

Destination Tibet

Go to Tibet and see many places, as much as you can; then tell the world.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Tibet: the Land of Snows, the roof of the world. For centuries this mysterious Buddhist kingdom, locked away in its mountain fastness of the Himalaya, has exercised a unique hold on the imagination of the West. For explorers, imperialists and traders it was a forbidden land of treasure and riches. Dreamers on a spiritual quest have long whispered of a lost Shangri-la, steeped in magic and mystery.

When the doors were finally flung open in the mid-1980s, Tibet lay in ruins. Between 1950 and 1970, the Chinese wrested control of the plateau, drove the Tibetans' spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, and some 100,000 of Tibet's finest into exile and systematically dismantled most of the Tibetan cultural and historical heritage, all in the name of revolution. For a while images of the Buddha were replaced by icons of Chairman Mao.

Today, Tibetan pilgrims across the country are once again mumbling mantras and swinging their prayer wheels in temples that are heavy with the thick intoxicating aroma of juniper incense and yak butter. Monasteries have been restored across the country, along with limited religious freedoms. A walk around Lhasa's lively Barkhor pilgrimage circuit is proof enough that the efforts of the communist Chinese to build a brave new (roof of the) world have foundered on the remarkable and inspiring faith of the Tibetan people.

For many people, Tibet is a uniquely spiritual place. Those moments of peace, fleeting and precious, when everything seems to be in its proper place, seem to come more frequently in Tibet, whether inspired by the devotion apparent in the face of a pilgrim or the dwarfing scale of a beautiful landscape. Tibet can truly claim to be on a higher plain.

Tibet is without doubt one of the most remarkable places to visit in Asia. It offers fabulous monastery sights, breathtaking high-altitude treks, stunning views of the world's highest mountains and one of the most likeable peoples you will ever meet. Your trip will take you past glittering mountain turquoise lakes and over high passes draped with prayer flags. Find a quiet spot in a prayer hall full of chanting monks, hike past the ruins of remote hermitages or make an epic overland trip along some of the world's wildest roads. The scope for adventure is limitless.

This remarkable place is changing fast. Investment and tourism are flooding into the region, inspired by a new train line from China, and GDP is rising even faster than the train tracks to Lhasa. Unfortunately the modernisation is coming first and foremost on China's terms. China's current wave of tourists has been dubbed the 'second invasion', with a slew of new hotels, restaurants and bars set up and run by Chinese for Chinese. Once the remote preserve of hardy backpackers, it is now local Chinese tourists who dominate the queues for the Potala and Jokhang. Lhasa is booming and even small towns across the plateau are being modernised and rebuilt. With every passing month Tibet looks less and less like itself.

The myths and propaganda that have grown up around Tibet can be so enticing, so pervasive and so entrenched that it's hard to see the place through balanced eyes. The

reality is that Tibet is no fragile Shangri-la but a resilient land underpinned by a unique culture and faith. But you are never far from the reality of politics here. For anyone who travels with their eyes open, a visit to Tibet will be memorable and fascinating, but also a sobering experience. It's a place that's likely to change the way you see the world and that will remain with you for years to come. And that's surely the definition of the very best kind of travel.

Preface



THE DALAI LAMA

The issue of Tibet is not nearly as simple as is sometimes made out. I believe that there are still widespread misunderstandings about Tibetan culture and what is happening inside and outside Tibet. Therefore, I welcome every opportunity for open-minded people to discover what is the reality in Tibet for themselves.

In the context of the growing tourist industry in Tibet, the Lonely Planet travel guide has an invaluable contribution to make in providing reliable and authoritative background information about places to visit, how to get there, where to stay, where to eat and so forth. Presenting the basic facts allows visitors to prepare themselves for what they will encounter and enables individuals to use their own intelligence to evaluate the evidence before them.

We live in times of rapid change throughout the world, but particularly at present in Asia and China. I remain confident that not very far in the future some mutually agreeable solution may be found to the Tibetan problem. I believe that my strictly non-violent approach, entailing constructive dialogue and negotiation, will ultimately attract effective support and sympathy from within the Chinese community. In the meantime, I am also convinced that as more people visit Tibet, the numbers of those who support the justice of a peaceful solution will grow.

I am grateful to everyone involved in the preparation of this seventh edition of the Lonely Planet guide to Tibet for the care and concern they have put into it. I trust that those who rely on it as a companion to their travels in Tibet will enjoy themselves in what, despite all that has happened, remains for me one of the most beautiful places on earth.

HH signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be the name "Lama" written in a stylized, cursive script.

September 15, 2004

Getting Started

Travelling in Tibet is not as difficult as you'd think – at least once you've worked your way around the latest permit situation (see p323) and have acclimatised to the altitude. Most travellers hire Land Cruisers (p343) to explore the country these days, but an adventurous combination of buses, hitching and hiking can get you to many places cheaply. (For information on the risks associated with hitching, see p344.)

On a practical level, Chinese modernisation has hit the Tibetan plateau big time and even small towns now offer everything from internet connections to cans of Budweiser. Out in the countryside traditional Tibetan life continues without much interruption.

WHEN TO GO

Climate is not such a major consideration when visiting Tibet as many people might imagine. For a place nicknamed 'The Land of Snows', there's a surprising lack of snow. The boom in domestic tourism means that Lhasa swells with Chinese tourists in the summer and particularly in the week-long holidays around 1 May and 1 October. Finding accommodation can be trickier during these weeks, so try to have something nailed down by lunch time. Winter is very cold, many restaurants are shut and snow can close mountain passes, but some travellers swear by the winter months. There are few travellers about at this time and Lhasa is crowded with *drokpas* (nomads). The average temperature in January is -2°C.

Spring, early summer and late autumn are probably the best times to visit Tibet. March is a politically sensitive month in the country (see p320) and there is occasional tightening of restrictions on travellers heading into Tibet at this time, but the weather's pretty good. April brings reliable weather in eastern Tibet and discounts on accommodation and vehicle rental in Lhasa. Mt Everest is particularly clear during April and May.

From mid-July through to the end of September the monsoon starts to affect parts of Tibet. (The months of July and August bring half of Tibet's annual rainfall.) Travel to western Tibet becomes slightly more difficult, the roads to the east are temporarily washed out and the Friendship Hwy sometimes becomes impassable on the Nepal side or on the border itself.

Trips to Mt Kailash can be undertaken from April to October, although September and October are considered the best months. October is also the best time to make a trip out to the east. Lhasa and its environs don't get *really* cold until the end of November.

It's worth trying to time your trip with one of Tibet's festivals. New Year (Losar) in January or February is an excellent time to be in Lhasa, as is the Saga Dawa festival in April or May (see p318).

COSTS & MONEY

Accommodation and food are both very economical in Tibet. The major expense – unless you have plenty of time and enjoy rough travelling – is getting around. If you really want to see a lot in a short space of time, you will probably have to consider hiring a vehicle and driver. Shared hired transport tends to work out at around US\$30 per person per day. The per-person cost for a group of six travelling with stops from Lhasa to the Nepali border is around US\$200.

See Climate Charts (p316) for more information.

FOUR THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GETTING INTO TIBET

- You need a Tibet Tourism Bureau (TTB) permit to be able to board a plane to Lhasa, and in theory at least to take the train or bus – see p323. For this you need to go through a travel agent.
- You need an Alien Travel Permit to travel outside Lhasa Prefecture and you can currently only get one of these by booking a tour, either from outside Tibet, or more cheaply in Lhasa – see p324.
- If you plan to enter Tibet from Nepal, you will have to travel on a short-term group visa, which is hard to extend – see p327.
- All these rules have exceptions and by the time you have finished reading this list, all these rules have probably changed.

Getting into Tibet is also relatively expensive. Train packages from Xining start at around US\$170 (including permits), while the cheapest package by air costs around US\$245 from Chengdu.

If you don't hire transport (and it is still perfectly possible to see most of the places covered in this guide if you don't), costs are very reasonable. If you are staying in Lhasa and visiting the surrounding sights you can do it comfortably on US\$20 per day, staying in a dorm room or sharing a double. Outside the cities, daily costs drop drastically, especially if you're hitching or hiking out to remote monasteries. Keep in mind that entry tickets can really add up: visit Lhasa's main sights and you'll end up shelling out around US\$60 in entry fees.

At the other end of the scale there's a lot more scope to go top end these days, at least in the cities. New five-star hotels, paved roads and a luxury train look set to take out much of the rigour of a visit to the Roof of the World.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Literature on Tibet is abundant. Quite a bit of it is of the woolly 'how to find enlightenment in the mysterious Land of Snows' variety, but there is still a lot of very good stuff about.

Seven Years in Tibet by Heinrich Harrer, translated from the German in 1952 and made into a film in 1997, is an engaging account of Harrer's sojourn in Tibet in the final years before the Chinese takeover.

Magic and Mystery in Tibet by the French Tibetologist Alexandra David-Neel has the lot for the starry-eyed dreamer – flying nuns, enchanted daggers, ghosts and demons, and also some interesting background information on the mystic side of Tibet. Another good David-Neel title to look out for is *My Journey to Lhasa*.

A Mountain in Tibet by Charles Allen is a superbly crafted book that centres on the holy Mt Kailash and the attempts of early European explorers to reach it and to determine its geographical significance. It's a must for anyone heading out to western Tibet. Allen builds on this work with his *Search for Shangri-La* in which he returns to western Tibet to examine the region's pre-Buddhist history and mythology, focusing on Bön. For other books on Mt Kailash, see p230.

The Heart of the World by Ian Baker is an account of several explorations into the physical and spiritual landscapes of the Pemako region of southeastern Tibet, and the Tsangpo gorges in particular. Part-scholar, part-mystic and part-nutcase (Baker's trekking supplies included alchemical foods and magic Tantric pills), Baker makes for a fascinating and erudite literary companion for the journey into one of Tibet's remotest regions.

HOW MUCH?

Land Cruiser hire per day, split between four around Y250 per person.

Chinese meat dish Y15-25

Monastery entry fee Y20-50

Internet connection per hour Y3-5

Prayer flags from Y4

For additional price information see inside front cover.

TOP PICKS



TIBET
Lhasa •

GREAT READS

Stuff your rucksack with a couple of these insightful looks into the Tibetan experience:

- *Tears of Blood: A Cry for Tibet* by Mary Craig is a riveting and distressing account of the Tibetan experience since the Chinese takeover and should be read by every visitor to Tibet.
- *A Stranger in Tibet* by Scott Berry tells the fascinating story of Ekai Kawaguchi, a young Japanese monk who was one of the first foreigners to reach Lhasa in 1900 and who managed to stay over a year in the capital before his identity was discovered and he was forced to flee the country.
- *Trespassers on the Roof of the World* by Peter Hopkirk is a superb read primarily concerned with European explorers' early attempts to enter forbidden Tibet.
- *Fire Under the Snow: Testimony of a Tibetan Prisoner* by Palden Gyatso is a moving autobiography that recounts Gyatso's life as a Buddhist monk imprisoned for 33 years for refusing to denounce the Dalai Lama.
- *Tibet Tibet* by Patrick French is an attempt to look beyond the propaganda and myth surrounding Tibet (what he terms 'the mind's Tibet') to portray a more complex and unsettling reality.

MUST-SEE FILMS

Get inspired down at the video shop with these big- and low-budget flicks:

- *Kundun* (Martin Scorsese) tells the story of the Dalai Lama ('Kundun'), through an all-Tibetan and Chinese cast, many of them descendants of the figures they portray (the Dalai Lama's mother, for example, is played by the Dalai Lama's niece). The cinematography in particular is gorgeous.
- *Himalaya* (Eric Valli) tells a community of Tibetan herders' epic story of succession on the salt caravan from Nepal to Tibet. The cinematography is also gorgeous (it was filmed largely in Dolpo in Nepal) and the entire cast is Tibetan.
- *Seven Years in Tibet* (Jean-Jacques Annaud) is a US\$70-million film that tells the story of the daring escape of Heinrich Harrer (Brad Pitt) and Peter Aufschnaiter (David Thewlis) from a prisoner-of-war camp in northern India, their epic trek across Tibet and their seven-year sojourn in Lhasa as aides to the young Dalai Lama.
- *Tibet: Cry of the Snow Lion* (Tom Peosay) is a powerful pro-Tibetan documentary with narration by Martin Sheen and voiceovers by Ed Harris, Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon.
- *The Saltmen of Tibet* (Ulrike Koch) is a Swiss-German documentary (hold on, don't turn off yet!) that follows four Tibetan traders and 160 yaks on their annual trek to carry salt from northern Tibet to Nepal. The scenery is stunning; equally intriguing is the secret language the saltmen speak to each other.

OUR FAVOURITE TIBETAN CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Don't overlook these simple joys of being in Tibet when planning your itinerary:

- The smell of juniper incense, the low murmur of Tibetan chanting and the warm glow of butter lamps in monasteries everywhere.
- Following a kora (a pilgrimage circuit) with a band of happy pilgrims or scoring a lift in the back of a pilgrim truck.
- Overnighting in a small monastery such as Mindroling (p167), Dorje Drak (p165) or Drigung Til (p162).
- Repeatedly wandering the Barkhor (p102), different every time.
- A post-hike thermos of sweet milky tea in a crowded Tibetan teahouse.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A good pair of sunglasses, high-factor sunscreen lotion and lip balm to block out the strong high-altitude light.
- A sleeping bag, if heading off the beaten track or travelling outside of high summer (see p314).
- A water bottle for cooling boiled water (thus doubling as a hot-water bottle!), an alarm clock for early morning transport and a strong torch (flashlight) for viewing the inside of monasteries (and midnight trips to the toilet).
- Warm clothing – a polar fleece will do in the summer months unless you're planning to be trekking at high altitudes or heading out to western Tibet. A waterproof jacket is useful if you are heading out to eastern Tibet in summer.
- Hard-to-find toiletries like shaving cream, razor blades, hand sanitiser, deodorant, dental floss and tampons. Cold medicines and throat pastilles are useful as many travellers develop a cold and cough as a result of altitude.
- The latest word on permit regulations from the Lonely Planet Thorn Tree (www.lonelyplanet.com). Also, read the information on p323 and throughout the Transport chapter.

The Siege of Shangri-La by travel journalist Michael McRae takes a wider (and sometimes testosterone-drenched) look at the explorations, recent and historical, of the Tsangpo gorges, with good sections on early botanists Frank Kingdon-Ward and FM 'Hatter' Bailey.

Travelers' Tales Tibet is an entertaining compendium of travel writing on Tibet by such authors as Pico Iyer, Peter Hessler and Alexandra David-Neel.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Australia Tibet Council (www.atc.org.au) Excellent travel information, including the latest travel restrictions.

Canada Tibet Committee (www.tibet.ca) Click on World Tibet Archive for a useful, free news-gathering service on issues relating to Tibet.

China Tibet Information Center (<http://en.tibet.cn/>) News, background and tourism information from the Chinese perspective. The travel site www.tibettour.com.cn is connected.

Kham Aid (www.khamaid.org) Excellent organisation with good travel information for Tibetan areas of Western Sichuan.

Office of the Dalai Lama in London (www.tibet.com) Provides lots of background information on Tibet.

Tibet Information Network (www.tibetfonet.net) Another news-gathering service with a good but dated rundown of tourist regulations in Tibet.

Tibet Map Institute (www.tibetmap.com) Highly detailed downloadable maps of almost every region of Tibet, with an overview of other commercial map sources.

Shanghai Odyssey Travel (www.tibet-tour.com) Travel agency site with lots of background information on Tibet. See also www.tibettrip.com and www.tibettravel.info.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

LHASA & AROUND

The chief goal of travellers is Lhasa itself, the spiritual heart of Tibet, and there's no better way to get here than the 26-hour **train ride** (p339) from Xining or other cities in China.

There's enough to see in and around Lhasa to occupy at least a week. Highlights include the **Potala** (p108), a Unesco World Heritage Site, the **Jokhang Temple** (p103) and the **Barkhor** pilgrimage circuit (p101). The huge monastic institutions of **Drepung** (p129) and **Sera** (p133) lie on the edge of town, and **Ganden Monastery** (p137) is a fantastic day trip away.

There are plenty of excursions to be made from Lhasa. An overnight return trip to stunning lake **Nam-tso** (p147) offers a break from peering at Buddhist deities, though you should allow at least a few days in Lhasa to acclimatise before heading out here. Add a day or two and return via the timeless and little-visited **Reting Monastery** (p151) to avoid backtracking.

With another couple of days, visit atmospheric **Drigung Til Monastery** (p162) and **Tidrum Nunnery** (p163), both east of Lhasa. You can visit these directly from Reting or on a two- or three-day excursion from Lhasa.

Two weeks

The area around Lhasa offers an excellent range of monasteries, both popular and remote, and no travel permits are required. Nam-tso offers a glimpse of the nomad life of the north. This route gives a good look at Tibet in a short time.



LHASA TO KATHMANDU

Seven to 10 days

The Friendship Hwy between Lhasa and Kathmandu in Nepal is the main travellers' route through Tibet and allows a number of excellent detours. Combine it with the train route into Tibet for an epic overland tour.

With a hired Land Cruiser (see p343) you can head straight from Lhasa to the coiling scorpion-lake of **Yamdrok-tso** (p181) and take in the views from **Samding Monastery** (p183) before heading over the glacier-draped Karo-la pass to **Gyantse** (p184). This town is well worth a full day: the *kumbum* (literally '100,000 images') chörten is a must-see and there are several adventurous excursions in the nearby area. A 90-minute drive away is Shigatse, with its impressive **Tashilhunpo Monastery** (p191). **Shalu Monastery** (p199) is a worthwhile half-day trip from Shigatse, especially if you have an interest in Tibetan art.

A popular side trip en route to Kathmandu is to recently renovated **Sakya** (p201), a small monastery town located just 25km off the Friendship Hwy. Stay the night here and investigate the northern ruins or stay in the nearby town of Lhatse.

The most popular excursion from the road is to **Rongphu Monastery** (p207) and **Everest Base Camp** (p209). A new paved road has cut down driving time to just a few hours. If you are hitchhiking, allow at least three days to get to Rongphu and back from the Friendship Hwy. (See p344 for information on risks associated with hitchhiking in Tibet.)

After Everest most people take the opportunity to stay the night in old **Tingri** (p210), with its wonderful views of Mt Cho Oyu, before the scenic rollercoaster ride to **Nyalam** (p211), **Zhangmu** (p212) and the Nepali border.

A classic overland route of around 1300km that can be done in a week on an organised Land Cruiser trip or in twice this time by bus and hitchhiking. It's also a classic mountain-biking route. It takes in central Tibet's most important monasteries, plus views of the world's highest peak.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

MOUNT KAILASH PILGRIMAGE

15 to 23 days

Much talked about but little visited, **Mt Kailash** (p226) sits out in remote western Tibet. Most foreigners get here in a rented Land Cruiser (p343), though a few hardy souls hitch (p344). If you just want to visit Mt Kailash and Lake Manasarovar, the most direct route is the southern road (870km), a four-day drive from Lhasa along the northern spine of the Himalayas. A kora (pilgrimage circuit) of the mountain will take three days and you should allow a day afterwards to relax at **Lake Manasarovar** (p229), probably at Chiu Monastery. Pilgrims traditionally then visit the sacred hot springs at **Tirthapuri** (p231).

An ambitious but rewarding alternative is to travel out from Lhasa along the longer (1700km) northern route to **Ali** (p224) and back along the southern route, a loop that will take three weeks. The six-day drive from Lhasa to Ali is brilliantly scenic but the rapidly expanding towns en route are charmless, so consider camping somewhere such as **Tagyel-tso** (p222). From Ali you can make an overnight visit to **Pangong-tso** (p238) and **Rutok Monastery** (p238), before heading down to Zanda and **Thöling Monastery** (p233). Allow at least two days here, with a day to explore the otherworldly Guge kingdom ruins at **Tsaparang** (p235). From Thöling it's a day's drive to Mt Kailash, though most groups stop overnight at Tirthapuri en route.

If you are heading to Nepal from Mt Kailash, it's well worth taking the short cut south via stunning **Peiku-tso** (p219) and its views of Shishapangma to join the Friendship Hwy near Nyalam.

A rugged mini-expedition to one of the remotest and most sacred corners of Asia, best undertaken with a Land Cruiser. You can just about get to many of these sights by public transport or hitching but you'll need a month or more and plenty of patience.



EASTERN TIBET LOOP

18 to 21 days

Equally remote, but different scenically, are the routes through eastern Tibet. Road conditions mean that the trip is best attempted from late March to late April, or late September to early November. It's possible to leave Tibet this way but you can't beat the comprehensiveness of the loop route.

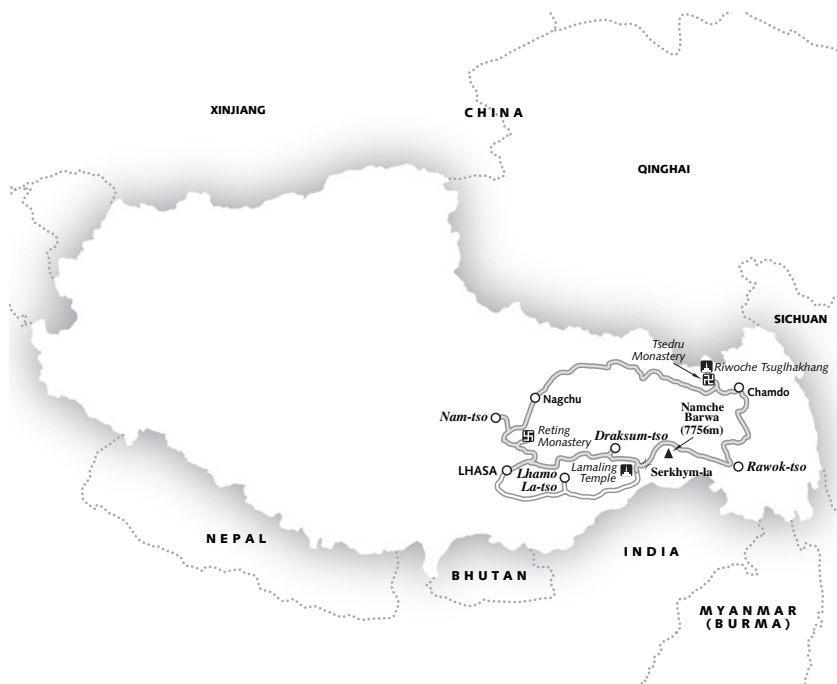
From Lhasa the southern route heads eastwards over a high pass to the beautiful but touristed lake of **Draksum-tso** (p247) and the fascinating Kongpo region, with its lovingly restored **Lamaling Temple** (p250). From here the road climbs to the **Serkhym-la** (p251), for excellent views in good weather of 7756m Namche Barwa, before dropping down into the dramatic misty gorges that lie north of the Yarlung Tsangpo. Camping is excellent near Barkhor Monastery and by the shores of the turquoise lake **Rawok-tso** (p254), where you can overnight after a half-day trip to the nearby Lhegu Glacier. Swing north over the high passes into the deep parallel red-hued gorges of the Salween and Mekong Rivers. Reach the modern town of **Chamdo** (p257) after five or six days and rest for a day, visiting the large Golden Jampaling Monastery.

From Chamdo the northern route continues three or four days westwards to **Nagchu** (p264), gradually climbing to the high-altitude pasturelands of Amdo. The route passes the impressive temple of the **Riwoche Tsughlakhang** (p261) and the remote and incredibly sited **Tsedru Monastery** (p262), the largest Bön monastery in Tibet.

From Nagchu visit **Nam-tso** (p147) and **Reting Monastery** (p151) en route to Lhasa (allow three to four days), though the road can be completed in a day.

A shorter and cheaper five- to seven-day loop itinerary from Lhasa to Kongpo could take in Draksum-tso and Lamaling Temple before returning via Tsetang, Samye and possibly the remote oracle lake of **Lhamo La-tso** (p178).

This three-week Land Cruiser loop takes you through dramatic scenery to some rarely visited corners of Tibet. It's perhaps best suited to a second trip to Tibet.



OVERLAND ROUTES TO LHASA

Two to three weeks

There are three main overland routes from the east: the **northern route** (p270) and **southern route** (p275) through Sichuan and the shorter **Yunnan route** (p337). The Tibetan areas of western Sichuan and northwestern Yunnan do not require travel permits; the eastern Tibetan Autonomous Region does.

The northern route through Sichuan starts from Kangding and passes the grasslands and monastery of **Tagong** (p270) and several large monasteries around **Ganzi** (p271). The timeless printing press of **Derge** (p273) is a day's bus ride further but there are plenty of exciting excursions en route, including to the remote **Dzogchen Monastery** (p273) and the pretty **Yilun La-tso** (p273). From Derge you cross into Tibet proper over some wild passes to **Chamdo** (p257), the biggest town in eastern Tibet. For the route west of Chamdo, see the second half of the Eastern Tibet loop; alternatively travel south to join the southern route.

The southern route through Sichuan runs west from Kangding past the Khampa town and monastery of **Litang** (p275), home to an epic horse festival in August, and then low-lying **Batang** (p278) before climbing up into Tibet at Markham and continuing over concertina passes to Pomda. For the route west, reverse the first half of the Eastern Tibet loop itinerary (opposite).

A popular alternative option is to start in Yunnan at the Tibetan town of Zhongdian (Gyeltang), from where it's a day's bus ride to Deqin. From here you cross into the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) near the salt pans of Yanjing; then it's 111km to Markham on the Sichuan southern route.

From Zhongdian to Lhasa, allow a week in a Land Cruiser. From Chengdu it takes 10 days to two weeks along either the northern or southern route. Figure on three weeks if hitchhiking (see p344).

A wild overland adventure through spectacular alpine scenery. The route is officially open only to organised Land Cruiser tours, but a small number of hitchhikers and cyclists are making their way through.



TAILORED TRIPS

MONASTERIES OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

A visit to one of Tibet's smaller monasteries could well be a highlight of your trip. The monasteries are more intimate, the monks tend to be friendlier, and it's often possible to spend the night and attend prayer meetings after all the tourists have melted away.

Between Lhasa and Samye, **Mindroling Monastery** (p167) is a friendly place that's easily accessible. The surroundings offer some enjoyable walks and it's possible to stay the night.

A short and scenic ferry ride across the Yarlung Tsangpo is **Dorje Drak Monastery** (p165). The monastery guesthouse and dramatic desert kora feel a million miles away from bustling Lhasa, though a planned road looks set to change this soon.

En route between Shigatse and Lhatse is the remote and little-visited **Phuntsoling Monastery** (p200). The monastery has a superb location and there are lots of ruins to explore, both at the site and a couple of hours' walk away at the ruined Jonang chörtén. Permits are required here.

Along the Friendship Hwy, **Shegar** (p205) is just 7km off the main road, not far from the turn-off to Mt Everest, and has a charming monastery at the base of the impressive ruined 'Crystal Fort'.



NATURAL HIGHS

Almost everywhere in Tibet offers superb scenery, but let's start at the top: **Mt Everest** (p206). Views of the north face from Rongphu Monastery are simply unsurpassed.

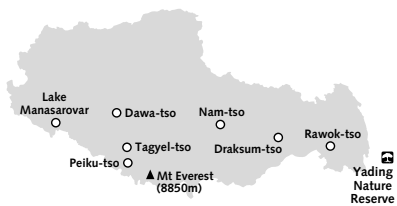
Nam-tso (p147) offers a very different landscape, more characteristic of northern Changtang than of central Tibet. The huge tidal lake is framed by the jagged white peaks of the Nyenchen Tanglha range.

The scenery of the east is different again. **Rawok-tso** (p254) is possibly the prettiest lake in Tibet, fringed by both sandy beaches and snowy peaks. **Draksum-tso** (p247), further west, is another gorgeous alpine lake, with a superbly photogenic island monastery.

Tagyel-tso (p222) and **Dawa-tso** (p223) are two of the most impressive of the lakes in the far west, with great camping en route to Mt Kailash.

Yading Nature Reserve (p277) near Daocheng in southwestern Sichuan offers sublime mountain scenery without the need for pesky travel permits. Stay overnight in tourist tents and then hike up to meadows and glacial lakes or do the full mountain kora.

Peiku-tso (p219), near the border with Nepal, is another of Tibet's awesome mountain lakes, this time with impressive views of 8012m Mt Shishapangma to the south. Further west the remarkable sight of Mt Kailash rising behind the deep blue waters of **Lake Manasarovar** (p229) is unforgettable.



PILGRIM PATHS

Mt Kailash (p226) is the most sacred pilgrimage path in Tibet. The 53km trek (p302) is generally done in three days by foreign trekkers and takes you over the 5600m Drölma-la and past several monasteries and sacred sights.

Lake Manasarovar (p229) is another sacred kora, but is less popular with foreigners. Still, it's possible to just walk a section, such as the day hike from Chiu Monastery to Hor Qu.

Ganden Monastery (p137) has one of Tibet's most interesting monastery koras and the views of the Kyi-chu Valley below are just wonderful. The **Tsurphu kora** (p144) is also worth walking for its meditation retreats and valley views.

Tashilhunpo Kora (p191) in Shigatse is always full of pilgrims. The trail passes chörtens and rock paintings, and offers the best views of the old town and Shigatse *dzong* (fort). **Sakya Monastery** (p201) also has an interesting kora around the ruins of its northern monastery complex.

Tirthapuri kora (p231) is another short kora, but is full of interesting medicinal sites, hot springs and pilgrim action.

Perhaps shortest of all is the **Barkhor** (p102), the fascinating circuit that surrounds the Jokhang in Lhasa.



FESTIVALS

Tibet's traditional festivals offer everything from horse racing to monk dances, plus the opportunity to mingle with a Tibetan crowd picnicking and partying in their finest garb. For details on festivals and dates, see p318.

The annual **Saga Dawa** (p318) festival in April/May brings thousands of pilgrims onto the streets of **Lhasa** (p119) to walk the city's Lingkhör pilgrim circuit. Pilgrims and tourists also flock to **Mt Kailash** (p226) at this time to watch the auspicious raising of a prayer pole at Tarboche and then trek around the mountain (p302).

Tsurphu Monastery (p144) has a colourful three-day festival just before Saga Dawa, featuring monk processions, *cham* dancing and the unveiling of a large thanka.

Summer horse-racing festivals are a centuries-old tradition on the grasslands of Amdo and Kham. The best ones take place in August at **Nagchu** (p264) and **Litang** (p275), where tens of thousands of visiting nomads set up a veritable tent city in the surrounding countryside. There's more equestrian fun and games around the time of Saga Dawa at the **Gyantse Horse-Racing Festival** (p184), which also features archery competitions and musical performances.

Other colourful monastery festivals include *cham* dancing at **Samye** (p168) and the unveiling of a multistorey sacred thanka during three days of festivities at Shigatse's **Tashilhunpo Monastery** (p191), both in June/July.



Snapshot

Change is afoot in Tibet. The economy is booming, new train links, airports and roads are revolutionising transport on the plateau and Tibet's urban areas are expanding at an unprecedented rate. As part of its 'great leap west', the Chinese government has poured over US\$10 billion into Tibet's infrastructure. A domestic tourist boom is fuelling hotel construction across the plateau. You can now take the train to Lhasa and a paved road all the way up to Everest Base Camp.

In most parts of the world this would all be good news, but here lies Tibet's conundrum. Alongside the short-term tourists has come a flood of Chinese immigrants, who Tibetans claim are the real beneficiaries of Tibet's economic boom. Many Tibetans feel they are becoming increasingly marginalised in their own land; the Chinese counter that they are just trying to bring economic prosperity to Tibet.

As the face of Tibet changes, it's looking more and more Chinese. And as Tibetan culture becomes diluted, there is a fear that Tibetans will become a minority in their own country, a situation the Dalai Lama has described as 'cultural genocide'. Ironically, Tibet is now seriously cool among Chinese backpackers from Beijing to Guangzhou, many of whom are as enamoured with Tibet as their Western counterparts.

Yet the more things change, the more they stay the same. Talks between the Chinese and the Dharamsala-based Tibetan government in exile remain stalled, with the Chinese taking every opportunity to accuse the Nobel-peace prize winning Dalai Lama of 'political splittism'. The Dalai Lama himself has abandoned any hope of nationhood, opting to push for genuine cultural, religious and linguistic autonomy within the Chinese state. Fearful of upsetting their trade balance with China, foreign governments continue to be careful not to receive the Dalai Lama in any way that recognises his political status as the head of an exiled government.

Politically speaking, Tibet remains a place lacking basic religious and political freedoms, where political propaganda reigns and torture is commonplace. Religious institutions are repeatedly the focus of 'patriotic education' and 'civilising atheism' campaigns, and strict quotas are still imposed on the numbers of resident monks and nuns, who are often forced to sign documents denouncing the Dalai Lama. The carefully hidden brutality was brought into sharp focus in 2007 when a Romanian mountaineer filmed Chinese border guards shooting unarmed Tibetan refugees in the Everest region. In 2007 the Dharamsala-backed 11th Panchen Lama turned 18 in his 12th year of house arrest (see p196).

Disputes between Dharamsala and Beijing over the selection of various lamas, most notably the Panchen Lama, have spotlighted the tricky politics of reincarnation, an increasingly hot topic as the Dalai Lama heads into his 70s. More than just 'a simple monk' or even a god-king, the Dalai Lama has become a shining symbol of Tibetan identity. When he dies, Tibet will have lost something essential to its modern identity. The Dalai Lama has made it clear that he will only be reborn in Tibet if he is allowed to return there.

As for the present, the longest-lasting result of Tibet's economic boom is clear; the ties that bind China and Tibet are stronger than ever.

FAST FACTS

Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) population: 2.81 million (2006)

Global Tibetan population: 5.5 million

Area of TAR: 1.23 million sq km, or one-eighth of China's landmass

Local drink: yak-butter tea

Average number of cups of tea drunk by a nomad per day: 40

Funeral custom: sky burial

Economic growth: 13.4% in 2006

Number of functioning monasteries in Tibet: 1700

World's highest railway line: 5072m Tangula Pass on Qinghai-Tibet Railway

Average per capita net income for a Tibetan herder: US\$300

On the Road

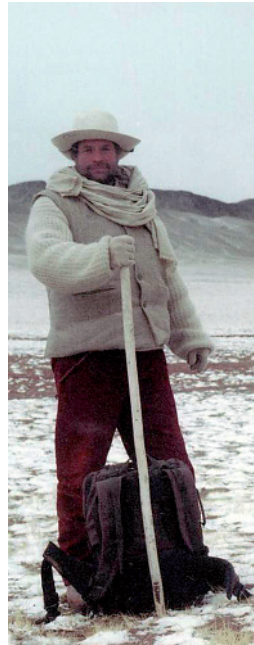


BRADLEY MAYHEW Coordinating Author

The hardest part of researching Tibet is tracking down the names of obscure monasteries. Five attempts at transliterating the name of one monastery in eastern Tibet (Djraa? Zha? Jar? Drayab? Traa?) had this monk laughing and shaking his head. Eventually we settled on Tra'e but I never was able to pronounce it properly.



ROBERT KELLY I'm just giddy up here at Everest Base Camp (p209). I didn't expect to be: it's just a mountain. But what a mesmerising chunk of ice and rock. I've called my dad to let him know where I am. He's more excited than I am. I have to climb this one day.



JOHN VINCENT BELLEZZA

A day hike on the Changtang. There were fierce winds and snow that morning but I was still on my feet and ready to go. Nothing like being in untrammelled spaces for one's peace of mind and physical health.

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