



Taking on Tibet



Kaila Krayewski

*journeys to the roof of the world
with an honest-to-goodness
exploration of Tibet*



No, it's not heaven,

but for the adventurous traveller keen to seek out deep, authentic experiences amidst a stunning backdrop of pristine nature, majestic mountains and ancient culture, Tibet just might be the next best thing. At an elevation exceeding 14,800ft, Tibet is the highest region on Earth, surrounded by the world's tallest mountains – the Himalayas. Up here, altitude is a way of life. Perhaps it is the region's proximity to the gods that has endowed it with such thick cultural roots – this heavily Buddhist country has been guided by a 500-year lineage of Dalai Lamas, who lead the people both spiritually and politically. The country's history, however, can be traced back long before the Dalai Lamas. Indeed, some archaeologists have found evidence of modern human life from over 20 million years ago in Tibet. Dynasties, empires, wars and invasions have seen Tibet fall into and out of the hands of a slew of ancient leaders, and its rich history is as fascinating as it is protracted. A country shrouded in mystery, Tibet has come a long way from its humble tourism beginnings when its doors opened to curious travellers in the 1980s.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Yamdrok Lake
ABOVE Yumbulakhang

Nowadays, a sparkling new Shangri-La sits alongside a St. Regis in the heart of Lhasa, Tibet's capital and second-most populous city. And though it is possible to get around on the back of a yak – Tibet's native livestock – comfortable, chauffeured, heated vehicles make for a far more convenient way to travel between the many monasteries and palaces strewn across Tibet's rugged, primal landscape. Five-star travel here may be nascent, but it's blooming, and oftentimes, it's in these early stages that luxury travel retains its authentic charm.

My experiences in Tibet have provided me with memories to last a lifetime. From meeting a woman with four teeth and a wide grin in a small village near Tsetang, to watching monk debates at a monastery in Lhasa, and taking in the jaw-dropping view outside my window on the road to Gyantse, this is a country that is bound to impress. Allow me to recount my days in this astounding destination.

Tsetang

The first day of my luxury Tibet adventure began in Tsetang – not only one of the largest cities in the country, but also the oldest. This is considered to be the cradle of Tibetan civilisation, and was home to Tibet's ancient emperors. This large city boasts a handful of impressive sites, and I set out to take

TOP TO BOTTOM

Samye; A Tibetan elder in a small village near Tsetang

them in, starting with the 2nd-century Yungbulakang Palace, thought to be Tibet's very first building. As I made my way to my next destination, I spent some time taking in the stunning surroundings – from the archetypal colourful Tibetan prayer flags, to the overpowering Mt. Gongbori and the Yarlung valley, this place truly had me enraptured. Next, I paid a visit to the ancient Tadrak Monastery, where I marvelled at its ornate architecture and intricate artwork. That evening, I bedded down at the four-star **Tsetang Hotel**, the best accommodation the city has to offer. It was a first day well spent.

Lhasa

The next morning, I awoke to the fresh mountain air of Tsetang and enjoyed a hearty breakfast at my hotel before heading out to check out one last of the city's can't-miss sites ahead of our departure. Samye Monastery is a short drive out of the city. Holding the impressive title as the country's first monastery, the structure is fronted by a long set of stairs that afford incredible views of the surrounding area. Though difficult at this altitude, it was worth the effort. The elaborate monastery's walls had intricate paintings of the sutras, describing the universe, I was told.

We climbed back into the car and started out on the road – it would be three hours to Lhasa. Along the way, we stopped at a tiny village to check out the Tibetan Village Project, which promotes education and entrepreneurship while working to preserve Tibet's ancient culture. It was here that I met a Tibetan elder with a fantastic smile that showed off her four teeth – one of the most memorable smiles I would have the pleasure of seeing on my trip.

Once arrived in Lhasa, I checked in to my luxury hotel, **The St. Regis Lhasa Resort** – though **the Shangri-La Hotel Lhasa**, whose doors swung open just a few months ago, is another great option. Now it was time to explore the city. I noticed plenty of traffic on the roads, and was not nearly as charmed by the place as I was by other cities in Tibet. However, there are plenty of ancient sites in Lhasa that are must-sees, combined with the luxury of a five-star hotel to return home to at the end of the day, making it worth spending a few days in.

Potala Palace was my first stop. Former home of the Dalai Lama, this structure dominates the city's skyline (and is visible from both aforementioned luxury hotels). I found this spot to be most impressive from the outside, possessing a powerful presence that is rare and almost indescribable. Most interesting for me though were the hundreds of Tibetans that walked in a line, spinning prayer wheels. I could've spent hours there watching, photographing, and interacting with the friendly locals.

I was next transported to Sera Monastery, where I had the unique opportunity to observe Buddhist monks debating in a lively fashion over Buddhist doctrines. I must say, it is a



truly bizarre experience to see a monk clapping in the face of another monk to drive through his point, but one that is pretty unforgettable! My final stop of the day was Jokhang Temple – for Tibetans, the important temple. I quickly found myself amidst a steady stream of locals strolling and praying throughout the area. Be warned; this spot is very touristy, certainly far too much so for me.

Having spent a heavenly night's sleep on my cloud-like mattress at the St. Regis, I stepped back out onto the streets of Lhasa once more to check out a few more sites. It was nice to start out the day in a spot free from tourists after the craziness of Jokhang Temple the day before. Having been the summer palace of the Dalai Lama since the 1780s, the well-manicured grounds of Norbulingka Palace are ideal for a morning stroll and, since it's popular with locals, people watching.

We made our way next to Drepung, the largest of all Tibetan monasteries. Though only a short walk, the hill to its entrance put me out of breath quickly, due to Tibet's high altitude. I was surprised to see that the Chinese authorities had installed CCTV cameras to keep an eye on the monks. The inside of the monastery was beautifully decorated – more authentic, I thought, than Jokhang.



LEFT TO RIGHT
Buddhists of
Sera Monastery;
A yak at
Karola Glacier

As the day came to a close, it was time to head out and get a taste of Tibet's nightlife. Alongside my guide, we entered a smoky, semi-crowded Tibetan nightclub. There was a stage, and we grabbed a seat front row center and ordered a few big bottles of Lhasa beer. Tibetans, I must say, can drink, and I was expected to keep up. We drank in unison from shot glasses every few minutes...for several hours. This is the Tibetan way. The show, performed to a crowd of Tibetans, Han Chinese, and me, began with some traditional Tibetan dancing, soon joined by a person in a yak costume and woman churning milk. Next up, of course, was Tibetan Michael Jackson. The entire experience was, how shall I put it? Weird, yet wonderful.

Gyantse

I started the morning with some delicious (but salty), warming Po Cha, or authentic Tibetan butter tea. The creamy drink, consumed several times a day in Tibet, is made from yak butter, and helps everything

from digestion to chapped lips.

Today we are heading to Gyantse, a car journey that my guide told me would take about five hours. The scenery that was to come took on a crescendo effect, getting increasingly spectacular as we pressed on. Two hours in, my face was practically glued to the window, so mesmerised was I by the colossal mountains that towered over the sinewy road as it weaved its way in between them. We crossed three passes, each at an elevation of over 16,000ft. The air thinned. I was thankful to have mostly acclimatised during the previous days. Yaks plodded along the countryside, grazing and occasionally glancing up as I snapped their photo amidst the epic backdrop of majestic mountains.

We came upon Yamdrok Lake, stopping to take in its beauty and stretch our legs. Local legends abound here – one being that the lake was once a goddess who transformed into a sapphire sea. And oh, how sapphire it was. Surrounded by snowcapped peaks, the gem-hued, glass-like lake took on a mystical appearance.

I was bewitched. We were surrounded by Chinese tourists and local Tibetans, but certainly no other westerners. This is the kind of experience that I go out of my way to find. It was here that I finally had the chance to ride the iconic Tibetan yak – an experience that was, I have to say, completely unimpressive, and I regretted having fallen into the tourist trap as I sat on the back of this smelly, hairy beast. But at least I have the photo.

Once back in the car, we drove for a while and rounded a corner and – BAM – I was floored by one of the most awe-inspiring views I've ever had the opportunity to take in. Before me stood the mighty Mt. Nojin Kangsang Glacier, the pinnacle of the Lhagoi Kangri mountain range. At 16,500ft, this was the highest point I'd ever reached in all my travels.

A few hours further along the road, we arrived in Gyantse – a traditional, charming town of 8,000 people, absent of tourists save for myself. Gyantse Dzong, a traditional Tibetan fortress, is a must-see, though unfortunately neither tourists nor (surprisingly) locals may enter its coffers. The thousand-year-old fortress is perched atop a hill and overshadows the entire town. Viewing it from below was enough for me.

This evening, I checked in to the humble-but-comfortable **Gyantse Hotel**. This three-star hotel may not



Gyantse Dzong

be the Shangri-La, but it's the best Gyantse has to offer, with spacious rooms but somewhat dated furnishings. I enjoyed a peaceful night's sleep amidst the clean and crisp Tibetan air.

Shigatse

The final day of my trip started with a two-hour drive from Gyantse to Shigatse, Tibet's second-largest city. While the city – which appears more Chinese than Tibetan – wasn't a particular highlight of my Tibet experience, there were definitely some interesting spots worth

checking out. The expansive Tashilhunpo Monastery, for one, is a fascinating religious site with a long history, having been founded in 1447. Another must-see – perhaps the main highlight of any visit to Shigatse – is Samdruptse Dzong, or Shigatse fortress. This is yet another fortress where entrance is forbidden, but taking in its imposing figure from the outside is a wonderful experience.

Our final stop ahead of departure was the Shigatse Market to pick up some souvenirs. Just outside Tashilhunpo Monastery, this small-but-active market

provides some fantastic insight into daily Tibetan life. Here we found many traditional Tibetan products for sale including – no surprise here – yak cheese.

Our trip having come to an end, we drove to Shigatse's international airport and hopped on a flight to Chengdu, from where we continued our journey home. This short, jam-packed trip left me feeling like I'd spent more like a month discovering the unique intricacies, beauty and storied history and culture of this incredible, mysterious country. It was a place to which I felt sure I would return. ■