of them has a "little bit" of Chinglish. Wifi and computers available as are ensuite rooms. Don't expect piping hot water though. There's a paid-for laundry service and they will book a taxi if you ask. On the rooftop is a restaurant with a selection of western style fare. Out and around are numerous places to eat and shop for snacks, including a great Tibetan restaurant next door where you will find a Buddhist Monk or two partaking of momo. Try the Yak and potato pie.

Traffic Hotel and Hostel

This place also goes under the name of Communications Hotel. Fairly bland but with English speakers. At the front door is a little travel agent that can book you local tours and tickets. If you walked past the main door to the back of the hotel there used to be a nice Hostel, but it's moved. See below.

The benefit of the [Traffic Hotel](#) 📍 is the Long Distance [Bus Station](#) 📍 where you catch the bus to Kangding, it's next door. Ticket counter on the left as you go in. If you are coming from Kangding the bus terminates in Shiqi

Street around the corner. You can grab a taxi here to Holly's or stay at the Traffic Hotel. Places to eat and buy snacks abound, including Dicos fast food.

Other:

Sam's Hostel and Guesthouse, 130 Shanxijie Street, Chengdu. +86 136 7817 7217

[Sim's Cozy Guesthouse](#) is another choice.

Both of these may be able to get your permit for Lhasa if that's where you're heading.

[Traffic Hostel](#) now at #26, Desheng Road, Qingyang District, Chengdu.

Address (in Chinese): 成都市青羊区德盛路26号交通青年旅舍

Kangding:

As you step out of the glass doors of the bus station onto the main street you will be accosted by numerous accommodation touts. Choose one. Ask the price. ¥50 buys a bed in a box room. ¥100+ buys a bed in a slightly larger box room with maybe a primitive ensuite, not necessarily with hot water. ¥200+ may get you heating too. There are all grades of accommodation around the bus depot and places to eat that will warm the hearts of backpackers on a budget.

TIP: You can get your Chinese entry visa renewed in Kangding. Check with Zilam Hostel.

[Zhilam Hostel](#) would seem to be the only hostel run by Westerners in [Kangding](#) and worth a visit as is the Black Tent Hostel: Yanhe East Road, Kangding County 626000 康定黑帐篷背包客栈 626000 沿河东路.

Or try this list on [Trip Advisor](#).

THE ROUTES IN DETAIL

By now you may have realised that this guide is focused on getting to Degé and beyond. For the more erudite traveler there are other routes and destinations equally rewarding. It's possible to come from Deqen in Yunnan from the south or Ngaba north-west from Chengdu but both not so quite so direct. So, now that you are acclimatised, let's push onwards and upwards.

All of the routes I have traversed have involved travelling by public bus. Some have included hiring a minibus or private car with driver for large parts. For three trips I've bought a motorcycle locally and used that for the bulk of the journey, usually catching a bus out of the mountains and leaving the bike behind as a donation to somebody (Tibetan) who's helped me.

Minibus drivers, and they are everywhere, will attempt, and succeed, in charging you significantly above the local rates. If you can negotiate then all the better but the issue is there will be few if any alternatives. It will not be so painful when you realise that their idea of a small fortune translates into peanuts in your home currency. Be aware, though, that maybe where you are asking them to take you may lead to difficulties with the authorities if you are spotted. Especially if checkpoints are involved. At a checkpoint with two or three guards, a little inducement can sometimes suffice to lubricate access. When there is a whole bunch of them that's where difficulties could begin.

TIP: If you are approached by a senior officer he may ask if you've been to India. He will be trying to establish if you are part of the evil (in Chinese eyes) "Dalai Lama Clique". Say "no, I don't like curry", even if you do and have.

A lot of the minibuses in town will be going out to set locations; satellite villages within half a day's travel. Others are available for random hire. Just make your request known and the word will be passed around. All fares cash only.

Long distance public buses will need to be booked, when you've finally found the ticket office, three or four days in advance. Hitch hiking is more than frowned upon by the Chinese authorities and may lead to problems if you are caught near the bigger cities like Chengdu or Xining. Take a shot and ask at reception in

your hostel, in either Chengdu or Xining, if anyone is going your way. Reception can also book your bus tickets.

Taxis around town are cheap. ¥6 to ¥10 will get you a few kilometres. ¥50 to ¥100 will get you half an hour's travel or more. In smaller places the bigger fees are negotiable. Just make sure that what you are paying for is either the single or the return trip. If you're lucky the driver may give you a semi-guided tour of whatever monastery, lake, glacier or mountain you are headed for.

Insert selection of maps 1x each route...

#1. XINING TO DEGÉ VIA GYÊGU, SHIQU & MANIGANGO



Xining

After acclimatising in Xining you will either take the one hour flight to [Yushu](#) (YUS) Ba Tong airport or go by long distance bus. The bus station is next to the main railway station at Jiangguo Road, Chengdong District, Xining City. 青海省西宁市城东区建国路（靠近西宁长途汽车站）The journey by bus will take 12 to 14 hours via Madoi. Options are overnight sleeper or day trip. If you haven't booked accommodation in Yushu then take the overnight that arrives early morning. This will give you all day to search out a bed. Flying is about an hour and arrives midday. Get a window seat, the view is spectacular. Make a note of where the bus station is in Gyêgu. If you are going onwards to Manigango or Kangding by public bus this is almost certainly where you will board. Pre-book.

Gyêgu (Yushu)

If you have flown then there is likely to be a bus from the airport into Gyêgu. Takes about a half hour and cost should be fairly trifling. Taxi will be around ¥80+ and the driver might be able to recommend a hostel / hotel. If the driver speaks a bit of English then get his phone number, you have struck gold. He will jump at the opportunity to be your personal chauffer and guide you around the things worth seeing.

On Tuesday, April 13, 2010 Gyêgu was devastated by a 7.0 magnitude [earthquake](#).

Yushu has things to offer. Watch for the gigantic statue of [King Gesar](#) as you drive into the centre of town. If you miss it you were probably asleep. The size of it is astonishing. Be astonished. You will also see, high on a spur of mountain, the local main Monastery (Gompa), Dondrub Ling, in Gyêgu.

Must do: Around 6 kilometres East of Gyêgu on Qionlong Road / Highway G214 at Xinzhai Village [玛尼堆新寨村](#) is the massive area of [Gyanak Mani Stones](#) and a couple of Temples. The Chinese list this site as the world's largest, as it may well be. There should be somewhere you can get a cup of yak butter tea nearby (traditional Tibetan tea made with yak milk, yak butter, tea and salt).

Interesting fact: The British in India attempted to sell the Tibetans "English" tea. The venture failed. The Tibetans were too enamoured of Chinese tea that they had been consuming for centuries.

The [Lebkhog](#) valley and its historic rock images are worth a trip for Buddhist academics. The Chinese have constructed a picnic area at the mouth of the valley and a new road was being built over the pass to Wengchen's Temple when I passed there. A round trip from Gyegu to here and then on to Princess Wengchen's Temple should make a good day out. And you could include the Gyanak Mani stones on the way.



Scenes from Gyegu: Stupas and prayer flags outside Wengchen's Temple © L.J.Bonner.

[Princess Wengchen's Temple](#) is definitely worth a must-do visit. An unassuming roadside temple, approached through an impressive prayer flag bedecked gorge. When you walk in you feel the awe inspiring power of time and location. [More](#)



Scenes from Gyegu: Princess Wengchen's Temple © L.J.Bonner.



Scenes from Gyêgu: The 2015 Gyêgu Horse Race Festival on the Batang grasslands. © Zhashi.

The Jyekundo (Yushu, Gyêgu) Horse Race Festival, at Batang, is in July. After the earthquake in 2010 it had been cancelled but this year, 2015, it took place. Be aware that if the area is under “political tension” it may well not be held. The festivities are out on the grasslands at [Batang](#) 📍, not far from the airport or else at the [Gyêgu grounds](#) 📍 west of the town. The biggest horse racing and [yak racing](#) 📍 festival in Tibet, Tibetan people all over the Kham region come to camp on the Batang grassland, singing, dancing and enjoying the unique cultural festival. Early morning hangovers are easy to come by but not recommended at this altitude.

If you are looking for the Yushu [airport](#) 📍 on Google Maps you will find it marked but in the wrong position. Google have marked the old WW2 military airport. The new one is further west by about 8 kilometres. You can't miss it. If you arrive before it opens in the morning you will find a machine-gun toting guard at the compound gate.

Yushu is 97% Khampa Tibetan. Women in traditional dress will be a frequent site and if you are lucky you may see a Khampa man in full regalia. Buddhist monks abound as do the P.A.P, the People's Armed Police.

Moving on:

If you are going to opt for public transport there is a long distance bus that follows this route going to Kangding via Manigango and Garzê. When you arrive in Yushu find the ticket office and book a seat. You cannot just jump on. Your ticket will be a few days ahead so spend the time exploring around Yushu.

Shiqu

An alternative, somewhat more comfortable and flexible, is to hire a mini-bus if you wish to stop off at anywhere inbetween. The centre of Yushu is the place for this or anywhere you can find a congregation of mini-buses. If your accommodation is run by Tibetans then ask if they know of someone. The mini-bus drivers will only take you as far as [Gyugar Town](#) 📍, where you can stay the night and organise the next section to Manigango. There are two nearby monasteries here. [Sershul Monastery](#) 📍 is a few kilometres before Gyugar. This area east of Yushu has multiple names; Sershul, Dzachuka, Serxu, Shiqu, སེ་ར་ཤུ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ། or 石渠县 and sometimes even 石渠縣.



Scenes from Shiqu: The early morning road with a hint of snow in the sky. © L.J.Bonner.

The amount you will have to pay for the trip to Shiqu is a number that you will not know until after you've paid it. If you can afford it, and have the luck to find someone willing, you can get a private car that will take you all the way to Manigango for around ¥1,000. A cost that may well be less than breaking the journey into stages. By car from Yushu to Manigango will take you all day, starting at dawn and arriving late afternoon. Be aware that there is a checkpoint outside [Zhiwu](#) 📍, usually unmanned at the early time you will pass through it. And another just before Shiqu that may well be manned and require lubricating to slip through. All depends on the temperature of the current political atmosphere.

There is accommodation in the centre of Shiqu where their star rating equals the sub-zero night time temperature; minus something. Outside there will be a location where half-a-dozen minibuses will congregate. Indicate that you want to go to Manigango and someone willing will step forward. Negotiate if you have the capability. I paid ¥700 for this section, having paid ¥500 to get here from Yushu.



Scenes from Shiqu: The Town. © L.J.Bonner.



Scenes from Shiqu: The bird cage heater. © L.J.Bonner.

An eatery on the corner where the busses stop serves up welcome rice and stir fry veggies. As always, establish a price before you order. Be aware that as dusk sets the town empties and dogs roam the streets, sometimes in small packs. It's pretty creepy.

The next part of the journey will take you through some awesomely wild and lonely country and over the [Ngamba La](#) at a height of 4,700m and, towards Manigango, the lesser [Mukri La](#) at just over 4,000m. Wikimapia now shows a fresh built tunnel under Mukri La. The Chinese are building military-grade road transport infrastructures everywhere. It rather takes away from the adventure of crossing mountain passes to reach your goal.



Mukri La and the Trola Shan. ©LJBonner



If you are lucky you may see some [Chiru](#), the endangered Tibetan Antelope, on this route. © bluemoonfund.org



Tibetan Gazelle - Goa 📷 © Gobind Sagar Bhardwaj indianaturewatch.net

Manigango



Scenes from Manigango: A Two Horse Town. © L.J.Bonner.

Described, in the Lonely Planet Guide, as largely a one-horse-town. But one time when I passed through there were *two* horses scrumaging around in the hotel bins out front. So, some progress had been made in urban development. The place to stay is the “Hotel” where the Chendgu - Chamdo and the Kanding - Degé busses stop, along with all the minibus drivers touting for passengers. “Degé , Degé ” or “Ganza, Ganza” can be the cries heard outside the hotel.



Manigango Minibus.

When you arrive at this transport hub you will probably want to eat. The hotel has a restaurant just inside the front door to the right of the reception desk. Don't be shy. Go straight into the kitchen at the far end right, attract someone's attention and point at the food you want. It might be a good idea to collect a few pics on your phone of favourite, or at least edible, meals that you've had on your journey so far. If you are going to stay here the night, be warned, it's fairly primitive but enduring. Heating is not available in the rooms and the bathroom is at the far end of the corridor. Prices might be negotiable here.

It would be worth staying a couple of nights if you want to see the [Yilung La Tso](#) (Chin. Xinlu Hai) lake and glacier (check out the pictures on Wikimapia). It's a stunning alpine style lake with a large number of Mani carvings and prayer flags that will impress. Hiking here is a good possibility but make sure you're well equipped and provisioned; there's no rescue helicopter to be had. Let one of the hotel staff know you want to go and a driver will approach you. The cost of the trip is entirely negotiable. The driver will be thinking "new digital TV". You will be thinking "cheap iPod".

Your next task is to get to Degé. Do not decide to wait for the public bus. Very likely it will be full when it arrives. The best recourse is getting a seat on one of the minibuses that are outside the hotel. The normal fare was (2014) ¥100. The driver will ask for ¥500. Expect to pay, if you can negotiate, a bit more than locals. Try looking wistfully in a southerly direction and say "Hmm... Ganza" as though that might be a preferred place to go. Could possibly help in getting that seat to Degé at not a too extortionate price.

Yartsa Gunbu



In this area, and elsewhere, particularly Yushu, Tibetans collect an aphrodisiac fungus called [Yartsa Gunbu](#). Translated from Tibetan, this means "summer grass, winter worm," although it is neither. It's the sub-soil dwelling of a larva of the ghost moth that has been corrupted by spores from a parasitic fungus called *Ophiocordyceps Sinensis*. The fungus devours the body of the caterpillar, leaving

only the exoskeleton intact, and then, in spring, flowers in the form of a brown stalk that breaks out from the caterpillar's head. This process happens only in the high alpine meadows of the Tibetan Plateau. It has considerable resale value to the Chinese and others and represents a major portion of income for those that collect it. The current buy price for Caterpillar-Fungus is a hot conversation topic.

The Trola Range in Eastern Tibet

The Trola Shan by Himalayan standards the peaks are not that high (the highest are about 6,000m), but this glaciated granite range is incredibly spectacular with spruce clad valleys, alpine lakes, streams meandering through picturesque meadows, long remote valleys, breathtaking mountain summits, as well as two huge monasteries ([Palpung](#) and [Dzongsar](#)) and numerous small monasteries, temples and meditation retreats scattered throughout the region.

You will have seen glimpses of the Trola mountain range coming down from Sershul when you crossed the Mukri La, that's if you didn't use the tunnel. You are now about to drive over it to Degé. Unless, of course, the tunnel the Chinese are building is finished, then you won't see a thing. Purportedly to be over 7klm long and currently the longest, highest, road tunnel on the planet (Chinese sources). It will take all the fun out of crossing a 5,050m pass that has more than spectacular views going up and coming down the other side. On the other side you will meet with the first trees that you've seen in a while. Pine forests are the norm in this area. It is a traditional pre-Buddhist practice at the top of a mountain pass for Tibetans to throw slips of [Wind Horse](#) (Rlung ta) printed coloured paper into the air and shout "Hla gyal lo!" (the Gods have won!).



Scenes from Degé : The Korldo stupa, modelled on the Great Stupa at Boudanath, Nepal. © L.J.Bonner

As you descend out of the high mountains into the Degé river valley there is an interesting Buddhist stupa at [Khorlomdo](#) (Chin.: Keluodong). The design appears to be based on the great Buddhist stupa at [Boudhanath](#), just north of Kathmandu, Nepal. The public bus will not stop but if you're in a hired minibus the options improve.

Degé

Degé lies in the steep sided Sug Chu River valley, a tributary of the Dri Chu ([Chang Jiang](#) or Yantze River). The Sug Chu flows south through the town in its own concrete canyon and is somewhat grubby to see, to say the least. The town is almost wholly Tibetan. Though being so near the TAR border there are plenty of Chinese military around. They have a logistics base on the southern edge of town. When I last passed through (2014) they were rebuilding the G317 into something approaching a highway. There was major construction work from here all the way down to Gamtog on the Dri Chu. How that will affect the town I'm not sure. The valley here is so narrow the road will have to punch through to be viable.

Woodblock Printing in Degé

Woodblock printing was known as early as the eighth century and was introduced to Tibet soon after. Tibetan book (Pecha) printing is done by means of hand carved woodblocks with the image or text in relief. The [Windhorse](#) prayer flags, which can be seen flapping in the wind everywhere, are also block printed. Books and the rolls of prayers and sacred texts in chortens and prayer wheels are either block printed or hand lettered. The fine grained wooden block is first cut to the size of the book page with the lettering then carved in relief. A sheet of paper, made from certain tree roots for archival purposes, on which the image is to be reproduced, is applied face downwards to the woodblock. The block face having first had ink applied to it. The paper is rubbed on the back, leaving a clear impression of the original text or drawing. The printers at the [Parkhang](#) in Degé work, remarkably fast, in pairs, one inking the other placing the paper. When the Pecha is printed in red it denotes a religious text. In black something more mundane like mathematics. If in gold, perhaps on black paper, then it has a particularly high value in Buddhism.

More to do...

Immediately uphill from the Parkhang is the site of the Palace of the [Kings of De Rge](#) (འཕགས་པོ་འབྲུག་པོ་པོ་པོ་) , now a school. The kings of Derge had a 1,300 year lineage. Behind that, further uphill is [Degé Gönchen](#) , a Buddhist Temple complex of some antiquity (14th Century). Destroyed in the [Cultural Revolution](#) it was rebuilt in 1988 and later. Still worth a look. The Parkhang, on express orders from the Beijing communists, was spared the same fate because of its cultural importance. It contains significant amounts of printing blocks for a wide variety of Tibetan cultural and Buddhist books.

The best pastime in Degé is to roam the streets and the little market by the rivers lower bridge and watch life in a small Tibetan town unfold. You will see pilgrims pacing it out on foot heading for Lhasa or someone leading a pack horse through town to the Gompa.



Inside the Parkhang, Degé ©

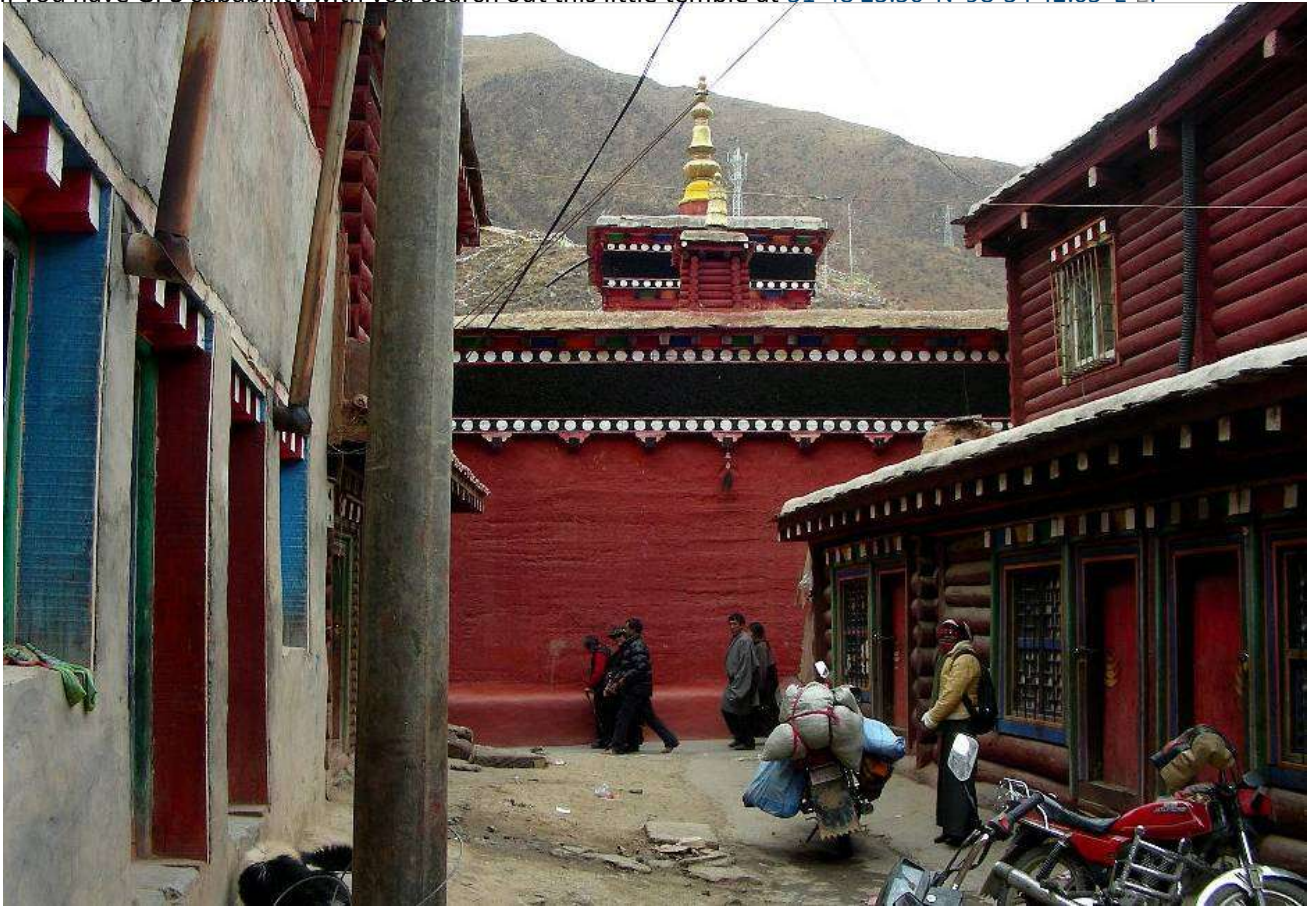


Circumambulation is done three times, always clockwise.

You can get onto the roof of the Parkhang where there is a little stand alone temple to the Buddhist goddess of mercy, Drolma, also known as Tara or in Japan Kwanon (Yes, your camera is named after her, Canon).

Little Secret

If you have GPS capability with you search out this little temple at [31°48'23.50"N 98°34'42.65"E](#) .



Scenes from Degé: Buddhist Temple, hidden among the houses on the hillside. © L.J.Bonner.

When coming down hill from the Parkhang there is a small alleyway on the left about half way down and before the cross-road. It runs along the lower side of a concrete multi-storey building and leads across a stream at the back, turning right up hill among the very close built houses. It's no more than a path and the building we are looking for is a bit less than 100 metres up from where you cross the water. You can't miss it, it's on a flat section of the hillside. Extremely popular with the locals, especially in the morning, who circumambulate it three times chanting Om Ma Ni Pa Mi Hūm and twirling their prayer wheels. It is tiny inside but the atmosphere is awesome. If you want an authentic flavour of what Degé might have been like 300 years ago then this is the spot. Well maybe, apart from the mobile phones everyone is carrying and the motorcycles. Not sure if they allow random foreigners inside but there is a bench outside or better still join the walkers around the temple for three circuits; there will be interaction. I was allowed access, after a donation, with a monk I had met in Manigango (2011) who got himself and me onto the public bus to Degé in spite of me previously being told there were no seats available. Taking photographs in Buddhist temples is generally forbidden. If you arrive at the door wielding and waving a camera you most certainly will be told to take-a-hike.

There is a post office in Degé on the upper main street. I sent a postcard back home from here but it never made it. There is also an ATM (2011 - Visa only) in the arcade above the market. It was in a small savings bank. I completely failed in using it. Instructions were in Chinese and my intuitive guessing was just that; a guess. I later realised that I was using Mastercard plastic ! By the time you get to Degé there will be better services. My thinking since then is always take cash with you.

Where to Stay

There are probably a number of places you can stay but maybe only one that can accept "foreigners" legally. Degé Hotel, or Que'er Mountain Hotel, is across the upper river bridge from the main street where your bus

will stop. Turn immediate left once over the bridge, don't go up the hill. If you are in a minibus tell the driver "binguan", this is where he will likely take you. It's a very comfortable and large place run by mainly Tibetans. The lounge area has heaters that make the plastic bamboo wilt and they will serve you tea at a table with a smile. After several days journeying through thunderous terrain that Viking Gods would feel at home in the warmth of this place is a pleasure.

You are unlikely to meet anyone who has a command of English so sign language, a picture of a bed on your phone and reference to your watch and the number nights you wish to stay, is a prerequisite. Prices are nothing special and it's doubted you will be able to negotiate. When night-time temperatures are at minus something the water in your room will be cut off overnight (pipes freeze). Do not mention "hot" water. It only causes embarrassment.

Where to Eat

Anywhere. There are many little "hole-in-the-wall" eateries in town. Try one that's busy and you won't go far wrong. If it has high backed chairs it is not the right choice. Tibetan towns do not come to life before 10:00 a.m. so make other provisions for breakfast. As a quick fill momo dumplings, hot, warm and nutritious, are a good choice. Momo are Yak meat, sometimes with vegetables, wrapped in a soft steamed pastry.

#2 DEGÉ TO DZONGSAR

Located in a remote valley south of Degé the Meshö is one of the most beautiful valleys in Kham. Including main branches, the valley system measures well over a 130 kilometres with the Meshö Chu (river) running its length. The area is well populated, almost exclusively Tibetan, and is a fertile oasis in the Trola Mountains. 500 years ago the valley was wrested from the hands of [King Gesar's](#) 🏹 generals by the [Kingdom of Derge](#) 🏹.

The public bus to Dzongsar is supposed to leave from the White Stupa in the northern section of the main road [HERE](#) 🏹. I found the Stupa but no one had enough English to tell me anything more so I opted to hire a minibus at ¥200 to take me to the Meshö Valley and Dzongsar.

Gamtog



Traveling from Degé down to the Dri Chu used to be a bad pot-holed experience but by the time you get there the road will have a new bitumen surface as part of the G317 military capacity upgrade the Chinese are doing. Linking in with the tunnel under the Tro La as a fast through route from Chengdu.

Across the river is [Gamtog](#) 🏹 in the TAR with two bridges, old and new, leading to a checkpoint on the other side. You cannot cross into the TAR here without a permit. You will not be given a permit even if you say *Please* very nicely.

Meshö Valley

The Meshö valley with its snow-capped mountains, sacred caves and lakes is the main agricultural area of the Degé region. Turning into the valley from the Dri Chu road you go through a gorge with the rushing waters of the Me Chu draining from the Trola Shan at the head of the valley keeping you company. If you've ever seen the old black and white movie "ShangriLa" then you will be familiar with the experience that you get when the gorge opens out to pine wooded valley sides. It's like entering a forgotten land. As you progress towards Dzongsar, the center of things, you'll pass villages and hamlets that are purely Tibetan. The valley opens out to present a vista that is worth all the effort of getting there.

Treking

If you are into trekking then get a copy of *Trekking Tibet* by Gary McCue. The book is enthusiastic about this area and give details of a number of treks you can undertake. Not included in the book is the possibility of trekking through the foothills of the Trola Shan to Manigango with horses and a guide. You will have to ask around for volunteers and it's probably something you would reserve for a summer visit.

Dzongsar Gompa

Around two-thirds of the way up the valley, 40km, is [Dzongsar monastery](#) which was founded 1,200 years ago, in 746 AD, as a [Bön](#) monastery. Destroyed in 1958, by the Communist Red Army, Dzongsar Gompa is now entirely rebuilt and wears the red, gray, and white stripes of the Sakyapas, perched high on a steep mountain ridge top. Dzongsar has its own Shedra (teaching university) where the teachings of several different Buddhist sects are practised. The Gompa is world renowned as is the current Rinpoche [Jamyang Khyentse](#) whose base is in Bhutan.

In the village below the Gompa you will find shops and restaurants and places to stay. They do not exhibit any signage so a few enquires as to which house door is a shop will have to be made. There are also a couple of window-in-a-wall retailers. They can easily be identified by the little crowd of monks hovering around them. You can't really see what they have for sale so comms here will be an issue. Be creative.

Traditional Crafts

The Meshö Chu valley is full of vibrant Tibetan culture. Many traditional crafts are practised and have been revived. Weaving, Sewing, Metal Work and Casting, [Wood Carving](#), Jewellery, Pottery, [Thanka Painting](#) and not least it has a [Tibetan Medicine Hospital](#) and manufacturing facility. There are some delightful short videos on YouTube made under the auspices of the [Kham Film Project](#) ^{YouTube} If anywhere on this planet should have the name of [Shangri-La](#) then this is it. Well, almost. Sometimes the Chinese cut off the internet and phones when they, the Communists, get edgy. I can't imagine paradise not having Internet.



Scenes from Dzongsar: Crystal Lotus Cave



Scenes from Dzongsar: Pema Shelpek © Others

Buddhist Places

There are many Buddhist places and hidden [Gompas](#) in side valleys here. There are Retreats and Meditation Centres; Mani Stones and Stupas abound. At [Rongme Karmo Taktsang](#) there are meditation

caves. At the high end of a small, prayer flag bedecked, valley there is [Pema Shelpok](#), the “Lotus Crystal Cave”. At an altitude of 4,750 metres is [Siling Lake](#) of significant local importance. On YouTube watch video [HERE](#). [Ripün Gompa](#) is a [Bön](#) monastery with around 15 monks in residence.

Interesting fact: The attire of the Buddhist monk is based on the ancient Greek toga adapted for the cold.

Dolphu



Scenes from Dzongsar: The top of the Meshö Valley is predominantly peopled by nomads. © Others

Trek to Palpung

If you can hire some horses there is a good trek across the [Hak La](#) (4,521m) from close by Dzongsar to [Palpung Gompa](#), equally famous and impressive (Wikipedia [HERE](#)). There is a hand printing establishment there that used to be equal to the one in Degé. It once housed 100,000 hand carved printing blocks; however more than a third were destroyed by the Communists during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960's.

The trek distance is only 20 kilometres but it is a full days walk. Best to take a guide with you, there are bears known to be on the upper heights. Do not pay extra to meet [Goldilocks](#). Utpala [Guesthouse](#) in Dzongsar will be able to help, ask. The path starts at a [small bridge](#) in the village opposite the Shedra.

How to Get There

There is a public bus from Degé. Alternative is hiring a minibus which is probably best since the bus only operates on alternate days. The road takes you from Degé down to [Gamtog](#) on the Dri Chu where you will catch your first glimpse of the forbidden TAR across the river. Following the Dri Chu for a bit over 40 kilometres the road turns into an inconspicuous gorge which after a short distance opens out into the Meshö valley and mountainside pine forests. The bus will take you up to the village at Dzongsar.

Where to Stay



Scenes from Dzongsar: Utpala

Kham Utpala [Guesthouse](#) ☑ in Dzongsar appears to be very new. They look as if they are Meshö Valley centric and run by Tibetans in connection with the French. There used to be, and maybe still is, a hostel next to the Shedra in the village. Uptala is across the river from it.

Ask around the village, especially where you find somewhere to eat. Stop someone and show them a picture of a bed. If you have brought good karma with you then you may be offered a home-stay. If not, you may have to cuddle up to a Yak overnight.

Tip: Electrical power in the valley is supplied by a local Hydro-electric Power Station.

Eating

Highly recommended. Life gets a bit slow if you don't keep up the flow of protein. There are eateries and places to buy stuff in the village below the monastery but none of them have any signage. If you've got this far then that won't be a problem. Approach a local and imitate using chopsticks and a rice bowl for best effect. It invariably it induces enlightenment and leads to something almost edible to eat. You need good teeth for Yak meat. A bowl of chunks of it comes with a sharp knife. Do not ask for [Pâté de Foie Gras](#) ☑ as misunderstanding often ensues.



Hole in the wall shop at Dzongsar.

My Story

What better to describe this section of our expedition than to give you my journal entry for 2010. My previous two trips, 2008 and 2009, had been truncated long before I had gotten to Degé. This year success was on the horizon. Let's take a peek over the hill...

“ That evening, in Degé, after the customary meal of something in spicy soup, I packed my bags in anticipation of travelling to the Meshö Valley and the Dzongsar Gumpa. I had found a driver and minibus and

hired them for the trip. This was the *raison d'être* for the whole journey. Tomorrow I might spend three to six hours in a minibus to get there, I didn't quite know how long, but that was unimportant and compared with getting to Degé over the Trola it was a mere trifle in time.

We set off from the hotel with the driver and his mate. The road very rocky most of the way. In fact the only sealed road was for the first 15km out of Degé. That was pot holed too. Following the Dri Chu (Yangtze) after reaching Gomtog at the bottom of the Degé valley, we picked up a man with a sack. When we turned into the Meshö Valley he got out a short distance in. I think this guy was a local Sharman. The sack turned out to contain antler horn. He disappeared across a little footbridge with the narrow path continuing up and into the mountains.

We arrived uneventfully at Dzongsar around noon with the village below the monastery almost deserted. A little perplexed we discovered from almost the last lone soul that there was a meeting further up the valley. We left in hot pursuit of the location and found it. A large grassed space between villages. Tibetans, en mass, listening to a Lama over loud speakers. Everyone, except the smaller kids, as quiet as a mouse.

Scenes from Dzongsar: Tibetans of the Meshö Valley dispersing after their "prayer" meeting. Many years ago I guess all these motorcycles would have been horses.

During the meeting a young Tibetan came up and spoke perfectly good English to me. He was fresh from an eight year education in Nepal and was the grandson of one of the valley's leading figures. He had a motorbike and car and stayed with his grandfather at the monastery. His future seemed to be to take over the Tibetan medicine hospital and manufactory. During conversation with him his sister, call her Drolma, arrived and sat down beside us. She offered me hospitality at her home. She stayed with her uncle and an extended family a little way up the valley from Dzongsar at a village called Xia Le. My Garmin told me I was at N31.664531 E98.933271 You can look it up on Google Earth and see the exact house I stayed in. This is it.

Scenes from Dzongsar: The house I stayed in.

Water was drawn from the river nearby with a yoke and two big buckets. In spite of there being several villages upstream I never suffered any ill effects. My room, a bit like the Aussie entertainment room, was top floor. The left two windows. A bit cold and draughty. There were a few chinks in the woodwork that let in the breeze but two dooners and three blankets kept me warm at night. Too warm. I awoke dreaming I was taking a hot shower only to find that I was too hot and sweating profusely. The room smelt of pine wood and had a deliciously decorated ceiling and a side room that was the household Buddhist Shrine.

I was treated like an honoured member of the family. Even granny insisted I sit on the best cushioned bench. The food changed. It was now yak meat and chunky potatoes in a veggie soup with rice separate. Spiciness was now optional. The Sichuan influence had gone. Bread was evident too. Not the sliced processed kind but home made with litres of Yak butter tea if you wanted it.

The following morning Dromla decides that we will visit grandfather and Dzongsar Monastery. Three of us, the third being Drolma's younger brother, troop out to the four wheel drive and spend a bit of time scrapping the frost off the windscreen before we go.

Scenes from Dzongsar: View from the house ablutions balcony over the front entrance. A bit crisp and bracing when you've just got out of bed. You tend to limit the bits you wash to face and hands. Even that's a shock to the system but you have to do it otherwise people frown on you. The alternative is to go back to bed and miss breakfast.

As a result of visiting grandad at Dzongsar I get to stand on the monastery roof and view the valley at large. This is the culminating point of mission achieved. The photo below is a little bit of a panorama but it doesn't do it justice. Perhaps there were emotions that enhanced the grandeur of the valley. Standing there in the crisp morning air after a fresh overnight snowfall was magnificent. The roof is made of compacted earth over heavy wooden supports. Guess it must have some insulating qualities. Note the layer of stones.

The next few days consisted of wandering around the monastery and the main village. Sometimes with Drolma and sometimes alone. They used to have the internet here in the Meshö valley but I was told the Chinese cut it off two months ago. Part of the communications lock down. The anniversary of the Dalai Lhama escaping the clutches of the Chinese was fast approaching. This is the anniversary that sparked the disturbances in Lhasa in March 2008. The same anniversary that prompts the Chinese to close the TAR from the end of February until the first week of April every year.

Scenes from Dzongsar: Scenes from Dzongsar. Monks debating. Part of their Buddhist training. Scenes from Dzongsar. Building of a new temple. The walls are tamped earth not concrete. Scenes from Dzongsar. Scenes from Dzongsar. Below: Dzongsar sits on a mountain spur above the main village.

Scenes from Dzongsar: Above: This is me having just climbed up the very steep 45° hillside path from the village. I honestly didn't think I would make it. At over 3,600 metres there is not a lot of surplus oxygen. The nearest western style hospital is a 4 day road journey.

Scenes from Dzongsar: Don't ask me why. I don't know. The tongues are red felt.

Scenes from Dzongsar: Above: Primary school funded by the French. They teach in Tibetan unlike the main Chinese school back in the village. Kids are playing basket ball.

Scenes from Dzongsar: School's out.

Dzongsar Gompa is 1,200 years old and goes back further as a Bon religious site. Bon was, and still is, the animalistic original religion of Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism has adopted much from it. Dzongsar is an important learning centre that attracts monks from all over the country. Through Drolma I got to see some of the inner sanctum's of the place. Her grandfather is a very respected leader in the valley.

In the late 1960's Mao's Red Guard army came through and partially destroyed Dzongsar as it did 6,000 other Buddhist establishments throughout Tibet. These pics show some of the buildings that have not yet been adopted back into use. The rebuilding only started in the 80's when the Chinese eased their stranglehold on Buddhism. What did Mao say to the Dalai Lhama? "Religion is Poison". These photo's show the practical application of that statement. Now Mao is mummified in a Beijing mausoleum and religiously revered by ardent communists and party members.

Scenes from Dzongsar: Mani Stones piled high.

Scenes from Dzongsar: These three were thrilled when I asked if I could take their photo. They were walking around the Stupas reciting the inexorable "Om Ma Ni Pa Mi Hūm" for the benefit of mankind in general.

Scenes from Dzongsar: Drying racks for Barley hay.

Scenes from Dzongsar: The Me Chu.

Scenes from Dzongsar: The Meshö Valley wanders into the Trola Shan rising to over 6,000 metres.

All good things must come to an end. Drolma arranged for me to take the bus back to Degé . Another uncle of hers operated the bus so he saved me a seat right up front against the windscreen. The bus was packed; solid. Not just all the seats but the floor too. Passengers and baggage. Half my luggage was on the roof the other bit in the boot. I don't know what the licensed carrying capacity of the bus was but I am certain we exceeded it by 100%. There is only one bus a day, so best to maximise your profit. Cost; about AU\$6 for four hours travel.

Leaving Dzongsar: If you wish to charter the bus for your next office outing the phone number is on the windscreen.

Now, the bus does not stop for any personal requirements. So on arrival in Degé I was bursting. There is only one public toilet in the place and that was far away. Following the habit of the area it is permissible to relieve yourself anywhere that your personal modesty and sense of embarrassment will allow. I made straight for the nearest concrete post ! So did several others. A couple of days in Degé . Enough to find the bus office and buy a ticket to Kangding; three days away at an enjoyable cost of AU\$30. The actual journey was another matter.

Up to a dark and cold 5 a.m. morning to catch the bus. The cold water has been turned off so that it does not freeze in the pipes. The hot tap works but I would not insult the temperature by calling the water hot. A lick and a spit, collect the gear together, and out the door. The receptionist is fast asleep but the door is unlocked.

The bus is easy to find, it's the only one. The street is almost pitch black and so very quiet. Grey shadows weave among the blackness. The eatery across the road the only place that shows a guiding light into the density of darkness that is pre-dawn. My ticket tells me I've got an up front seat behind the driver with good window views.

We travel the same road, there is only one, back to the Trola Pass at 5,050 metres. A bit of snow around as we ascend to the summit, then it gets a bit difficult. The driver stops to put snow chains on with a sigh of relief from several passengers, including me, as they escape the bus and water the pine trees. Now in full daylight we hit the exact summit only to find a long line of traffic backed up and stretching away down the other side and round a bend. For the first hour I think it's just that someone has broken down ahead. This I think is fun because it lets me take photos at a place I wasn't expecting to stop.

Scenes from the Trola Shan: From this pic you can see that I am standing at the equivalent height of two-thirds of Mount Everest. I do not ever expect to get higher without attempting Everest's summit.

Scenes from the Trola Shan: I think the highest road pass in the Himalayas is 5,600 metres. This is 5,050m.

After some time we started to move and it was stop, wait, start, stop, wait, start all the way down. It finally became obvious to me that the problem was wind drifted snow holding back the lead vehicles. It took us seven hours to get over the pass. We arrived in Manigango at about 5 p.m. having left Degé at 7 a.m. and we still had to get to Ganzi for the overnight stop where we arrived around 9 p.m. At Manigango I met a Dutchman who was cycling from Malaysia through to Europe via Western China and the Silk Road. Some people do strange things. Me, I stick with the easy stuff. From Ganzi onto Kangding the next morning.”

#3. CHENGDU TO DEGÉ VIA KANGDING & MANIGANGO



A two day journey

Chengdu

Passing through Chengdu is covered [HERE](#) for places to stay and transport.

Chengdu is a typical Chinese city with a population of 4.334 million in 2000. The air, though breathable, lacks a certain “mountain spring” freshness.

The [Wahouci Temple Gardens](#) and the nearby [Tibetan Quarter](#) are worth a wander around. Through an impressive gateway to the right of the Wahouci Temple is [Jinli Street](#) (锦里古街), very touristy and very Chinese. Immediately through the gate is a Starbucks café then various shops and stalls of equally various interest. Worth a walk though and the coffee is good. There are a few food vendors and restaurants to abate your starvation but probably not the cheapest in town.

Lhasa from Chengdu

If you are set on going to Lhasa then the Chengdu to Lhasa train, T22 and T23, departs every other day and takes about two days. Cost for a soft sleeper is around US\$200 (2015).

So you will need a permit. The Tibet Tourism Bureau issues TAR entry permits for all foreign visitors. All the necessary documents must be sent to Lhasa for review by the public security bureau, the foreign affairs office and other government departments. The permits will then be delivered back to the travel agent in the city where the applicant intends to start the trip. Best bet is to shop around online first and see which travel agent has the best empathy for you then meet them on the ground. You can also fly to Lhasa from here.

Do your research on this. The regulations have proven to be very volatile over the last few years especially since 2008. There was a time that you had to belong to a group all of the same nationality. Currently (2016) you can belong to a group of one. Facts at the time of writing may not be the facts tomorrow.

Interesting Fact: You can fly to Lhasa from Deqen (DIG) airport in Yunnan, but no longer without a permit.

Chinese tour groups are notorious for rushing you from one photo opportunity to the next, never leaving you enough time to linger and feel the place. Often tour guides are Chinese migrants from eastern cities who simply repeat official Chinese communist government propaganda, while Tibetans are relegated to unemployed spectators in their own land.

Under the project banner of "Make Lhasa Enjoyable" (2016) the Chinese are building three dams on the Kyichu (Lhasa river) to form artificial lakes for the benefit of (Chinese) tourists. You can see where this is heading. For only ¥25 you will be able to hire a [Pedalo](#) for an hour. But it *will* be decorated with Buddhist symbology, therefore making it culturally acceptable. If there is a God... please come and help us!

In the same theme a ski resort is to be established outside Lhasa at over 3,600 meters. This undoubtedly will attract even more Chinese tourist but does have big plus. We may get to see Tibetans performing in the Winter Olympic in 2022. Perfect.

Kangding

Located on the T'o River and also called Tatsienlu, Dar-tshe-mdo, Dardo and Dartsedo, Kangding has, historically, always been a melting pot and a trading interface between the Tibetans and Chinese. Capital of the old Kham Chakla Kingdom, tea was a popular commodity that the Chinese traded for sturdy [Tibetan Horses](#) 🐎 and the medicinal natural resources associated with [Tibetan Medicine](#) 🌿.

Early last century the British had a trade agent stationed here for many years. One of them, [Erik Teichmann](#) 🇩🇪, who was an explorer-cum-special agent, brokered a peace deal between the warring Tibetans and the first Chinese republic around 1912. Which is a pity because the Tibetans were winning. They might have thrown out the Chinese from Kangding.

TIP: Snow can be expected in late October, heavy rains in the months from June to early September.

Not quite such an interesting place. Populated largely by Chinese but a significant Tibetan element still colours the place. Sinuously crammed in between some pretty steep and lofty mountains just about everywhere worth seeing is only a shortish walk. There are three temples not far from each other, Ngacho Gumpa being closest to the bus station, with a Catholic Church and a Mosque in the city centre. The town square is a busy meeting place during the day and in the evening the stage for community dancing in a distinctive style. ATM's doubtless abound in the centre so that you can shop-till-you-drop in the Tibetan run shops. Places to eat are almost limitless. Outside Dartsedo is Er Dao Qiao, a hot spring resort and Muge Cuo National park containing Alpine lakes, forests, mountains, trekking opportunities, hot springs, Tibetan Buddhist rock paintings and grasslands.

Moving on from here you can catch a bus directly to Degé from the bus station where you arrived or [HERE](#) 🇩🇪 if you cheated and flew in. If you have time there are stops on the way that you could spend a couple of days

at each. Mini busses are an option if you are hopping from town to town and can be found at the town square and elsewhere.

Tagong



Tagong (塔公), also known as Lhagong (ལྷགོང་།), a short hop from Kangding, is a dusty town that doesn't have a lot, but in the grasslands are stunning gems. Tibetan nomads wander the area on horseback and motorbikes. The Lhagong Monastery is on the road out of town to the north and walkable. A little further on, with the road bearing to the right, is Minyak Serkyi Chörten a newly built monastery, Pel Lhagong in Tibetan, amidst the grasslands with a great view of the impressive Mount Zhara Lhatse at 5,820 metres.

There are a few places to stay and to eat. Walk around and see what eatery is popular with the locals. Horse riding and trekking are all viable options to spend your time in Tagong and can be organised through Khampa Nomad **Ecolodge**, and others, around 10km outside Tagong.

Across the river bridge to the south-west from the centre of town T junction are Chinese built houses, clustering around a power sub-station, that are the product of the Chinese 'Clearing the Nomads from the Grasslands' policy. A little further out in this direction is a Nyingmapa Shedra (Buddhist College).

Travelling north from Tagong you will pass through **Bamei**. This used to be a lunch stop-over place for the Degé bus and there was usually a checkpoint on the Kangding side of town. The police have never boarded the bus here when I've gone through. It seems to be a bus check-in point as the driver always gets out and does some paperwork.

TIP: Taking photographs or staring at the military or police is taboo in China. I did just that in Bamei, long and fixedly enough for it to agitate a young Chinese officer sitting at the checkpoint table. He came storming across the road to the bus with a big black stick in his hand but couldn't get in. The driver had closed all the doors when he got out. His senior officer motioned him to return. Later at the lunch stop a Tibetan came up to me and said Thank You in English. But that's all the English he had so not sure what for. But I have an idea.

The road onwards to **Ganzi** passes through Tawu and Luhuo the only places you might call a town. At Tawu there have been 4 self-immolations over the last couple of years in protest against the Chinese occupation. The latest, at time of writing, on 15th April 2014. At **Luhou** you turn off for **Larung Gar** towards Sertar, 135 kilometres and three and a half hours, or more, drive north. **Larung Gar** with a population of over 10,000 monks and nuns makes it possibly the largest religious institute on the planet.

Ganzi (Garzê)

The central town of Garzê (Ganzi, or Kandze) sits in a valley at 3,367 metres, surrounded by the Trola (Chola) Mountains. Garzê (Ganzi) is the capital of Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and is mostly populated by Tibetan Khampas. It is 387 kilometres from Kangding and Google Maps says it will take you 9 hours 16 minutes by car, 89 hours if you walk.

The 15th century Kandze Monastery, home to **Gelugpa** monks, was destroyed by the Chinese and rebuilt over the years. Today it displays a combination of old Tibetan and Chinese architecture. You will notice this too in houses as you travel north out of Kangding. The further north you go the Chinese architectural influence declines.

The bus station yard has a **Hotel** on one side and the Degé - Kangding bus stops here briefly. A busy place with plenty of shops and places to eat. Ganzi too has been the location of protests against the Chinese in the past.

Manigango

Manigango, Degé and Dzongsar has been covered previously in the Gyêgu to Degé section [HERE](#) 📄.

SICHUAN-TIBET TEA HORSE ROAD



Scenes from Yunnan: The Tea & Horse Road © Others

The ancient Tea Horse Road was a trade route from Yunnan and Sichuan to Tibet. People in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces exchanged tea for horses with Tibetans. The Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road appeared in the Tang Dynasty (A.D.618 - 907), starting from Ya'an in Sichuan to Lhasa via Luding (卢定), Kangding (康定), Batang (巴塘), and Chamdo (昌都), extending to Nepal, Burma and India. The complete length of the Sichuan-Tibet road was over 4,000 kilometres.

WHAT TO TAKE

First be aware of what you can and can't take onto the plane. Most of below you might want to put it into your check-in luggage. Even that can be a risk. Changing planes in Xi'An they had me open my bag three times looking for what they were calling a "Baby Battery". They gave up after three, in exasperation.

The information below is given with a Winter Camping on a motorcycle preference. Using a motorcycle to get around frees you to go almost, but not quite, anywhere you choose.

Quote: "Good luck is what people get who prepare well. Bad luck is for the lazy" (adapted from Amundsen).

Navigation



A good dedicated GPS device with accompanying paper maps. Large and small scale. See [HERE](#) 📄. Take a small compass too. I've used a Garmin Oregon 450 to date. Has touch screen and memory card capability. If you have the time and dedication you can plot routes in Google Earth, save them as a KMZ or KML file and load them onto your GPS device. Research it. There are a couple of bits of software you will require. Some from Garmin.com. Do not take your cars GPS mapping thingy. It will not give you turn-by-turn instructions in this neck of the woods. Neither will Google on your phone.

First Aid

Pack the usual holiday first aid kit. Band aids, diarrhea tablets, rapid pain killers, indigestion tablets, something for Cold and Flu. Hand Cream and Lip Balm are recommended. The air is very dry. Sun cream with maximum UV protection and UV resistant sunglasses are highly recommended.

I also take water purifying tablets but have not used them extensively. Travelling in winter has the advantage of the nasty stuff being less virulent due to the cold. I throw out all the outer packaging to save space which allows me to get everything into a clip lock plastic box. Keep the instruction panel from the pack. A good addition is a spray-on-plaster. A small aerosol spray that will help chips and cracks in the skin heal quickly and keep them clean. It dries as a protective covering. It's painful when sprayed over a small raw cut and makes you jump up and down quite a lot. Recommend tetanus and rabies jabs. That also makes you jump up and down.

Barley Frog

This is a remedy from an early book of Tibetan medicine. People suffering from joint problems, swellings and the like were often thought to be afflicted by water spirits called Lu (a Tibetan cousin of the Indian Naga). In this ritual, barley flour is molded into the shape of a frog. Then a cavity is made in the top of the frog with a stick, and a special ointment prepared in the cavity. The ointment is then applied to the afflicted person's body. The barley frog is then checked to determine the success of the ritual:

Taken from a 10th century [Dunhuang](#) manuscript.

“ Lift up the frog, and if a golden liquid emerges from under it, they will definitely recover. If it is merely moist, then they will recover before too long. If there is only meat with gluey flour, they will be purified by the end of the illness. It is not necessary to do the ritual again. If there is only gluey flour, break it up and do the ritual again ”. © Sam van Schaik, [earlytibet.com](#)

Clothing

Take a layered outfit. Afternoon temperatures, in winter, can be quite warm but be aware that even in midsummer snow storms are possible. I wear T-shirt, thick cotton long sleeve shirt, sleeveless jumper, an open knit long sleeve woollen jumper, with a long sleeved sweat shirt over all, a pair of jeans with lined track pants under. On top of that I have a goose down long jacket, neck tube and fur lined trappers hat. Semi-insulated gloves are a must, too. Try Thinsulate™ ones. The time of year I go the temperature is pretty crisp (February / March or October / November). No need to bring your beach shorts or that little black party dress. Keep colours subdued. Do not draw attention to yourself by wearing a fluorescent yellow outer jacket. You are trying to blend in.

You will need a different outfit for the plane journey. Wherever you originate from internationally it's likely to be very warm compared to up on the Tibetan Plateau. You need something lightweight for the summer rain.

General Stuff

On my first trip to Lhasa I took a 75 litre back pack plus a day bag. What a mistake! I took everything in it. It felt like I had a petrol generator to charge my phone battery. At Dali, in Yunnan, on my way home, I planned to stay at a hostel half way up a mountainside with no road access. Luckily, it was in a national park and there was a [Chairlift](#) most of the way up. But the last couple of hundred metres of footpath were a nightmare with a steep set of old steps to negotiate before I reached the front door. I was so exhausted that I had to lift my backpack from step to step in front of me. Be warned. I now go with a 45 litre wheelie bag and a small day pack. Anything I can't get into these and a man-bag doesn't go.


Mini-Torch and spare rechargeable batteries. A lot of places have daily power outages, usually after dark. Get a battery charger. Not a cheap one that takes forever but something that will charge 4 AA batteries in a

couple of hours. Failing that some T-Light candles. Electrical sockets here will take Australian plugs, but everyone else will have to take an adapter. Multi plug adapters are as cheap-as-chips on eBay.

At Nangcheng in 2013 I managed to find a place in the centre of town for ¥50 a night. It was a strange set-up. Store rooms on the ground around three sides of a covered compound and bedrooms upstairs with no windows, mostly no power and a TV that didn't work.

If you have money to splash around you can get a folding solar device that will charge AA's and you can plug your mobile into its USB port. You can get Battery Banks too that will store enough power to start a car, but of course they have to be recharged too. On my last motorcycle trip (2014), I took a 5 volt two USB charging device from eBay that powered from the motorbike's 12 volt battery. Had to wire it in myself but worked great for my phone and my iPad.


A cigarette gas lighter might be good in a tight spot. Yes, I know you don't smoke but when you are out on the mountainside admiring the local glacier and your driver has disappeared a little wood fire might be useful to huddle around. It's perfect for lighting the candles too.

A *Swiss Army Knife* , or a simple folding pocket knife, can come in handy especially if your horse has a stone in its shoe or you need to cut open the pack of pickled chickens feet you've bought to nibble on the bus. Yes, I have eaten them, accidentally. I take a mini tool set with me too. That gives me a bit of confidence in making minor repairs when my motorcycle and me are a little bit away from anywhere.


Female gender, human and alien, will need to reflect on gender specific stuff to take. I have no experience of this so cannot make recommendations. Everyone will need soap, face cloth, small hand towel, toothbrush, toothpaste and all the other bits and pieces a civilised person thinks is absolutely essential.

Emergency Food for Winter




There is an *Australian*  heat-in-the bag survival food that I take with me. It's supposed to last until almost the end of time, maybe, and can be eaten cold as it is pre-cooked. Not exactly compact but the beef stew and veggies variety is delicious. Take something. Enough to get you through a day and a night. Even if it is just compact nibbly energy bars that would be useful on that long bus journey. Better than pickled chickens feet.

It's essential to keep eating in the cold. Your body generates its own heat but only if you give it fuel to convert to a warm inner glow. High energy stuff. This is particularly important just before sleep. Nights can be terrifically cold. Better to miss breakfast rather than the evening meal. Keep your hydration up with plenty of clean water. Best practice; Keep moving, Keep eating, Keep drinking. Breathing is quite useful too.

Good fresh apples can be found almost everywhere, even in the remotest of places and in winter too. Bananas as well but they tend to be a bit hard, not ripening fully at high altitude. Edible though as a change. If you are in a Tibetan eatery buy an extra round of *Momo*  dumplings and put into a plastic bag. Usually filled with ground Yak meat and maybe vegetables, they will last more than a few days if it's winter weather and they are very filling.

Tsampa

A traditional Tibetan victual, *Tsampa*  is difficult to eat. It is roasted barley flour. Mixed with Yak butter and salty tea in a bowl. You use your fingers to do the mixing and eating. I usually get it all over the floor.



Tsampa: Roasted barley flour. Just add a dab of Yak butter and Tibetan tea. Mix with fingers. A very bland taste but nutritional.

Water

Needless to say, but I will say it anyway, take a personal bottle for drinking water. Something robust that won't split the first time you drop it. If you are sensitive about water quality a personal filter device might be your preference also. This is what I have used for a couple of trips. It's small, about 150mm high, and perhaps only good for filling your personal water bottle. Has a replaceable ceramic filter and can be found on eBay and elsewhere for around \$40. Search for military water filter.



There are other devices like a filtering Drinking Straw too. You can filter puddle water with these things, if you're desperate.

Keep your personal water bottle inside your sleeping bag at night to stop it freezing. If you fill a water bucket for use in the morning you can be certain that it will be 90% ice when you wake up and require a large rock to batter it into meltable pieces.

Shoes

It doesn't matter what you buy, cheap or more, fashionable or not, or even if they are pink, though the guys, and macho aliens might want to consider wisely on this one, the key goal is comfort. Your feet will be cold whatever you buy unless it's some fit-for-the-Arctic-Circle boot. So take your time in buying new, if you have to, and get the right fit for your feet. Consider what socks you will also be wearing when you are up in the mountains. Wear them when you are buying new footwear for the trip to ensure perfect shoe fit. Synthetic fibre dries quick when you wash them but wool will be warmer. Think about layering with two pairs of socks.

Head Gear



Everyone knows that your brain leaks intelligence. Mine has been doing this for many, many, years. I tried wrapping it in silver foil on the advice from a web page, but it was a lie, it didn't work. More pertinently your head leaks a terrific amount of heat. Conclusion is, get a good hat. Not just a [Beanie](#) but something more furry. Pictured is the Russian army issue called a Ushanka, also known as a trappers hat. The flaps can drop down to keep your ears warm and it's great for wearing whilst you sleep. Mine came from this

[website](#) in Canada; try [HERE](#) in the U.S.A. Surf for best price.

CAMPING

The assumption here is that you are stealth camping and you will buy a motorbike. Lugging all this gear around on foot, with a giant backpack that you could drive a small car into, will be a real heart stopper at high altitude.

Tent



From the Campsite: The five star accommodation known as the Hilleberg Soulo, twin wall, 2.4kg packed.

If you are going to do camping, whether winter or summer, at this altitude, you will need to have something of almost expeditionary quality. You cannot afford to skimp or make-do on this. Here's my choice: a [Soulo](#) tent from Hilleberg. It's twin wall, 4 Season, free standing, light weight, and quick to put up. I have the one person version. The two person tent, identical but bigger, is called [Staika](#).

I can't be too enthusiastic about this tent. So easy and fast to erect. Lay the tent out flat, insert poles into pockets, raise the tent and clip it to the poles. All that's left to do is attach the vent cover on the top and put in a few pegs. Ten minutes work. The inner tent is self-erecting. It doesn't need guy ropes in windless conditions. If it's not quite in the right location lift the whole thing and move a few metres to a preferred spot. Comes in three colours. Buy green or brown for stealth camping. Found that it was cheapest to buy direct from the Hilleberg website.

I camped, in November, at times well over 4,000 metres and with the sleeping bag I had the whole system was near perfect. Even the size. I am 6ft 2ins and there was still room at one end to put my boots and I could sit up comfortably with room too for a smallish day bag by my side. The vestibule has room for a bag and space to do a bit of food prep with a stove. Negatives: there is no built-in hot water plumbing system !



Scene from the Campsite: "Home" at 4,050m. The white bag on top of the bike contains my supply of Momo dumplings.

Campsite

Anywhere you're comfortable with. The only formal campsite I have ever come across in this area was a little north of Kangding. From a bus window in winter it looked awfully forlorn with leafless trees and brightly coloured plastic picnic tables. I think it was meant for Chinese summer tourists. Do the usual thing and choose a flat spot that's not low lying. I go for an east facing, western side-valley to take advantage of the rising morning sun. This is crucial for the motorcycle, as you would have read earlier. Carry a compass.

My choice is a spot that's out of sight of the road but not too far that if it snows overnight it becomes difficult to get back onto the track. I get out of sight off the road so that any passing Chinese authorities do not take an interest in me. Avoid being too close to settlements or villages. Roaming Tibetan mastiffs are to be avoided. Yaks are ok.

A small running mountain stream is nice if your water supply is getting low. Avoid overhanging rocks or next to the biggest boulder you've ever seen. This area is prone to the occasional [earthquake](#) 📰. Dig a hole and bury personal human waste. Clean up the campsite when you leave. Don't forget to mark the campsite in your GPS device for later reminiscence, storytelling and exaggeration.

Sleeping Bag

Get a *minus* 15° Centigrade as a minimum comfort zone, perhaps more if you are going midwinter. A draw string hood to it adds to comfort and warmth, even when wearing your hat in bed. I have found that synthetic fibre bags don't last for more than one extended trip. Stuffing them in a bag, in-out, in-out, seems to deteriorate them. Down appears to hold up better for extended life. You will also need under-bag insulation to protect you from heat loss to the ground. This is important. Get a self-inflating-mattress, even if it's a three-quarters length one that will save you a bit of space, it will give you that needed heat block. Do not buy a yoga mat unless it is extra to the above.

Other Warmth

Some of you might take one of those orange and silver reflective Emergency Blankets with you. I did too, but the one time I needed to use it, on a bitterly cold sub zero night in an inappropriate tent, it didn't work. A good idea is to get a blanket, that you can buy for a couple of dollars, in what you would call a department store, in just about every Tibetan town. Great for on the bus crossing a mountain pass and something extra for the bed when the concrete walls of your room are colder than the outside air temperature. Strap it to your day-pack when travelling. If you find a Yak wool one then even better.

It is also possible to buy, when you are there, a sleeping pad that's stuffed with sheep wool. About 50mm thick, single, and will far exceed your self-inflating mattress as ground insulation. They are very cheap and can be discarded at the end of the road. Not always easy to find though. Try in Kangding, Yushu or Degé. Buy it after you've completed all your air travel, it's a bit bulky to take on the plane. Always bring a self-inflating mattress in case you can't find one.

The Volcano



With a twin wall tent there is a little trick to keeping it very slightly warmer than the sub-zero outside. Take a small tin can, with a pull top, that a standard T-Light will fit easily inside. Empty the contents and consume if edible. Clean and drill a ring of 8x5mm holes around the base. One of these holes might be 10mm so you can light the candle inside through it with a match. The ring of holes should be the same height from the base as the T-Light is tall. This allows for the wax to be spilt inside the tin can without spilling through the holes when it's upright. Wrap a piece of copper wire around the base in the groove where the side meets the bottom of the can. Make three loops in the wire to form legs. These can be folded down and raise the thing off any groundsheet below. It also increases stability. The tin doesn't get hot. The airflow through the holes ensures this. As the air enters the bottom it's warmed by the flame before ascending and raises the temperature in the space between the two walls to some (very) small extent. The inner tent suffering less heat loss. The T-Lights last about five hours. Consider proper ventilation when in use. Also great for warming the hands and signaling to passing alien spacecraft to beam you up.

Cooking

My first five trips I relied on "eating out". For my bike trips, that some of entailed camping, I bought a multi fuel stove that worked off petrol, diesel or kerosene. Since I was riding a four-stroke motorcycle I used petrol drained from the fuel tank. The stove is pump action. The pressure forces fuel through a pipe that pre-heats

it for a toasty roar. Do not light the thing in your tent. Until the pre-heater pipe warms up the initial flame is a bit scary. Practice with it in the back garden. Do not accidentally set light to Mum's washing line. Be safe.



Around the Campfire: From eBay and elsewhere at around \$70+. There are a couple of different styles.

Do not take a gas canister stove, you will be unable to get refills. Same with a spirit or alcohol stove. If you are thinking of a little trekking wood-stove, that burns twigs and stuff, it's not a good idea. Large parts of the landscape is treeless and bush less. You could follow the locals and burn dried Yak dung in it but carrying a pat of dried dung in your back pack may result in your fellow travelers suddenly deciding to go in a different direction. Without telling you.



Nangcheng 2013: Loaded Motorbike.

Do not cook inside your tent or use a stove to heat the inside of it. You will suffocate. Cook outside or in the open doorway. If you need heat in the tent at night then you've got an insufficient sleeping system. In Degé I managed to buy some sheep wool lined under trousers for only a couple of dollars. Hmmm... toasty. If you have the ability to heat water with you then think about a hot-water-bottle.

Also think about hiring a Yak to cart all this stuff around.

Carbon Fibre cutlery is nice and light and strong but I found the knife useless for Yak meat. Another reason to take a small sharp pocket knife. Fingers come in useful too. Avoid using chopsticks in Tibetan areas unless you are offered them. The supposition being that you are in cahoots with the Chinese if you bring your own. The traditional Tibetan eating implements are a knife and fingers.

There are other bits and pieces you can take. Something to boil water in, a cup, sewing kit, folding bucket, heaps of AA batteries, a [glockenspiel](#) 🎵, the list is endless. Don't overdo it. Travel light and compact. To my detriment I sometimes haven't in the past. The bigger the travel bags you have the more the temptation is to fill that last little bit of space with something that is almost, but not quite, completely irrelevant.

THE MOTORBIKE

Part of the advantage of travelling by motorcycle is that, to the very casual observer, you look a bit like a local returning from town, overloaded with supplies. This is distinctly useful when you are trying to look intensely blasé as you motor by a Chinese checkpoint somewhere where the Chinese would not like you to be. It's also useful if the guard is interested in something other than you, like lunch, his phone or the girl in the car he's checking.

Getting on the bike for the first time is an immeasurable feeling. You suddenly become un-tethered. Free as the wind, blah, blah, blah. You get the picture. No longer do you have to rely on buses, drivers and extortionate charges. Properly kitted out for camping you have the feeling of supreme freedom. Well, almost. Depends on the weather and who's telling you "no, turn back" in Chinglish.



2012 February: Loaded up and on the [Road](#) 📍. There are fresh tyre tracks in the snow, the road ahead is open.

I had the advantage of knowing locals who helped on the three occasions, so far, that I have bought a motorcycle. Cost was around ¥3,500 which I know is not too much above local retail prices. In 2012 that equaled AU\$617. Front crash bar and luggage racks on the sides will not cost you a lot extra. You might find they will include these in the cost of the bike. These bikes range from ¥3,500 up to ¥5,000 depending on brand, engine size and seller's wife needs levels. The whole transaction is negotiable. Never ever buy second-hand. Too risky for mechanical reliability.

TIP: Don't buy a bike with a high level back seat. This is where you will put your wheelie bag and the additional height will change your centre of gravity. The lower it is the easier to balance the bike on rugged terrain and to lift it after a drop.

There is little choice of engine size up on the Plateau. Biggest I found was 175cc. But that is sufficient. 125cc would be a little small. Anything bigger than 175cc would be dangerous and too heavy in these conditions. In places like Chengdu and Xining you will find 200cc and 250cc. The temptation to use that bit of extra power to go at breakneck speed could see you with a broken neck. The terrain up here is not conducive to rapidity. You are buying a work bike not a glitzy, blingy, off-roader that will strike fear into the Yaks.

TIP: If you are living in China proper for a while here's a [site](#) 📍 where you can buy a second-hand mean street machine that will impress the girls. Watch out for scams. There's a whole procedure to buying safely. Research it. If your Chinese reading is weak use a Google Chrome browser. It will translate for you. Right click, translate page.

Another thing to think about is weight when you drop the bike, and you will drop it. Lifting it upright including the weight of all your gear on it can be a serious exercise. Remember straight back, bend at the knees. Chiropractors are non-existent and nobody knows how to spell ambulance.



At the Shop: A typical Chinese 150cc motorcycle. All the Tibetans ride this style of bike and always Buddhist red. You need to add crash bars and luggage racks. Get half a litre of engine oil and a seat cover to look cool. Nuts and bolts are metric. © Alibaba

The quality of these bikes is sufficient for the short time you will use it. They have the usual controls. Clutch and foot gear change on the left, throttle on the right. The gear change is one up and four down. Keyed electric start with kick start on the right together with the footbrake. Speed and distance gauges in kilometres with gear position and lights indicators. They have turn indicators and an engine kill switch. Suspension is average. In neutral, with no throttle, the engine will stop. It's not set to idle at low revs. I think this is a safety feature but I always adjust mine so that it just keeps turning with no throttle when warm.

If your accommodation has a courtyard, or somewhere round the back you can use as a pseudo-workshop, then all the better because the next step is to check it over. Go over all the nuts and bolts you can see and make sure they are not loose. Your metric mini toolkit that you have brought with you will not allow the tightening of bigger stuff but do a visual and finger tight check on these anyway. Practice taking off the side covers and seat if that is where the battery is parked. After you have ridden a couple of hundred kilometres do this overall check again. Cast a critical eye over what you can see of the wiring.

The worst I've experienced was that a luggage rack bolt dropped off. That was after a week of riding bumpy roads. Cost me less than a dollar for a mechanic to replace the bolt in [Nangchen](#) 🇨🇳. Changing an inner tube at [Tankong](#) 🇨🇳, the year before, because of a leaky valve cost me \$6 including the new tube.

There may be some tools that come with the bike along with a user manual completely in Chinese. A winter rear tyre should come as standard issue. Make sure your bike has one. They will not be real winter tyres but so long as they've got some knobbly tread that looks as though it will grip the snow, dust and mud it's all you can expect.

If you are comfortable with doing it, change the sump oil. Buy the oil with the bike. Not totally necessary but a plus for reducing later issues. I didn't. Although I did buy a bottle of oil to keep the sump topped up.



Assess how you will load the bike with your gear. I have the tent strapped to the front forks, pannier bags on the luggage racks, wheelie bag on the back seat and my sleeping bag strapped to the back mudguard. When you attach the panniers don't make it too permanent. There will be occasions where you might want to remove them. Take narrow web straps with you. Some strong small diameter rope or synthetic woven string will be useful. Learn to tie knots that come undone without having to cut them.



2012: Taking a break. Note the hand warmers and the saddle cover. Tibetans decorate their bikes like they used to, and still do, their horses.

Where you park your bike overnight in sub-zero temperatures is important. Starting the bike in the early morning sub-zero cold, before the sun has given it a little warmth, will be impossible. The performance of batteries drops drastically at low temperatures and engine oil becomes thicker. The battery will seem to be dead before sunrise but will spring to life in the sunshine. The only way of overcoming this, that I could think of, was to have the battery in your sleeping bag overnight. Not impossible but uncomfortable. It's not good to start too early anyway. Road frost needs time to thin out in the sun. So, when camping, try the west side facing the early morning sun. If you are on the east side it might be almost mid-day before the mountain shadow moves enough to let the sunlight warm things up.

Road Conditions

Driving

Do not assume that drivers will follow any rule that you know or even that they know. Golden rule, stay calm, cool and observant. This is what [Wikipedia](#) says:

“To a newcomer, Chinese traffic appears to have no rules or, if there are rules, it appears they are neither followed nor enforced. In reality, of course, there are rules; they do generally manage to avoid hitting each other. However, Chinese rules are very different from what most travellers are used to. To Western eyes, appallingly bad driving is the norm, and insane or suicidal behaviour behind the wheel is fairly common.”

In town and city the keyword is chaos, but if you stand and watch the traffic for a while, or get a front seat on the bus, you can see that there is risk taking lightly salted with co-ordinated self-preservation. In town, when things are busy, it can be a nightmare trying to navigate a cross-road. Take it slow and easy. Expect anything and everything. Be very, very, observant in every direction, even behind you. Be like a chicken surrounded by foxes. All of them can bite.

In a taxi ride to Chengdu's Shuangliu International airport we approached a traffic jam not too far from the terminal. Road work activity blocking the road. It soon became obvious that no-one was going anywhere very soon. The answer? Drive on the pavement. Which the taxi did along with several other cars, pedestrians cowering against roadside buildings. This is the sort of thing to be expected in Chinese cities. Complete disregard for rules and regulations.

TIP: Do not bother with goggles. The constant wiping off of dust scratches the lenses very quickly and makes them useless. First thing in the mornings your eyeballs will feel like they've frozen. Try UV sunglasses.



Vehicles with military registration plates are not required to follow any rules of the road. Big black SUV's are likely to belong to either the mafia, senior Chinese officials, their wives or young immature offspring who will consider themselves above the law. Beware.

On the Road on the Plateau

You have to be ok with driving off-road, not that you will actually be off of the road. Up on the Plateau the conditions vary from brand new bitumen in town, albeit with manhole covers missing, through cracked and potholed concrete that uniquely runs out after two kilometres, to rocky creek bed paving and gravel. There are places where the road does not exist other than a few feint tyre marks in the tundra. However smooth the road seems always watch for potholes. Roads are narrow, one truck wide, and can be, more than sometimes, perched halfway up a mountainside. Drive with considerable caution and drive on the right.

Of three or four weeks driving on the Plateau you could count on one hand the number of riders you see wearing a crash helmet. I don't wear one either. Not very bright but at the speeds I'm travelling at, between 15 and 20kph, it doesn't seem worth the hassle of bringing one with you. My trappers hat is pretty thick.

The Chinese have a habit when they rebuild roads, of starting one summer and finishing the next. With the severity and length of the winters they can do nothing more. This can leave you with hours of extremely rough and ready surface to drive over which can severely test your stamina. On the bright side there is nothing more motivating and spirit lifting than meeting with a fresh laid stretch of bump free concrete road that may run for five kilometres or more.



On the Road: The gravel road turns a corner at the top of the Mukri La (pass) 📍. Trola Shan in the distance which you will have to cross.

You cannot drive fast. My average speed for daily travel has been between fifteen and twenty something kilometers an hour. I did once get up to 40kph on the speedometer but that didn't last long. You have to balance between speed and fear of hitting a monumental pothole. You just cannot get any serious driving in.

Small potholes every two meters, in every direction, is daunting even at low speed. If you don't have heaps of flesh on your backside seriously contemplate a silicone cushion, honestly! I do no more than six hours a day with breaks. Anything much more than this is disheartening. Besides, the weather closes in about 4 p.m.

Additionally you have to consider ice sheets. Small streams that partially thaw out in the warmth of direct sunlight and freeze again at night. Where the culvert under the road, if there is one, gets permanently blocked with ice the water fans out over the road and forms a skating rink of white. Sometimes there are small "islands" of ice free dirt that you can use to "hop" across, stopping at each one to consider the next best route. Be careful of frozen puddles. They may look innocuous and small but could be deep enough to stop your engine when the ice breaks and your back wheel drops in filling the exhaust with water. Consider all this when scheduling distance and time. There are some routes that you can power ahead, with others you would wish you were in a four wheel drive SUV.


Riding a motorbike on snowy, icy, rutted roads takes a bit of practice if you haven't done it before. All the weight of your luggage at the back of the bike can have some difficult consequences. Because of the extreme lack of traffic and mostly very narrow roads you will tend to wander from side to side seeking that elusive smooth surface. Where the road is rutted changing direction can be easier said than done. You will get the bikes front wheel out of the rut off in the direction intended but the back wheel, with its extra weight, will tend to stay in the rut you were in and go off on its own tack. This will result in you expressing your love for the planet by kissing the ground. Luckily you will be doing this at low speed and possibly without any injury except to your dignity. Because of the remoteness no one will see, saving on embarrassment.

TIP: If you take a fall and assuming the engine has stopped all by itself, turn the petrol tap off. There will be a smell of petrol when the bike is on its side. It's leaking from the little vent hole in the petrol tank filler cap. Familiarise yourself with the petrol tap. There are On, Off and Reserve Tank positions.

On my first motorbike trip, on my first bike, in the first thirty-five minutes out of base camp, and riding over my first snowy mountain pass, I did just this. Took a drop because of ruts in the road. Trying, at a bend on the top of the pass, to get to the correct side of the road in case of oncoming traffic. No injury except a slightly bent crash bar and very lucky timing. By the time I had got the bike upright and off to the side of the road a minibus came whizzing around the bend from the opposite direction.

Doing it Legally

If you have a driving license in your country of origin you may be able to purchase an International Driving Permit. This will be of no use whatsoever but take it anyway. The Chinese do not recognise it. To legally drive in China you need to pass their road examination. I didn't. The motorcycle, strictly speaking, should be registered, if you are a local, within 30 days. Once you are up on the Tibetan Plateau you will be hard pushed to see a motorcycle with registration plates. The reason for this is probably income divided by the cost. Since I'm using the bike for less than 30 days I have decided not to bother with all this. Get on and go. I have never, yet, been stopped with anyone asking me about legality. At the bike shop they just sell you the bike. No, I do not have a bike license at home, only a car one. Yes, this probably does invalidate my travel insurance.

If you are stopped and they seem to be asking for your license, act dumb for as long as possible. It may take as long as five or ten minutes to get them to give up. If they are still persisting in seeing some documentation show them your International Driving Permit. This might help but either way they may be glad to get rid of you and avoid any further pain of dealing with a foreigner with no Chinese. Here's an interesting link on driving in China at Wikivoyage.org .

If you are going to buy your bike in China proper then be aware that you will have to go through all the procedures required. Only worth it if you are going to live there for a while. The cost of the motorcycle will be cheap enough but then there's registration plus you have to pass your road examination to get a license which may take weeks, certainly several days. The score for the test is 90 questions correct out of a hundred. The correct visa is also required with more than 90 days on it. Probably needs to be a work permit. Health

check too, somebody may want to prod you in the ribs. There have been some recent changes in Chinese regulations. It may well be possible to drive legally into China from a neighbouring country on a non-Chinese-registered motorbike.

TIP: Here's a Chinese company 🇨🇳 that can assist you in being legal. They have some geographic limitations.

In order to help keep their big and newer cities looking squeaky clean some local governments have banned the bike from city centres. They also ban cars older than five years. It's an image thing. Bikes are also banned from Freeway / Motorway style roads. The price of rego and license is not great. The time it takes to do all this is. At my own risk, in an area where the locals do the same, I ignore all the rules. I can buy a bike in Gyêgu or elsewhere, pack it with my gear, and be on the road in not much more than two days.

Before I did these bike journeys I hadn't ridden on two wheels for over thirty years. But I did cheat. Took an hour's re-familiarisation lesson at a local Motorbike School in Australia.

Motorbike Gear Specifics



Crash Bars are a good safety feature considering the roads you will be travelling on. Without a doubt you will drop the motorbike in poor conditions. These bars will help save your leg and damage to the bike. A luggage carrier, too, is a must. You can tie your gear on securely. Potholed roads will soon shake things loose without a rack to hang everything off. Some 5mm woven rope would be useful.



For a few dollars on eBay and stores elsewhere you can get a device that you can wire into your 12v DC bike battery. It outputs 5v suitable for recharging your electronic stuff through a USB port. Double ports are available. Check that a safety cut-out is built in. It's easy to do, just need to take suitable tools. You can recharge as you drive along. This is a big plus when the nearest mains power outlet is a day's drive or more away.



Pannier Bags are indispensable. These total 47 litre and come from Chain Reaction Cycles in Ireland and elsewhere. They are joined but just cut the straps, sew them into loops on each pannier and that lets you fasten them to the bike luggage frames. Made of canvas with plastic stiffeners and fold easily. For the air flights they fit into the shoulder strap pocket of my wheeie bag. I cut the straps off for a better use of this space. When I fit the USB charging device I have the USB lead going into one of the bags where I can put phone etc. for recharging on the go.



Ice grips for your shoes. These are great, cheap as chips, take two pairs. If you are riding over sheets of ice they help with steadying the bike by putting your feet down and motoring slowly. You will not get good grip without them. Perfect for walking too. The Chinese do not clear snow and ice from public places, so keep them in your day pack for safety's sake when walking around town in winter. I've tried other varieties and styles without so much success. Do not buy crampons. You are not mountaineering.



Because of the scarcity of petrol refill locations you will need to carry a bottle of petrol with you; 5 or 10 litre. Buy this bottle when you get there, BUT take a good liquid tight cap with you. The Chinese ones, bought locally, leak. You will need spare petrol not only for the motorbike but also your stove. Petrol stations can sometimes turn up in the most unlikely places. In larger villages, someone will be selling fuel out of their backyard from a 55 gallon drum. Ask around. Be safe. No, I did not take a fire extinguisher with me. Keep this container hidden from Chinese authorities. There are [Reasons](#) for this.



You will need a dust coat when riding your motorbike that can double as a rain/snow coat when needed. The off-bitumen roads, when they are not rocky, are very dusty, sometimes dangerously so. In places it's like talcum powder and induces slipping and sliding just as much as snow. A cheap, thin, throw away dustcoat, dark blue or black, helps keep you clean. You can throw it over your sleeping bag at night for an extra layer of moisture proof insulation. Wear a Neck Tube too. The dust gets in everywhere.



Dutch Army winter under trousers. Yet to use these but will on my next trip. They are lined with faux fur and would appear to be able to add significant insulation. The reason I've [bought](#) these is that my synthetic sleeping bag seems to have lost its 'newness'. The trousers will be a supplement for night time use. They are a bit bulky but suitably rolled very tight they are a bit less than a summer bag, which was the alternative choice to extend my bags 'stay warm' ability. They can be kept on when you extricate yourself into the early morning cold and would be useful on the motorbike if the weather deteriorates. They have enough fullness and waist elasticity to be put on over jeans.



Screw in tyre [Studs](#). Those that live in sub-arctic winter conditions and ride a motorcycle will know how to use these. They screw into the thick knobby bits on your winter back tyre. Get the ones specific for bikes. For two years I took some of these but never actually used them in spite of biking in February. They screw in and out fairly easily but you need a special tool from the people you buy the studs from.



A tyre air pump is worth carrying if only for a maybe. I've known road surfaces to be worse than driving down a dry rocky creek bed. The constant hammering from the rocks and potholes wears the tyres. Mini *metric* toolkit is useful. Try and squeeze in a spark plug spanner, electrical or duct tape, electrical ties, tyre levers and puncture repair kit. Best to pack into your airport check-in bag.



Buying the Motorbike

The motivation behind using a motorcycle to get around comes from having to sit for endless hours in minibuses, cars and public transport. I love watching the scenery go by out of the window but it was so frustrating to not be able to stop and savour the landscape or wander around an interesting place. There were also limits as to where I could go. Between the sparsely delineated main roads on the maps there are vast areas of mountains, river valleys and Gompa (monastery) by the score. All accessed by little pecked track lines on my Russian maps.

I suppose the inspiration for two wheel travel came from remembering that most Tibetans got around on motorbikes. Why could I not do that too? So, combined with a tent, the shackles could be removed. I could go, almost but not quite, anywhere I chose. Now, how to buy a bike?



In 2011 I met up with a teacher from Xining Nationalities University. I had met her, in 2010, in Gyêgu. She brought with her a companion who was a first year Masters student and came from the same area. The student's western name was Betty. After a meal and an afternoon of getting beaten at pool I now had a second Tibetan friend. The upshot is that, from home, I emailed Betty and asked if she could get me an idea of the cost of buying a motorbike. This she did and sent me some pics of a brochure with prices marked in ¥uan.

What I eventually paid for the bike, in Yushu, was a bit less than the brochure but I had an affordable starting point. It had to be a disposable purchase. There was no way that it would be worth shipping home. When I did buy my first bike the Australian dollar was strong so it only cost me AU\$617. I paid a price not too far from local retail.

The source of my bike was clear. What about all the legal stuff. I was for a while anxious over this point but eventually decided that I would just get on the bike and go. I did try to get hold of "forged" registration plates off the net, from a UK manufacturer, but met with stony silence as a reply. I then discovered that every area in China has its own style of plate. An additional complexity. What to do. Best thing was nothing. Pictures on the net that included Tibetans riding bikes showed that almost no one on the Plateau was bothering to register their motorbike. All running around blind. I would too.

THE MOTORBIKE ROUTES FROM YUSHU



2012: About to load up, complete with leg warmers. The stove fuel bottle on the ground I've just filled with petrol from the tank.

2012 Trindu to Degé

Trindu - Gyêgu - Batang - Damtog - Tangkong - Dzogchen - Mannigango - Degé

This trip started from Trindu in Chinese Qinghai, the extreme north of the Kham area bordering on the Amdo region. Spent several days here with Betty's family, her older brother negotiating the buying of the motorbike. The bike arrived at the house sans crash barriers and luggage racks. We went out again and found a couple of guys in a tin shed just around the corner who were selling motorbike accessories. Bought what we needed plus some leg warmers and a seat cover all for AU\$16 including fitting.

The ride from Trindu into Gyêgu was a bit wearisome. Slid off the bike at the first ice covered pass I came to and consequently met every subsequent ice patch with trepidation. Took me nearly four hours. In summer it would only have taken two.

In 2010 I passed through Gyêgu at the end of February, six weeks before the devastating 7.1 earthquake, on my first successful trip to Degé travelling by bus. Prior to leaving Australia I had established that the only route from Yushu to Degé was via Xiewu and Shershul which is the route I took in 2010. I had discovered a second, more direct, route but was hampered by the need to cross the Dri Chu. Google Earth in this location was very low resolution; no bridge could be seen. I could have short-cut this crossing by going via [Penda](#) , but notes on the Net told me there was a checkpoint in this place. So no-go. Besides this track wasn't on anybody's minibus-route being unpaved until you get to near Dzogchen. [Map](#)



In researching the route for my first motorbike trip, Gyêgu to Degé, I discovered the [Bridge](#) I needed. Google Earth had upgraded the image resolution and I could see a footbridge at Damtog, a small village surrounding a Gompa on the banks of the river. Perfect. This was going to be the route I would take. Crossing the little suspension bridge on my motorbike.

In planning this trip I hadn't considered it to be a camping one. Where I was going to sleep each night I had no idea. Gyêgu was fine, Betty would know of a place. When I got to Manigango there was a "Hotel" there and at Degé. In between these places was where the issue resided.

Getting anxious about spending a couple of nights out in the wild I decided on lugging along some emergency gear in the form of a very cheap tent and an even cheaper sleeping bag. As it turned out I got a room at Damtog, Tangkong and Dzogchen, the places in between known accommodation. In the light of a couple of years of hindsight I would have frozen to death if I had had to use the camping gear I took.



The Gyêgu hotel. A temporary building in a devastated town a year after the earthquake. Hid my bike behind the roller shutter doors.

With five days in Gyêgu I managed to find a sleeping pad made from sheep wool and canvas. If I had to camp I would have a good bit of insulation between me and the ground. So cheap in fact I bought two because the first got wet from a roof leak in the storage lock-up.

Leaving the hotel not too early in the morning I headed for the main road south out of town. Every intersection that I passed was manned by one or two police. At the edge of town I caught sight about ten of them at a checkpoint just having stopped and dispatched a mini bus. My heart was in my mouth. As I approached the checkpoint they split into two groups one of which begins to walk away. The others stay put but resolutely ignore me as I did them. Phew ! Got through with two or three other locals on motorbikes without even blinking an eyelid.

The route going south passes the junction to Princess Wengchen's Temple and not long after there's a left hand turn-off in the direction of Batang. This takes you across a wide flat bottomed valley past the abandoned WWII airport and several hundred grazing Yaks. Around here is the site of the Yushu Horse Festival. Pushing southeast the road takes you over a rolling pass at 4,150m, and down through a winding gorge to the Dri Chu. Another 30 kilometres of road, cut into the mountain side and following the curves of the river, takes you to the little village of Damtog.



First view of the Dri Chu after coming over a low pass from Batang on the road to Damtog. Have to get cross this.

There's [accommodation](#) here where you can rent a room by the night. Ask at the shop under the red sign. They may send you up to the Gompa to find the man you need. The steps up to your room are inordinately steep, in the traditional Tibetan fashion.

In the yard in front there are three petrol pumps. They don't work. To get a tank top-up you need to find the old woman that tends a 55 gallon open topped drum. She will use a one litre juice bottle which she dips into the petrol to fill before glug glugging it into your tank. To find this nightmare of potential death you need to



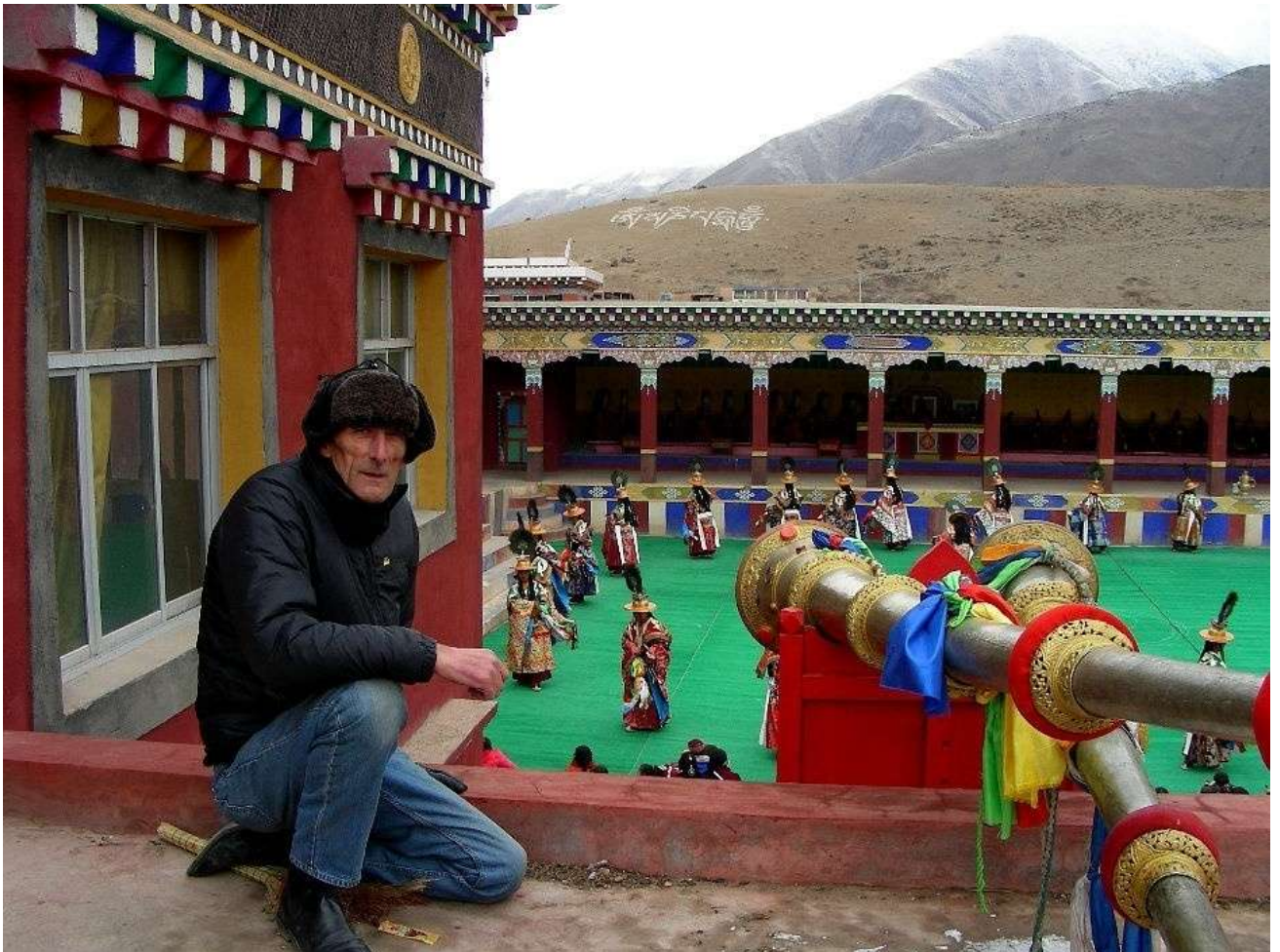
follow the little dog in the extreme right bottom of the next photo.

Above the shop is a place that the monks use for eating. It has a kitchen where you can rustle up a meal. The shop below is a general store and sells a wide variety of stuff and was always busy when I went in. There is another little place, just outside the yard compound that sells Tibetan Medicines. I bought a pack of Chinese AA batteries from here which had about as much power in them as a star on a cloudy night. They still trade in horses at Damtog. You may well see a few guys putting them through their paces for potential customers.



Downtown Damtog. For petrol follow the little dog in the extreme right bottom.

It would seem that Damtog may once have been of greater importance; maybe it still is. Immediately north of the village, behind the accommodation, on a low hill, are the remains of a large complex structure. Most likely a monastery destroyed by the Communists in the 60's but larger than the current Gompa on the opposite mountainside above the village.



My arrival at Damtog coincided with some Losar celebrations (Tibetan New Year). I spent a whole day watching this from the roof of the archway entrance to the monastery courtyard.

After two nights at Damtog the next section to Tangkong was gruelling in places. Sections of the road were made up of small boulders not unlike a dry rocky creek bed. It played havoc with the front wheel tyre pressure. I think the air valve was leaking. Every five or so kilometres I had to stop and pump up the wheel. The first thing I did on arrival at Tangkong was to hunt down a motorbike repair shop. Found a place and after a lot of sign language, mostly imitating the hiss of escaping air, the guys replaced the inner tube on the front wheel for \$6 including the cost of a new tube.



Next was to find some food and a place to stay. After the repair took the bike around the corner to what seemed to be the centre of things and spotted a group of young guys in front of a small hole-in-the-wall pool room. Made signs for food; pretending to eat out of a bowl with chopsticks. One of them took up the challenge and show me a place through an archway and upstairs where I ordered some momo for him and myself.

Coming out of the eatery I went further through the arch and found a small market at the back of the buildings. Little open fronted shops selling mostly fresh fruit and vegetables. Bought half-a-dozen apples and a couple of bananas for a \$1.

Took the opportunity here of asking, in Chinese with a bit of sign language, for a Binguan. One young lady steered me along to the end of the market and pointed to a building with a gated yard. Went back and got the bike and brought it round to the "Hotel" and parked. No reception. Wandered around the building, which on the ground level seemed semi-derelict. Upstairs was slightly better and one room showed signs of occupation. Went back and sat with the bike for half-an-hour waiting for someone to turn up. I must have had good Karma at this point because it sent a young monk. He had come to drink from the outside tap and spotted me sitting on the bike. He couldn't have been much older than twelve. After a bit of smiling at each other and me indicating I needed to stay here, he went off and came back with the proprietrix. Another perfect event. She showed me to a room and also a place downstairs where I could store my bike under cover and out of sight.

The night was cold and I had to burn my cooking stove for a couple of hours to take the edge off of the frost. What the temperature was like outside I don't know but my little thin tent, if I had used it, would not have done the job. Sleeping largely fully clothed with a couple of blankets and a soft bed I was as warm as toast. Be aware that in winter, when everything is frozen, the toilets are locked and the only recourse is an area outside at the back.

There is only one "main" road here so getting out of town in the right direction was a cinch. Now we are heading for Dzogchen, a hundred plus kilometres to the south-east. A little more than I liked to do in one day but there was nowhere in between. Here leaving the Dri Chu valley with the road running parallel to the foot hills of the northern part of the Trola Shan. The big mountains rising above the softer hills to make a snow covered saw tooth edge to the skyline.

Between Tangkong and Dzogchen there is a long pass but not what you would call a mountain pass, more of a hump stretching for over 70 kilometres with a slow rise to 4,300 meters. A very bleak place with patches of snow abounding. The road in places was bad. Either with ice and snow drifts or barely discernable as it crossed the heights. With the afternoon getting long in the tooth the weather started to close in. Now

mountains of snow filled cloud topped the granite outline of the Trola. A few snow flurries fell just to make things interesting but the main threat did not seem to be able to get over the mountains. One comfort was that at the top of the pass there was an old, partially ruined, Chinese built, [Caravanserai](#) 🏠. It still had the Chinese style roof on it so could have given me shelter if things got really bad.

Good Karma again, I made it to Dzogchen late in the afternoon. Coming down from the pass when I got onto the, badly potholed, main road again I came across a stretch of perfect tarmac. I recklessly reached 40km per hour. The fastest I've ever been whilst driving on these roads. Didn't last long though, maybe a kilometer at most.



Dzogchen finally hove into view some distance off of the road. Did the same thing as at Tangkong and pulled up in front of a group of youngsters and asked for a Binguan. Out of the minute crowd stepped a senior Tibetan and promptly made a phone call. It turned out he was acquiring me a room for the night and motioned me to follow him not too many metres back down the village road. We went through some big wooden doors into a long cramped courtyard. Up some rickety old stairs and along a short gallery I was shown a sumptuously decorated room. Bed for the night on a long bench seat.

Found somewhere to eat too. As I was wandering back out onto the street I motioned to the hostess that I was going to find some food. She told me to follow her and almost next door was an open fronted eatery run by a young Chinese couple. After much confused communication we descended on rice with scrambled egg and tomatoes. The place was appallingly grimy. Stray dogs were wandering in and mooching through the bins. But, it was sustenance and I hadn't eaten anything more than small snacks and fruit for more than 24 hours. Consequently, it was delicious. I had a comfortable night's sleep with Buddha and his disciples beaming down on me.

In the morning I was hustled out of my room and out of the building with all my gear. My hosts hurriedly locked the main doors and almost ran up the road towards the Gompa as everyone else in the village was doing. It was still Losar, the celebrations for which run for several days.

Keen to get on to Manigango and Degé I packed the bike in the road outside and motored off towards the [Mukri La](#) 🏠 at 4,600 metres. An uneventful ride with astounding views of the Trola Shan all the way. With a little bit of snow and ice here and there I negotiated the icy pass without falling off of the bike. Practice makes perfect.



Arriving at Manigango tired and a little brain dead I knew where I was. Had been here before, twice. It's a smallish place with a Y junction at the centre where there is the most incongruous, three storey high, Chinese advertising pole with a massive triangular hording on top. There was also, parked in the middle of the road, a Chinese police car. As I approached it one of them got out. I'm not saying that he was going to stop me but it felt like that. I just kept going with a blasé, unblinking, expression resolutely avoiding eye contact and monitoring them with my peripheral vision. If they shouted "stop" I didn't hear.

The hotel at Manigango is something of a transport hub with public and mini busses stopping here for meals and pick-ups. The public busses are usually full so not the best place to get on. Mini busses abound going to Degé or Ganza. I got a room and a meal before I hunkered down for a chilly night. The ceiling was high so my attempts at warming the room with my cooking stove were wasted. All the heat was hanging around out of reach and playing tag with the dimly dim light bulb.

The time of year being late February and pretty much mid winter, my plan was to get the bike transported over the 5,050 metre Tro La. Having crossed it four times by bus in the last two journeys I well knew what the state of the road would be. Snow, ice, heavy trucks and near vertical drop-offs at the roadside. Scenery would be spectacular but only if you are sitting relaxed and looking out of the window.

Besides all this there is a checkpoint on the road leading to the pass. The road being narrow and full of hairpin bends they regulate the traffic flow. Alternating one way priority between east and west approaches. With the bike in the back of a small truck and me squeezed down low in the back of the cab it was unlikely there would be any issues with access.

The next day I discovered that, this visit, there was a Tibetan woman on the staff who spoke fairly good English. I broached the prospect of a couple of locals taking me across in the appropriate vehicle. The following day she said she had found someone willing. A little later we sat around a table; the two prospective drivers, the woman and the guy that had put the word around for volunteers.

¥1,000 (AU\$180) was to be the price. Ouch! Just at that moment the hotel proprietor arrived and sat down joining in the conversation. When he discovered what the going rate was he insisted they cut it back to ¥400. Smiling, I agreed. But it didn't end there. I had to give the guy who put the word out ¥100 and later I rewarded the woman with the same amount. With further inducements having to be applied later in the crossing, the final figure was ¥900. Which was not so bad when you consider I did not have life insurance to cover this and there was the risk that the drivers were taking, colluding with a foreigner.



Approaching the 5,050 metre Tro La from Manigango. The Chinese are currently putting a tunnel under here (2015) © LJBonner

Half way down the other side the two drivers wanted to dump me at a hair pin bend. With a further cash inducement I reminded them that the real goal was Degé. Three minutes later I discovered their reluctance to go further. A [checkpoint](#) 📍. With the boom gate down a woman officer appeared on the second storey balcony of the roadside building. Whatever was said between her and the driver, it worked. She pulled on a long rope and pulley system and up went the boom. On we sped, the road now dramatically improving, towards Degé. At the outskirts of the town they pulled up and again wanted to drop me off. With only half a kilometre to the hotel destination I declined. The driver's mate started shouting, what I thought was, "please, please". In reality he was saying police, police. He refused to go any further but the driver was made of sterner stuff and we left his mate at the roadside without the cash incentive I paid the driver. Ten minutes later and we were unloading the bike in the courtyard of the hotel.



Degé Hotel, or Que'er Mountain Hotel, can be found [HERE](#) 📍. A very civilised and sumptuous place if you've been on the road for several days, albeit decorated concrete. In the winter they have enormous heaters in the lounge with enough heat that almost melts the plastic bamboo. In all my visits here I've never found any of the staff that can speak English but all have always been very helpful.

Degé is an interesting town, I love being there, a traditional Tibetan place. If you prowl around you will find lots of eateries of varying quality. There are a whole range of shops catering for Tibetan life style and places like the Parkhang. Explore. See [MORE](#) 📍.

Here ends the 2012 saga other than getting back to Chengdu and my flight home. The easiest way back is the bus to Kangding, where you transship for Chengdu, leaves from [HERE](#) 📍 in Degé. The journey in the past used to take two days just to get to Kangding with a ride to Chengdu, out of the mountains, the next day. Now, with the major upgrade of the road and the tunnel under the Tro La, it can be done in one day and if you are slippery enough you might make the connection to Chengdu, at Kangding, on the same day.

2013 Gyêgu - Zurmong - Nangchen – Gyêgu



Gyêgu - Batang - Surmang Namgyaltse - Nangchen - Gyêgu

If ever the number thirteen had undertones of deformed destiny it was in the 2013 expedition. It started in the planning, no clear goal. No start and finish defined, only an area. I was going to wander around hidden mountain valleys visiting out-of-the-way Buddhist Monasteries.

I had read that this area south of Gyêgu over the Ku La, at 4,850 metres, was nomadic and also one of the poorest areas in what is now, mistakenly, called China. This of course is measured by cash income which the nomad needs very little of. A tent, a stove, a mobile phone, a herd of Yaks, summer and winter pasture and a



horse and motorbike is all that is required for a prosperous life. The Yak provides meat, milk and intrinsic value to the Tibetan nomads existence. The herd is his equivalent of a bank account.

I had read a book, *Born in Tibet*, about the Senior Rinpoche, *Chögyam Trungpa* at Surmong Dütsithil, his life and harrowing escape from the invading Chinese Communists in the 1950's. He was one of the first Tibetan Buddhists in exile to settle in the west and begin the spread of Buddhism. He also had close connections, as a centre of leaning, with the Dzongsar Gompa.

The net result of this was a collection of my Russian maps smothered with panned in tracks that looked motorable on Google Earth and a host of GPS notations. A spiders web of routes and I was the fly.

Shipping out of Australia to a mid February winter I arrived in Gyêgu four days later, having flown the usual



route to Guangzhou through Xi'an and onto Xining for acclimatisation. Then flying the one hour trip to Gyêgu from Xining, staying here with Linda, one of Betty's teachers at Xining Minorities University. Linda helped me buy motorcycle number two at not much more than last year's price.

I had met Linda in Gyêgu in 2010 in an internet café. She approached me and asked if I could help her with filling out an application form for a university course in the USA. This I did in the bestest English I could muster.

It took us most of the afternoon to complete it and as a reward I was invited back to her house for an early evening meal of Yak meat and Tsampa. Linda was successful in her application and took up a year's residence somewhere in Vermont in the United States learning to teach English to non-native speakers.

On my way. Breezing through the usual checkpoint, unnoticed, at the south side of town the route took me to Batang where I turned off for the Ku La. It took about an hour from Gyêgu to get to the foot of the mountains on the road over the pass to Zurmong, the road sneaking in between two minor mountains from the flat grasslands of the Batang valley. Time for a quick break and to check over the bike that nothing had wriggled loose.



Approaching the Ku La with a really good section of road which soon deteriorated into broken concrete and ice.

Looking back down the road I spied another motorbike heading the same way. The image grew to reveal a slightly plump monk who stopped and smiled. He seemed keen to communicate but beyond me saying I was "Inji" and pointing at the mountains with "Zurmong, Zurmong" we exhausted general possibilities. After half a minute of silence and smiles I saddled up and motioned the he should lead the way, me being a newbie. None of that, I had to go first. It made me feel a little uneasy, as I had hoped he would lead, not only to show the way but also the best routes across the ice patches.

The Ku La is a fairly respectable pass but nothing like the Tro La crossing. There were no shear drops from the side of the road. The road wound its way up a V shaped valley in a multitude of hairpin bends after reaching the snowline, turning right up a side stretch before making the top. I dropped the bike maybe four times on the upper slopes where there was persistent ice and ruts. The monk indicated that I was going too fast but that was not the main reason. The weight I had mounted on the back of the bike was encouraging the rear wheel to seek independent direction.

Motoring down the far side and over another minor height we reached a [road junction](#) at which the monk stopped. Being a little ahead I turned around and went back to the spot. He indicated that he was going south. Me being over confident thought that I had to keep going on the road we were on. I asked him, pointing in the direction I was going, "Zurmong". He seemed to nod. Then I pointed down the road he was to

take and said “Zurmong”. He seemed to assent again. I did this again asking about petrol, pointing to the bikes tank, and again both directions were positive. Arrogantly I thought I knew where I was and did not consult the map and the GPS. What I also didn’t know was that there were three Zurmongs. Zurmong the village with Zurmong Dütsithil and Surmang Namgyaltse as monasteries. So, just like Rome, all roads lead to Zurmong in this little neck of the woods. Any one of three. I should have just followed the “flow” and gone in the same direction as the monk. I, of course, didn’t.

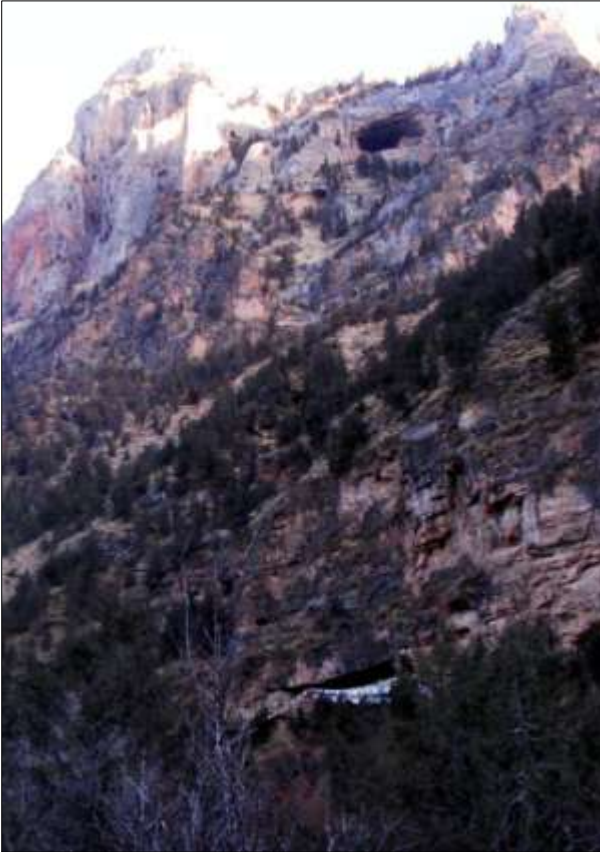
Motoring on, alone, fairly uneventfully, through wild valleys with little population evident. Crossing one low pass I completely ignored the no entry signs in the road. This consisted of three small boulders laid across the path. After a couple of hairpin bends I met a wall of ice that, with the exaggeration of memory, seemed like a glacier. Melt water from the daily sunshine had refrozen at night and built up a considerable and impressive obstruction. Turning back for a kilometer or so I found the bypass.

After motoring for the best part of the day, without much reference to maps and with evening not far off, I began to look for somewhere to camp. This would be my first night under canvas in the wilds of Tibet. Not so wild, of course, if you live there. Roads in this little area were fairly reasonable with large stretches of concrete track. In Lubou Village everything was neatly and freshly paved.



Lubou Village 📷

Pushing on I wandered about a bit, first up one side of the valley then back and up the other. [Ganden Gompa](#) 📷 was passed on a neck of land encompassed by a river bend, a tributary of the Kyang Chu. Finally finding a bit of flat scrub land where the road briefly looped away from the river side I hunkered down amongst signs of Yak activity. The river just down an embankment was fine as a water supply. The surrounds were impressive. A prayer flag bedecked cave in the base and one at the top of the craggy mountainside and a frozen waterfall just to add decoration. The caves worried me a bit. I began to think of bears but resolved that it was hibernation time.



In the shadow of the mountain.



The inappropriate tent, inside is the inappropriate sleeping bag and inappropriate emergency blanket.

The tent I had was a single wall affair that I had painstakingly modified so that the lower edge sealed against the ground to stop the breeze coming under. This, of course, did not stop the intense, late February, winter cold from lowering my core temperature. I have never ever been so cold. The sleeping bag I had wasn't up to it. The emergency blanket also proved useless. It may reflect heat but it also dabbles in conduction. The night was long and sleepless. Even burning the cooking stove inside didn't help to keep me thawed, though I think it may have lessened the opportunity for frost bite.

People say you can learn a lot at the University of Life. I certainly did that night. Just waiting for my certificate to arrive. It will say, in nice gold letters, "Honours in Stupidity". My water bucket that I had filled the night before with three litres of river water was frozen solid. I had had to beat it with a rock to get enough ice chips to melt for coffee.

Not only having the wrong gear, I stopped in the wrong location. I was camped under a fairly steep sided mountain on the *east* side of the valley. The perfect place to avoid the morning sun. Having packed all my gear ready to go the bike wouldn't start. Turning the ignition key produced not even a cough out of the engine. Kick starting had no effect other than to warm me slightly. At first I thought the battery was dead and I would have to push it to the roadside and try and bump start it.

Then I noticed the hard edge of the mountain shadow had moved. I had gone and stood in the sunlight earlier, to get warm. With the amount of sub zero temperature in the night it dawned on me the real issue. The battery was too cold. So basking in the sunlight I stood and watched the shadows edge approach the bike. Eureka! Five minutes of sunlight warmth and the motorbike spluttered into life. Two or three minutes of revving the engine to warm it up and we were off.

Bleary eyed from little sleep I wobbled off along the road, determined to reach somewhere I could find a room for the night. Surmang Namgyaltse was the goal. Stopping only briefly to confirm direction and when the little town came into view to top up on petrol. Motoring through the outskirts I stopped a local and signed that I needed food. He crossed the road and took me into the building beside me. An anonymous restaurant sans signage, but too early for something hot. So I chomped on dry flat Tibetan bread and a bottle of something Chinese and fizzy for a late breakfast. Feeling physically better, but still half brain dead, I motored further into town towards the Gompa on the mountain spur. Driving up the side of the spur I parked at the top near to a young Ani (nun) and a guy who were chatting. On the crest there was a large

building, a Chorten, a big pile of Mani Stones and a *herd* of Tibetan mastiffs lazing in the sun. I say “herd” because the number and the size of these dogs defies the use of the word “pack”.

Wandering towards a rather magnificent building to take some photos my camera batteries gave out at the second shot. The day was no longer -10°C so they were genuinely dead and needed replacing. Back to the bike. My path led past the dogs. Two older women were walking past them so no thought of any fear of the dogs from me. Just as I leveled with them one at the back took umbrage at me for even thinking of coming to Tibet let alone disturbing its siesta. At what I thought was a close approximation to the speed of light he howled and came at me. I have never seen a dog when it's feeling aggressive so the sight of curled back lips and protruding canine teeth rather took me aback. So witching into high response mode, I froze solid. I swear that if the Ani behind me hadn't shouted at it the thing would have made off with my leg. Heaven knows what parts of me the rest of the pack would have shared. The dog backed off on command and left me to ponder the eternal value of a large stick.

Forever thankful for whatever life path the young nun had taken to bring her there at the right moment, I decided it was time to go. Thanking her profusely the trauma I was suffering forced me to hightail it for the safer small city environment of Shorda (Nangchen) where I arrived late afternoon. For six months after this event I shivered every time I pictured this dog. From a couple of metres away, which is how close it got, you could count the teeth. It doesn't take much counting. There's only two of the really big ones.



Ya La 📍 at 4,650 metres on the road to Shorda, Nangchen from Surmang Namgyaltse.

Shorda is a fairly large and busy town only slightly smaller than Gyêgu. It sits in a wide side valley a little above the Za Chu (Mekong River) that flows out of Tibet to Vietnam and the South China Sea. I turned off the main road just before the checkpoint that consisted of a man sitting on a stool in the middle of the road with a bit of rope across to indicate that all should stop here. Luckily he faced away from me and the noise of my motorcycle gave him no concern.

I drove up and down the main street but could not identify a place to stay. Stopping a guy on a motorbike I asked “binguan, binguan”. He pointed across the street at a glass double door that looked suspiciously like a Chinese hotel. Parking and going inside I found a big reception counter and an eerie quietness. The counter was deep enough in dust to have grown potatoes and a bit of shouting brought forth only echoes in response for attention.

Back on the bike the search led me to a bit of street that seemed busier than the rest. I pulled up alongside a congested group of parked motorbikes, cars and people. Barely having stopped for a few seconds when out steps a Tibetan with some English ability. I ask for a place to stay. He seems a little hesitant and asks me

where I have come from. I tell him Xining, Gyêgu, Zurmong. “Do you have friends in Gyêgu ?” he asks. “Yes” I say. “Do you have friends in Shorda ?” he continues. “Yes” I say “you”. With this he bursts out laughing and motions me to follow him. We go through some big steel doors into a wide courtyard and then into a little room in the corner where a family of three are living. This is reception for a hotel that is well past its use-by-date. We agree on ¥50 a night. Probably five times the normal rate, if not more but I’m happy. The courtyard is the old market area, a new one having been built across the road. A large part of it was covered with a huge steel roof. On the ground floor were small storage rooms and in the corner a stair well that led to rooms on the upper level. The room was windowless and the door did not lock. Toilets were the usual hole in the floor along the corridor. Water was in a big plastic drum. Bucket provided for flushing. It was the job of a young girl to refill this drum with water from a ground level tap the other side of the courtyard. She spent most of each morning walking back and forwards with a bucket.



Ground floor of the “Hotel” in Shorda, Nangchen. My grubby state matched that of the courtyard.

The “Hotel” may have lacked the glamour of a six star Chinese Binguan but it definitely had character and I felt safe there, away from the prying eyes of any authority and large dogs with even larger teeth. The people there did not bother to ask for my passport. Ok, the room had no window and the door did not lock, but I was among Tibetans so I felt relaxed.

Eats were from a Muslim eatery just outside the gates. Had a number of meals there, hot spicy lamb stew, that eventually gave me diarrhoea on the day that I motored back to Gyêgu. The market across the road was interesting enough. Some traditional stuff available from stalls and open fronted shops. Interested eyes watching me all the time.

Three days and time to go. For the distance involved back to Gyêgu I estimated four hours, maybe less. Not to be. I motored through town towards the G2XX that would take me north. Approaching the main road the

guy at the checkpoint was in full view and watching. I closely followed another bike carrying a gas cylinder on the back seat and together we motored pass the guard with ease.

For the next XX kilometres the road condition was reasonable. Crossing the Za Chu again the road trended north east and into a narrow canyon where the Chinese were raising the road above flood level and digging tunnels through the rock to even out the multiplicity of hairpin bends. Needless to say the road surface was bad. Coming out of the canyon my heart gladdened at the prospect of a smoother surface. The feeling quickly evaporated after a few kilometres. Almost the entire stretch between here and Gyêgu was a mess. How the bikes suspension survived I do not know but it was painful for my backside after six hours of it. The relief of reaching smooth paving, half an hour outside Gyêgu, was immense. You need to do it to experience it.



Life is almost but not quite perfect. A bit dusty. On the road in 2013.

Back in Gyêgu I pined for a comfy hotel. How to find one. Why not flag down one of the minibuses that cruise the streets looking for passengers. I did. The one I stopped was driven by a monk. After a little bit of sign language we set off with me following on the bike. Not a straight forward exercise. We went down a back street only to find a place that was closed and down another to find that it was being rebuilt. Third time lucky. I went inside and secured a room with shower but only at the best rate they could squeeze out of me. None the less they were friendly and Tibetan. Next door was a restaurant that you entered up the fire escape on the outside wall.

The motorbike I gave away to Betty's younger brother. I phoned her in Xining and she got a relative in Gyêgu to meet me and pick it up. That's pretty much the end of the story. Just routine travel back to Australia. I almost forgot. Negotiated a taxi out to the airport a little bit early. Arrived and was told by a machine gun toting guard at the gate that it was not possible to enter yet. So, I had to wait for the best part of an hour until someone senior enough to have their own car turned up and he had to open the gates for them. In I went and spent further time in a very new waiting hall but very bereft of facilities.

2014 Trindu - Jomda – Degé



Trindu - Surmang - Mianda - Jomda – Degé

This trip was substantially more focused in its goals and execution than last years. The target was Degé via Jomda from Gyêgu through the forbidden Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) that should have required a permit that you cannot get. Generally, to get into the TAR, you can only go to Lhasa on a “tourist trail” with a minder. This trip involved crossing into the TAR at Madan and exiting at Gamtog on the Dri Chu.

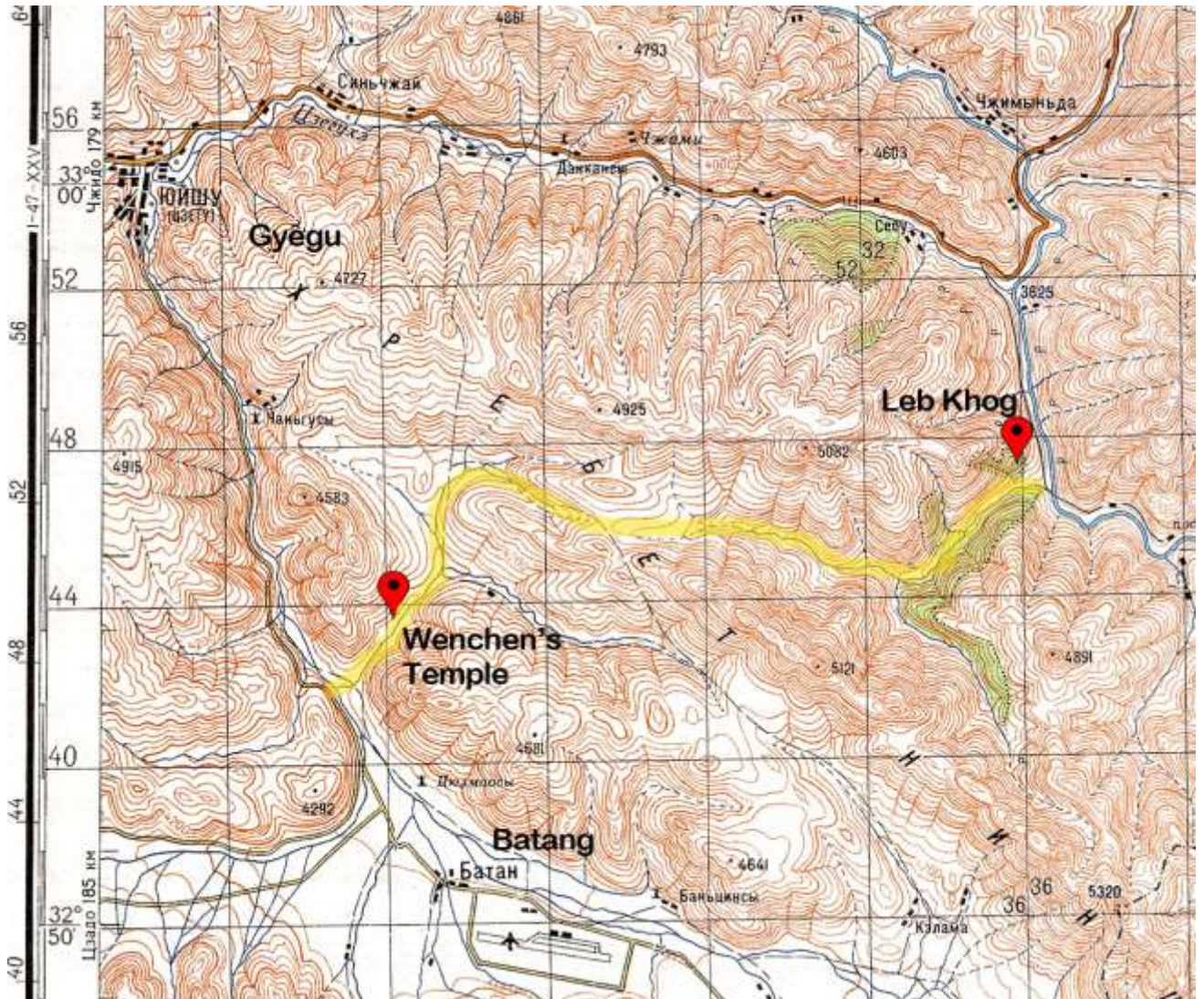
Jomda is in the TAR and would require a permit that I cannot show you because I didn’t get one when I did this trip on a motorbike in October / November 2014. At any point along these routes, certainly entering and leaving the TAR, you will go through multiple check points. I have marked the points above that I know of or are aware of.

The journey started in Trindu where I purchased the bike and stayed for a few days with the family I know well. The route from Trindu to Gyêgu is east out of town to pick up the main road. Having done this direction a number of times I decided to exit west, down to the Dri Chu then south from [there](#) to where the main road [crosses](#) this river.



Confluence of the Gyêgu river and the silt laden Dri Chu with the main G214 on the north shore.

Arriving at the Gyêgu river confluence I crossed a small bridge and continued south down the west bank of the Dri Chu to pick up a right hand valley that led to a pass over which the road descended to Princess Wencheng’s Temple. This little side valley has something of importance attached to it at the lower end. Known as [Leb Khog](#) it contains four important historic rock art image groups of some antiquity; 800 A.D.



The Russians missed it. (Map i47-XXVi)

From here the road took me across the [Ku La](#) again, for the second year running, on to Zurmong and over a low pass to find an overnight campsite.



Hiding behind a Yak Byre @ 4,054 metres.

An uneventful and cosy night under canvas saw a frosty morning breakfast of cold momo and almost hot coffee. At high altitude the water boils vigorously but doesn't reach the same temperature as it does at sea level. The coffee and the early morning sunshine got both me and the bike onto the road and heading south. Less than an hour's ride brought me to [Dütsithil](#) for a brief stop where I found a stand pipe to top up my water supply. The valley here widens out where two small rivers join to make a substantial tributary that flows into the upper reaches of the Mekong who's headwaters are found on the Tibetan Plateau.



The Dzong at Dütsithil. The old "Castle" destroyed by the invading Chinese.

My next goal was [Madan](#) and checkpoint two which was, I thought, going to be at the provincial border between Qinghai and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) at a river crossing in the village of Madan. This is where I expected to be stopped. When I got there the boom gates on the bridge were up and the inspection building abandoned. Passed through with some relief. I'm supposed to have official permits to cross into the TAR. I didn't have any. I was going to show my International Drivers License, which of course is invalid in China and didn't cover the motorbike anyway.

Stopping a few kilometres beyond the bridge, for a break and an apple, I attracted the attention of several passing youngsters on their motorbikes. I tried to explain that I had come from Yushu and was heading to Degé via Jomda. One concerned man managed to get across that Jomda was seven hours away. I explained, or tried to, that I had a tent and food. I then went on to even greater heights of expressive sign language to tell them that I had GPS navigation and paper maps. They were rather taken by the map but my pointing to the sky can hardly have elucidated the complexities of using satellites to pin point your position on them. There are times when I deeply wished I had linguistic capabilities.

I started travelling by motorcycle so that I could journey where ever I chose and it proved to be a great way to travel. Except that you lose the comfort of sitting at a bus window and watching the landscape roll by. It is actually hard work motoring along unmade roads. Watching for potholes and the best route through and around them is an intensely energy absorbing task. The incredible scenery you are passing through can only be seen in snatches unless you stop.

This same intensity of watching the road brought me to checkpoint number three, at [Shengda](#) village (Sibda, Sinda or སེང་དྲཱ་གྲོ་མཚོ་ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་), unexpectedly. I came round a spur of mountain into the tiny main street and before I realised it I was sitting in front of a manned inspection post with the boom gate down. Only one Chinese policewoman on duty in a little booth. Just as I arrived a truck turned up on the other side of the boom. The driver got out and presented his documents at the booth window. What to do next. I'm sitting

there, engine running, in full view of everybody with a slight sense of panic. Just as the driver had finished with the policewoman and started to return to his truck a local Tibetan guy ducked under the boom and came and stood next to me without saying a word. It must have looked to all as though he knew me and may have been perceived by the policewoman as though I was a local. The boom started to go up and I surreptitiously pointed forward and said "shall I go". The Tibetan said one word. I presumed it was "yes". So off I went.

I am a great believer in letting the Universe supply solutions and in this case the solution was perfect. I motored out of the village half expecting to hear bullets whizzing by or at least a vehicle to come chasing after me; but nothing. My slight sense of panic led me to take a wrong turning across a bridge and ended up going down the valley in the right direction but on the wrong side of the main river. This led to further adventures involving a ford over a small side river and copious amounts of water.

Crossing the Red Sea

Having been successful at getting through the checkpoint at Shengda, I was indolently cruising down the wrong side of a valley on my motorcycle heading for Jomda and Degé. My previous sense of panic at the Shengda checkpoint, that caused me to take a wrong turn, having dispersed, I wandered along a track-way that seemed to wither as I progressed. Arriving at an area that was a bit of a riverside quarry I spied a small blue truck and two guys. "Jomda, Jomda ?" I asked whilst waving a pointing finger in a general southerly direction. The verbal reply was unknown but the body language said "where else would Jomda be".

Continuing with greater confidence, in spite of the track being barely discernible in places, I came to a small river after a couple of kilometres. An easy stone's throw wide but with a fairly strong current on the far side. The track went down the bank into the water and came out opposite. In hindsight I should have gone up the side valley and explored the possibility of a bridge further up where it might have been narrower. Even if it was just a couple of planks it would have been preferable to what happened next.

Contemplating the possible depth of the water I noted that the ripples were rather large over on the far side. But, road goes in, road comes out. Must be ok to cross here. So, throttle open I charged across. Doing well even though it was up to axle level. Then the plunge. Water not more than knee deep but enough to stop the engine and pour into the pannier bags. Turning the ignition off I managed to step off the bike but had one of those angst moments when the current caught the side of the bike and it started to fall away from me. I had visions of the chrome glistening underwater and me stranded in the middle of nowhere with no public transport due for another 10 years.

Superman that I am I grabbed the bike and steadied it against the current then suddenly felt very lonely. No, wait. A local on a motorbike, heading up the side valley, hove into view 200 metres away. Frantically waving, I was completely ignored. Ok, I will push the bike out by myself. Not possible, the back wheel deep in a gully. Wouldn't move an inch and the water was beginning to feel cold.

I think my brain was feeling the cold too. Couldn't think of what to do next, totally blank. The view was nice though; big mountains, the little river falling down into the main valley and a clear Tibetan blue sky. What more could one ask for other than a tow truck. Well, one came into view and beeped its horn at me. It was the two guys in their little blue truck. Not quite the roadside assistance I wished for but who was I to be fussy when it's the 5th Cavalry coming to the rescue. They headed for the crossing and ran down into the water. Then, taking a wide curve upstream, barely getting their tyres wet, came out of the water and parked. I would have preferred that they were engine deep too. Battling their way across the torrent to the rescue. Would have made a better story. But they didn't. It just threw my stupidity into stark relief. Highlighted by the driver pointing to the route he had just taken and making gestures of exasperation.

The drivers' assistant was made of good stuff. Without hesitation he strode, knee deep, into the cold river and between us we pushed the bike out and up onto the bank. Water cascaded from the bike and the

panniers. Would it ever start again? The driver had returned to his cab and came back offering a pair of shoes which I refused but thanked him. Two sizes too small. Besides it was almost fun sloshing about with boots full of water. At least for a few seconds.

The two drove away with profuse thanks from me ringing in their ears. I stood by the bike toying with the idea of attempting to start it. I did and it didn't. It did start eventually though. No electrical short outs. The battery being high up under the seat. I got on and drove and drove for several kilometres in an attempt to dry the bike, only then daring to stop. Which I did, to empty my boots and wring my socks out. Then I kept going, driving into a setting sun. Well, not exactly. The setting sun was on my right and I was going south looking for a campsite. Found it in a little western side valley, with a stream that did not require crossing at water level. Bridge included.



Campsite @ [31°30'05"N 98°02'05.2"E](#)

My north / south cross country route eventually joined up with a main road going east west which led to the town of [Jomda](#). On the outskirts there was a manned checkpoint but no boom gate. With only one Chinese policeman at the roadside, engaged in inspecting a drivers documents, I decided to risk just quietly motoring by. It worked. He didn't take any notice of me. After topping up on cigarettes, three apples and a bottle of coke I headed out of town. Another inspection post on the far side. One policeman talking on his mobile sitting with his feet up on a wall. The boom was slightly raised, enough for me to get under. So assuming he was more interested in his phone conversation than me I again just motored through at a slow pace. I ducked my head as I went under the boom then sped off down the road without looking back. Success again !

The road from Jomda to the Dri Chu river-crossing is easy going except for the [Nge La](#). Of all the passes I've crossed this is the longest and the most winding of them all. Even the paved road gave up and turned into a bumpy dusty route as it climbed to the 4,450 metre summit and down again.



Crossing the [Nge La](#) towards Degé; the late afternoon weather closing in.

EDIT HERE...

The final checkpoint was at the Dri Chu river crossing. This is a main crossing, in this area, from the Tibetan Autonomous Region into the province of Sichuan. On the TAR side there is a little village pinned in between the steep mountainside and the big river. The main and only street is very narrow and at the far end near the bridge is a rope across the road and a cluster of Chinese police. It seems the Universe has deserted me and I anticipate some difficult time ahead. I pull up beside the group and it's obvious they recognise me as a westerner. No amount of fur hat, dark glasses and a scarf covering half my face can disguise me. The main man approaches from out of a little wooden hut and I give him my passport. He keeps flicking through it, backwards and forwards. I assume he is impressed by the number of Chinese visas I have collected over the years. All of a sudden, handing back the passport, he motions to someone to drop the rope and off I go again. My faith in the Universe is restored.

DONATE THE BIKE



The next trip 950klm. © Google Earth



Altitude profile. Maximum road height 4,610 metres. © Google Earth

Interesting fact: The Sherpa ethnic group in Nepal, famous for supplying guides to Mount Everest expeditions, were founded by Tibetan clans originating in the Degé area in Eastern Tibet (Kham). They migrated into Central Tibet around the early 1500's and then south to Khumbu, Nepal, in the mid 16th century.

Apologies for not including the bit about the squirrel.

Below is the contents of an email several friends and relatives and sent from Xining after a second failed attempt to reach Kham (Eastern Tibet) dated 17/03/2009. The scenario is that bus tickets cannot be obtained by westerners and it is not yet possible to fly to Yushu. The airport there will not be operational until August that year. The context is that I have hired a minibus in an attempt to circumvent the restrictions.

Lete Hostel, Xining

Chu Demo Inga ? (How are you ?)

Well, yesterday I organised a minibus with driver and an English speaking Tibetan interpreter through the place I am staying at. They turned up this morning, Tuesday, at 8:00 am and off we went. The route to Guide (Gwiday) goes over a mountain chain so we are in amongst the snow. One scary moment when the minibus did a little bit of a sideways slide on the ice as we rounded a hairpin bend. My whole life flashed before me. No, wait, it was someone else's life, quit interesting, mine wasn't. Reached the top of the pass, 3850 meters, and took some pics of the Tibetan prayer flags another 50 meter climb up the mountainside. The Tibetans always have, at every pass, a mound of stones with a pole from which they string a myriad of prayer flags. It was great to be there but very, very, cold and windy.

Once we passed over the mountains the countryside changed dramatically. The climate was a little warmer with the first shoots of their barley crop showing above the ground. The whole landscape feels as though it should be on another planet. Their crops are fed by an irrigation system but the rest of the valley was as dry as a bone. The hillsides were the weirdest shapes. The landscape, including the hills, is made of a soft clay like rubble so it erodes easily. All the houses, except for a few white tiled Chinese built homes, are made of the same clay. Compacted walls with flat roofs. The local people in this valley were Salar Muslims originally from Eastern Europe centuries ago.

Anyway, approaching our first destination, a few kilometres out, a policeman steps into the middle of the road and flags us into a truck stop. Caught again. They come prowling around the minibus looking in the windows at me. The sliding the door opens and they ask the interpreter "Who am I", "am I a journalist". The people with me told them I was an English school teacher from Qinghai University. None the less they took my passport and made off into town to fax it to headquarters. We were there an hour with the net result of being turned back. No foreigners allowed.

The rest of the day was spent in back tracking to Xining, lunch of momo's and rice porridge and then a short trip north to a small town with a large make believe temple constructed entirely of concrete. Good quality Chinese concrete. There weren't any large cracks in it at all. It was sort of interesting as it was decorated with Tibetan murals all of which was explained in quite some detail by the keeper through my interpreter, Tsotso.

I fly out Thursday midday. Tomorrow, Wednesday, is my last complete day. But should be good. I have invited a group of four Tibetans to dinner at one of their own restaurants. Will also revisit the Tibetan market for a last look. It's a very interesting place. Frequented by Tibetans, some in traditional dress. They come in from the outlying villages and towns for weekly shopping. The usual stuff, half a yak and 20 kilos of yak butter ! Each time I have visited, so far, there has been at least one who has come up and shook my hand. Don't know what they say, apart from Tashi Delek, but their smile and warmth of handshake tells all.

Hope you're all doing well.

Laurence of Australia

QUOTES

“Clouds are not part of the sky. They hang intrusively.”

“Never microwave the tin. Only the contents.”

“There is no past and no future. Only now, and you’re late! ”

“You must not be the same person yesterday as you are tomorrow.”

“River valleys are formed by gravity.”

“Charity is a seed that will bear you future fruit. Be a frugivore. ”

“Better to travel and feel than to watch YouTube.”

“Arriving is the end of a journey. Travel heroically.”

“He who gives in pain will receive in pleasure. So cough up! ”

“Being angry is to stab one’s own heart. Don’t carry a knife.”

“Mountains, too, can dissolve into nothing.”

“Happiness is an emotion. Contentment is a condition.”

“Look from the mountain top not from the swamp.”

“Beware of the swamp, it cannot be seen from the mountain top.”

“You are what you think. Think wisely or not at all.”

“The centre of the universe is wherever you are. Check the map.”

“Distance is an illusion. It’s just somewhere you haven’t been yet.”

“You can travel a thousand miles and still be in the same place.”

“You can travel for a thousand years and still not be on a journey.”

“Rain makes potatoes contented.”

“A jug fills drop by drop. Better to turn on the tap full.”

“Yesterday was a rehearsal. Today is the main performance. Tomorrow the grand finalé.”

“Concrete is just a re-arrangement of atoms.”

“Give a rabbit carrots and it thrives.”

“Grow carrots and you will have many rabbits.”

“Time is an illusion. Only movement counts.”

“Movement is time. Never be still.”

“A year is the time it takes to travel around the sun once.”

“How many times have you travelled around the sun? ”

“Accept the smile however strange it seems.”

“Do not read proverbs, they may change you.”

“Knowledge is power only if you read the instructions correctly.”

“Swim in the sea not the bathtub.”

“You cannot cover the world in carpet. Wear shoes.”

“Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.”

“When you think, use your whole body.”

“When the wind blows the dust cannot resist without help.”

May the shadow of the [Khampa Warrior](#) 🏹 ever protect your journey.

MY MAP LIST

EXTENDED IMAGE GALLERY

Lhasa & Drak Yerpa

Lijiang and Wenhai

Gyaltang

Degé

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MY LISTS | BOOKS | EBOOKS | MAPS | VIDEO

Books

Title	Author	ISBN	Subject
A Mountain in Tibet	Charles Allen	0708823513	Discovering Kailas
A Tibetan on Tibet	Combie / Zödba	None	1926 Tales from an English speaking Tibetan
Across The Top	S.Wilby	0725107197	Traverse of the Himalaya
Across Yunnan	A. Little	1402159676	1910 Journey
Among the Tibetans	Isabella Bird	1406925144	1889 English explorer in Southern Tibet
Ancient Tibet	Various	898001463	History of Tibet to 9th Century
Baynets to Lhasa	Peter Flemming	0195838629	1903 British Trade / Military expedition to Lhasa
Buddha's Warriors	Mikel Dunham	1585423483	1960's Khampa Warriors and the CIA
Captured in Tibet	Robert Ford	None	1950 British radio operator working for Tibetan government
China	Lonely Planet	1740596870	Travel guide
Clear Mirror The	Sonam Gyaltzen	1559390484	History and folk wisdom
Courting the Diamond Sow	W. W. Walker	0792279603	1998 Tsangpo expedition
Cultural Monuments Gansu Amdo Kham	Andreas Gruschke	9747534908	Vol.2
Cultural Monuments Qinghai Kham	Andreas Gruschke	9744800615	Vol.2
Cultural Monuments TAR Kham	Andreas Gruschke	9744800496	Vol.1
Dangerous Passes	A.F.Legendre	9747534371	1911 Western China
Echoes of History	Helen rees	0195129504	Musical History of the Nhaxi (Lijiang)
Eclipse of the Spirit	Tibetans Sydney	9780646509549	Tibetan Refugees in Australia
Fearless in Tibet	Matteo Pistono	9781401941468	19thC Life of Tibetan mystic Tertön Sogyal, Kham
Festivals of Tibet	Tsepak Rigzin	8186470484	Festivals
Folk Culture of Tibet	Norbu Chopel	8185102236	Beleifs and Superstitions
Folk Tales from Eastern Tibet	R.Kajiham	8186470360	Amdo Folk Takes translated
Folk Tales of Tibet	Norbu Chopel	8185102260	Oral Tradition in text
Food and Tales of Tibet	Tibetans Sydney	9780987556301	Tibetan recipes from Tibetans in Australia
Footprint Tibet	Gyurme Dorje	1903471303	Guide
Forgotten Kingdom	Peter Goullart	None	1938 Russian émigré: life in Kham
Further Travels in Laos and Yunnan	Francis Garnier	9749496759	1866 French officer exploring in south east Tibet
George Bogle in Tibet	C.R.Markham	None	1875 Bogle & Manning's missions
Gesar of Ling	David-Neel / Yongden	None	1934 Oral tradition in print
Heavy Earth, Golden Sky	Various	None	Stories of Tibetan women from Xining's Shem Group
Highlights of Tibetan History	Furen / Wenqing	None	1980's Fictional version of Tibetan history by the Chinese
Historical Atlas Central Asia	Rafis Abazov	9781403975423	Maps & History
In Secret Tibet	T. Illion	0932813135	1930's German explorer in Tibet
Into Tibet	G.Woodcock	None	Early British Explorers of Tibet
Journey Among the Tibetan Nomads	Mankhai Norbu	8186470107	1950's journey Eastern Tibet
Journey in S.W. China	F.S.A.Bourne	None	1888 Blue Book entry
Land of the Blue Poppies	Frank Kingdom Ward	0812967399	1949 American plant hunter in Kham
Land of the Lamas	Peter Goullart	0719505402	1937 Russian émigré in Kham
Learning Practical Tibetan	Bloomfield / Tshering	1559390980	Snow Lion's language book
Lhasa and its Mysteries	L.A.Waddell	0486257630	1903 British Mission to Lhasa
Lhasa the Holy City	Spencer Chapman	None	1936 British political mision to Lhasa
Life, the Universe and Tibet	L.J.Bonner	None	Travel guide
Lijiang	Peter Moss	9627283916	Small glossy travel guide
Mapping the Tibetan World	Various	0970171609	Travel guide
Marching Wind The	Leornad Clark	1590480600	1949 American ex-service in Amdo and Kham (Ngolok)
Mongol Journeys	Owen Lattimore	None	1940's Journey in Mongolia
Monks, Spies and and Soldier of Fortune	Scott Berry	0485113147	1915 Japanese monks in Tibet

My Journey to Lhasa	Alexandra David-Néel	9780060596552	1923 French journey to Lhasa from Kham
My Land and My People	Dalai Lama	446674214	Translated Dalai Lama autobiography
Nyichoe Zangpo	Aku Tonpa	8186230211	Tales of a Tibetan folk hero in Tibetan and English
Our Tibet	Various	9780646501833	Story of a Tibetan family now in Australia.
Peking to Mandalay	R. F. Johnston	9747534533	1908 Exploring Kham and Tibetan Yunnan
Power Places of Central Tibet	Keith Dowman	9789937506045	Religious and Historic Sites
Return to the Irrawaddy	F.Kingdom-Ward	None	1952 Plant hunting in Upper Burma
Rising China	Burbridge	None	Chiang Kai-Shek (1940's)
Seige of Shangrila	M.McRae	0767904850	Quest for Paradise
Through the Yangtse Gorges	Achibald Little	1402193130	1888 Journey by boat up the Yangtse
Tibet Handbook	Victor Chan	0918373905	Pilgrimage Guide
Tibet: A History	S. Van Schaik	0300194102	7th Century to Present
Tibet the Sacred Realm	Lobsang Lhalungpa	0893811211	1880-1950 Photographs
Tibet: Its Country and Inhabitants	Fernand Grenard	548265984	1904 Scientific mission
Tibetan Book of the Living and Dying	Sogyal Rinpoche	0712671390	Buddhist classic
Tibetan Empire in Central Asia	C.I.Beckwith	0691024693	Narrative of the Empire
Tibetan Journey	Alexandra David-Néel	8173030049	1920 French woman exploring Kham and elsewhere
Tibetan Journey	George Patterson	None	1950 Escape from invading Chinese
Tibetan Marches	Andre Migot	None	1946 Journey through Kham
Tibetan Phrase Book	Sandup Tsering	1740592336	Tibetan phrase book
Tibetan Proverbs	Lhama Pemba	8186470018	Two line proverbs in Tibetan and English
Tibetan Venture	Andre Guibaut	None	1940 Golok Journey
Tibetan-English Colloquial Primer	Kraft / Hu Heng	109813009152	Kham Dialect
Timely Rain in Tibet	Gelder	None	1962 Post Communist Journey
Tower of Five Glories	C. P. Fitzgerald	9889746018	1930's Tibetan Yunnan
Travels of a Consular Official in Eastern Tibet	Eric Teichman	817769054X	1900 Eastern Tibet by English Government official
Travels of Marco Polo	Polo / Marsden	7560013678	1250 Abridged classic tales.
Trekking in Tibet	Gary McCue	898866626	Travel guide
Twenty Years in Tibet	David Macdonald	8177692933	1904 English officer in Southern Tibet
Warriors of Tibet	Jamyang Norbu	0861710509	1950 Aten's story in Kham. Chinese invasion
Yangtze and the Yak The	Marion Duncan	None	1929 Missionary tales of Kham

eBooks

Title	Author	ISBN	Subject
Nine Commentaries on the Chinese Communist Party	Annon.		ninecommentaries.com
Case for a United Independent Tibet	Jamyang Norbu	None	Rangzen Alliance 2013
English for Tibetan Speakers	Karl A. Peet & Kevin Stuart	None	Lanugauge learning 275pp
Golok Nomads of Eastern Tibet	Fernanda Pirie	16154568	Max Planck Institute Paper
History of Tibet	Auroville	None	Brochure style
Jesuits in Tibet	Mario Aguilar Benitez	None	Lecture Paper
Journey Across Tibet	Cptn. H.Bower	None	Simla 1894
Key to Junior English for Tibetan Students	Kevin Stuart & Others	None	Language & Dictionary 267pp
Khampa Uprising Resistance Against the Chinese	Unknown	None	1950 Fighting back
Magic and Ritual in Tibet - Cult of Tara	Stephan Beyer	8120804899	576pp
Mythology of Tibetan Mountain Gods	Xie Jisheng	None	21pp Study Paper
Nomads of Eastern Tibet	Rinzin Thargyal	9789004158139	Pastoral Estate in the Kingdom of Degé
Notes on Tibetan Affairs	Cptn. H.Bower	None	1893 British Army in India Intelligence Branch "Confidential"
Opening of Tibet 1903-04	Perceval Landon	None	Correspondent of The Times: British expedition to Lhasa
Tibet the Mysterious	Col. Sir T. Holdich	None	1906 British Colonial interpretation
Tibetan Book of Living and Dying	Sgyal Rinpoche	0060734957109	Buddhist
Tibetan Language for Beginners	Silvia Vernetto -	None	72pp

Tibetan Papermaking	Tenzin Norbu		
Tibetan-English Dictionary	S. Van Schaik	None	Historical origins of Tibetan papermaking
Tibetanization of Henan's Mongols	Huadan Zhaxi & Kevin Stuart	None	Dictionary
Truth About Tibet The	Gerald Roche	14692953	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2015.1049244
What Makes You Not a Buddhist	A. MacCullum Scott	None	1905 Comentary on British military expedition to Lhasa (1903)
With Mounted Infantry to Tibet	Jamyang Khyentse	9781590305706	Buddhist teaching
With the Tibetans in Tent and Temple	Major W.J.Ottley	None	1906 British military expedition to Lhasa (1903)
	Susie Rijnhart M.D.	None	1895 Eastern Tibet Missionary

Maps

Title	Publisher	ISBN	Subject
China North	Nelles	9783865740168	Includes Amdo 1:1,500,000
China Central	Nelles	9783865740151	Includes Kham 1:1,500,000
China South	Nelles	9783865742162	Included Yunnan 1:1,750,000
Tibet	Map Link	0783498268	Kham, Lhasa & West 1:2,000,000
Tibet	Int. Travel Maps	1553415701	Chengdu, Lhasa & West 1:1,850,000 W'proof
China	Hema	1865002704	Includes Mongolia 1:4,000,000
Sichuan	Sino Maps	9787503158377	In Chinese 1:1,420,000
Qinghai	Sino Maps	9787503158315	In Chinese 1:1,420,000
China South	Map Link	9780783498362	Yunnan & Sichuan 1:2,000,000
China & Mongolia	Freytag & Berndt	9783707905977	1:4,000,000
China Central	Map Link	9780783498379	Inc. Kham but not Lhasa 1:2,000,000
East Tibet	Gecko	9783906593425	Chengdu to Lhasa 1:1,600,000

DVD's

Title	Director		Subject
Bardsongs	Sander Francken	bardsongs.com	3 Tales, one in Ladakh
Blessings	Victress Hitchcock	Chariot Video	Nangchen Nuns Doco
Brilliant Moon	Neten Chokling	Kino Lorber	Dilgo Khyentse, Dzongsar
Desu Uzala	Akira Kurasawa	Shock Records	Siberian Frontier Russian. Eng. Subs
Himalaya	Eric Valli	Dendy	Ladakh - Little Tibet
Kundun	Martin Scorsese	New Vision	Young Dalai Lhama
Lost Horizon	Frank Capra	Columbia	1937 Shangrila found, in B&W
Lost World of Tibet	Dan Cruickshank	BBC	Culture of Tibet
Reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche	Sarin & Sonam	White Crane	Quest for a reborn Lhama
Storm Over Asia	V.I.Puddovkin	Eureka Video	1928 Mongolia
Stranger in my Native Land	Sarin & Sonam	White Crane	Return to Tibet
Summer Pasture	Various	True Walker	Kham Grasslands
The Cup	Khyentse Norbu	Dendy	Monks & the World Cup
The Horse Thief	Tian Zhuangzhuang	gzbeauty.com	Chinese made
Tibet Murder in the Snow	Mark Gould	Nat. Geographic	Tibetan refugees crossing the Himalaya
Tibet, Cry of the Snow Lion	Tom Piolet	New Yorker Vid.	Chinese occupied Tibet
Travellers & Magicians	Khyentse Norbu	Zeitgeist Video	Spiritual journey in Tibet
Trials of Telo Rinpoche	Sarin & Sonam	White Crane	For BBC Television
Windhorse	Paul Wagner	New Yorker Vid.	Chinese aggression in Tibet