

17 TIBET

The five days I spent in Tibet are among the most unforgettable days of my entire life. It was my first immersion in a culture where religious beliefs are not just lip service or something you believe, and they are not just your life, they are you. I confess that the intensity of these days may have been enhanced because I was not distracted by Myrtle. She was basically out of commission the whole time we were in Tibet, leaving our room only once for our excursion to a Tibetan home. Myrtle, yes intrepid Myrtle, had such a serious case of altitude sickness that by day four she required the use of oxygen tanks. Yikes! I did try to tell her once that alcohol is said to be the worst thing for altitude sickness, but my thank you was a snarled, "Shut up." I thought altitude problems were supposed to be my thing, not hers. Hmph.

Our flights were from Chengdu to Lhasa, and we were delayed three hours in the Chengdu airport with heavy fog. During that time our guide told us a little about Tibet. Her lecture was not auspicious nor peaceful. If I want to be totally honest here, her lecture was pretty much one argument after another from the people in our group, Myrtle being a top candidate. If you know Myrtle, you know that one of her really big hot buttons is the way the Chinese are treating Tibet and the Dalai Lama. Most of the people in our group were of like mind, and once they had Myrtle as their little champion bulldog, oh my! I wondered later if this pre-trip lecture was the reason our guide was sick the whole time we were in Tibet. But later she told us that she gets sick every time she takes a group there, because she cannot deal with the altitude. She comes prepared with an arsenal of Chinese herbal remedies.

"Over 90% of the people in Tibet practice religion devotedly," she began. "We will see them in the temples with their prayer mats, their bottles, their beads, their prayer wheels, their traditional ways of praying. In no other place are people so devoted to their religion. The religion here is Tibetan Buddhism. When introduced to Tibet from India, Buddhism was combined with the native Bon religion which worships nature. My opinion is that the people are so devoted because they believe in reincarnation. They take the body up to the mountains, crush the bones and chop the body and mix everything with flour to feed the vultures. Their lives are so hard that they put all their hopes in the next life."

And here we had the first explosion, only one minute into the lecture! "That is a judgmental thing to say." "How do you feel authorized to determine what makes a person feel religious?" "That is a bigoted statement." After three minutes of near coming-to-blows among the group, our guide tried to regain control.

"Bon is the original religion of Tibet. The eastern part of Tibet has some Christians. In Lhasa there are some Muslims. But Tibet is a Buddhist country, and the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader." Oh oh, I saw some people getting ready to let go their salvos. The guide started talking faster and faster and louder and louder. "The Dalai Lama is determined by reincarnation. Before the current Dalai Lama dies, he writes down all the details of where he will be reincarnated, place, time, family, etc. Tibet is just sort of managed by the Dalai Lama and the country is ruled by a system of combined politics and religion in a Theocracy. Until the 1950s most of the people were slaves. Now there is the 14th Dalai Lama. The PLOA of China is trying to liberate Tibet. The People's Liberation Army."

Ooo, Ooo oooo. I am sure every single one of you readers can see how inflammatory all those innocent little sentences were. "SLAVES?" "SLAVES?" "LIBERATE?" "What planet do you live on?" Etc. The group turned into a sort of volatile angry beehive, with Myrtle managing the stick. And for once, Myrtle and ObOff were on the same side, praise be. If they were on different sides of this issue, there would surely

be some impressive fisticuffs! There was so much antagonism that I think nobody heard anybody else. A quiet woman next to me was muttering to herself. "It's all because the Chinese do not understand the Tibetan people. The Chinese Han are all about industriousness, production, getting ahead. That is not the Tibetan way." I thought she had a very good point, but I think I was the only one who listened to her.

Our guide rose from her chair, saying over the cacophony, "I need to get myself more water. Excuse me." And she walked quickly away. With the target of all this antagonism suddenly removed, the level of rancor slowly fizzled. By the time the guide returned, there was silence in the group, but she faced a group of sullen, distrustful people. Yikes. She opened her bag and started handing out small snack packets. This seemed to do the trick. When everybody was munching, she resumed. "There are differences of opinion about what is best for the Tibetan people. I will only try to give you a little information, and you are free to decide your own feelings about Tibet. Here are some facts:

- After the 1950s Tibet became formally a part of China. Tibet is the only place that pays no tax to the government of China. Also, the Chinese government is giving money to Tibetan farmers.
- Some noble ranking monks and nobles who own property are afraid the PLOA will take their land, so they are against liberation. The local army is stirring them up.
- China sent Han people to Tibet to colonize it. (Oh oh, that was not a good thing to say. There was an immediate outcry about what right China had to colonize Tibet. This time the guide talked over the outcry and just kept going.)
- The Dalai Lama went to India. He is well-educated and travelled. He has visited the United States frequently. China would welcome the Dalai Lama back if he would agree not to pursue independence. ('BOO!' 'What a crock!')
- Most people cannot have the opportunity to be educated. There is only one school in Tibet. ('What?' 'Wrong wrong wrong!' 'Where do you get your facts?!' This is propaganda!) The life span in Tibet is 35 years. Very short. ('Oh my god! Where do you get your facts!' 'This is beyond propaganda!') Until recently the people were into slave-owning. ('Oh my god! Are you just spewing the party line? The Buddha specifically said that buying and selling of human beings as slaves is morally wrong!') A quiet voice to my left mumbled, 'Some of the monasteries used to have slaves, though.' Yikes!
- The Chinese people regard Tibet as part of China, historically. Tibet has been part of China since the time of Genghis Khan. Tibet was part of China from that time. Tibet became 'independent' in the 1920s and 30s after the last dynasty was overthrown.
- Tibet is far away, kind of ignored by the Chinese government. Chiang Kai-shek ignored it.
- 5.2% of Tibet is Han, but in Lhasa it is 35% and growing rapidly. The railway that made possible the influx of the Han was difficult to build. It was built 2001-2005. 85% of it was built over ice, very hard to do. They used high technology for the difficult areas.
- There is not much industry in Tibet, but there are natural resources in the mountains, so Han business people are interested in coming here.
- The railroad is the highest railroad in the world and Lhasa is the highest city in the world.

Three different people immediately shouted out, "No it isn't, the highest city in the world is La Paz, Bolivia."

Oh, my dear gentle reader. What an introduction to a country we had all been looking forward to so eagerly! Yikes! Some in our group, including Myrtle, just got up and walked away. How rude! But then, maybe it was better than getting into fisticuffs. I hung around and kept writing faithfully in my journal.

“There are three systems of marriages in Tibet: The traditional one of one wife and one husband; polygamy, one husband with more than one wife; and polyandry, one wife with more than one husband. In the outer regions of Tibet this decision is often based on economic interests. A dowry is given from each husband’s and wife’s family. A dowry is typically a refrigerator, a TV, a Yak, a quilt, etc.

Karma is very important for Tibetans, based on actions. Many people in Tibet have no surname. They are frequently called ‘Sunday,’ ‘Monday,’ ‘Moon,’ etc.

There is not much rain and not much snow in Lhasa. People wear masks here because of the cold. The new section of Lhasa has been built since 1980 in the Han style. Our hotel Shambala is in the old Tibetan section. There are 2.7 million people in Tibet, 20% Han. Lhasa is the capital of Tibet, also called ‘God’s Place.’

The traditional diet of the Tibetan people was meat because it was difficult to grow vegetables and fruits. Now with greenhouses, that is changing. The Sichuan people started the greenhouses.”

ObOff was one of the four of us who remained to the end of the lecture, and when our guide finished, Oboff said to her, “Don’t worry, we know you had to say the things you said. We understand.” I think she meant well, but I think if I were the guide, I might have bopped her. Big sigh.

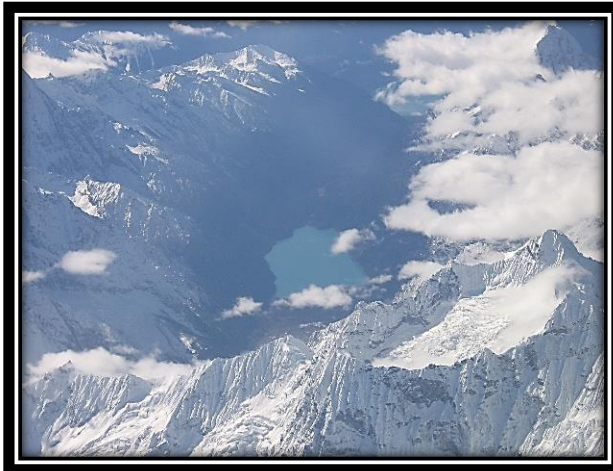


Then at last we were told to prepare for boarding. Hurrah! Myrtle was still in a sullen mood and told me I could have the window seat. Our seats were right above the engines, and within minutes I spotted this sign below me telling the world that this plane was powered by a Rolls Royce engine! I took a photo through the window. Thinking to cheer her up, I said to Myrtle, “Well, my dear, if you have ever wanted to ride in a Rolls Royce, now is your chance!” I showed her the photo, but she just looked at me as though to say, “Whatever, child.”

Oh well. I decided I was not going to let her ruin my day, so I turned my back on her and determinedly watched out the plane window. And oh, my goodness! Within minutes our plane was above the mountains, and for over an hour I was enthralled with the vistas that opened below me. I took over 150 photos of the mountains! Yes, I counted them. Between gawking and taking pictures, I wrote a few notes in my trusty journal, which I will share with you here:

“Within minutes we were over the Himalayas, AMAZING, MAJESTIC, lots of snow-covered peaks, several really high ones in the distance, some bare mountains where snow has not yet fallen, saw five different human settlements in the valleys by the rivers between the base of the mountain peaks. How can people live there? Clouds moved in, Intermittent. I can’t believe the sheer SIZE and MAGNITUDE of this mountain range. It takes your breath away. After one hour of flying over the Himalayas, the cloud cover got too thick to see anything more. 12:10 clouds lifted some, we must be very high up. 12:15 heading into some tall peaks that show above the clouds, then in the distance coming up some really tall

mountain ranges that stick up high above the clouds. Then directly below us some lower valleys with snow, with a river and human settlement. 12:20 all the mountains below us are covered thickly with snow. 12:30 incredible views with huge peaks, aqua lakes down deep, sometimes a glimpse through the clouds of mountainsides or streams far far below. 1:40 clouds gone, now see some mountain valleys with no snow, they have rivers and human settlements. ENDLESS MOUNTAINS, can't believe the Himalayas are this big!!!”



Even today I love those journal notes because they bring back to me the awe and wonder I felt that day flying over that unbelievable mountain range. Then we began our descent into Lhasa. We encountered significant turbulence from wind currents but landed safely. The views of the landscape as our plane descended were like paintings: stark land, pure aqua waters, freeform shapes that reminded the viewer that in the end, it is nature who determines the landforms on this earth. The captain announced that the temperature in Lhasa is 39 degrees.

A Tibetan guide greeted us at the airport with the traditional white silk scarf that he ceremoniously draped around each of our necks. He herded us onto the bus for the ride to the city of Lhasa and he proceeded to give us an abbreviated language lesson. Hello is “Tashidelek,” which means hello but can also mean good luck, or congratulations, or everything. If you see the same person the next day you say “Jus Delay.” Thank you is “Tochichi.” To say something is very, very good, like the “Ding Ding Hao” of China, you say “Yabadabadoo!”

Myrtle, of course, piped right up with a tootling, “Yabadabadoo!” She stood up from our place on the bus, flashed her brilliant smile, and waved brightly at him. He smiled uncertainly, then collected his thoughts and continued his introductory lecture. He didn’t know it, nor did I, but this would be the last animated communication from dear Myrtle for five days. Not until we were back in a “normal” latitude would she return to herself.

“The white scarf is a welcome scarf. The white color means pure minds, good luck, good fortune, and long life. You can keep it or offer it to Buddha. You will also see red and green color scarves in Lhasa. The common people will offer the white scarf.

Babies in Tibet are named by the High Dalai Lama or by the parents. The river we are crossing is one of three major rivers in Tibet, the longest one having its source in the Western Tibet mountains. It travels all the way to Bangladesh, a distance of 1000 km, where people believe it is the holy river because it comes from the roof of the world. The power plant here can supply power for most of Tibet, hydropower and geothermal. The nomads move every summer and use solar power.

Tibet was covered by oceans millions of years ago. The bare mountains here are never green even in summer. There are mines under the mountains for gold, and copper for bronze and brass. Around us is the ridge of Yanching Mountain at 22,000 feet. Here in Lhasa we cannot see the ridges of the Himalayas, they are south of Tibet.



The yaks you see in the field are domesticated. Wild yaks are very strong, can hold two people. The domestic yak is smaller with a smaller horn. Yaks are extremely useful animals for Tibetan people. The yak skin and fur are used for weaving, blankets, tents and carpets. Bones are used for souvenir carvings. Yak meat is the best meat. It is stronger and gives more energy. We also make Yak butter and special pies from Yak milk for cheesecake pie. The cowpies are used for fuel. In the winter it is very cold here, so cowpies are burned in stoves in the living rooms. The farmers can sell cowpies in the city. In ancient

Tibet farmers kept animals on the first floor of their homes, but not today. Farmers identify their yaks with earrings, before sending them to the mountains for the summer.

There are five different burial practices Tibetans use: sky, water, cremation, earth, and stupa, the Buddhist Towers. The stupa is only for the High Lama. The whole body is preserved inside the stupa. Sky and water burials are used by the common people. After death a monk prays over the body for three days, then an undertaker takes the body and chops it into many pieces and gives it to the vultures. The bones are crushed and mixed with barley flour and given to the vultures. In this way the body is returned to nature by being offered to the animals.

For the water burial the body is taken to the mountain and prayed over for three days. Then it is taken to the river, cut into small pieces and given to the fish. So in Tibet people do not eat fish unless it is brought from the mainland.

Earth burial is the worst one. If a person died from an epidemic or a disease, it is buried underground. Cremation is used for the tutors of the Dalai Lama. The tutor's body is burned and the ashes are kept in the temple. There are no cemeteries in Tibet.

You see Mandarin ducks on the river we are passing. They are a symbol of love. You also see the black necked crane and seagulls.

In Tibet the farmers grow barley, wheat, mustard, corn, green beans, and radish. Barley is the main crop. Barley flour is the main food. For breakfast we eat barley flour with yak butter. We also make barley beer. There are three levels of beer: strong, medium, which is the most common, and weak. We drink lots of Yak butter tea.

You will see winter wheat growing right now to be harvested in August along with the barley planted in the spring. In greenhouses we grow cucumber, eggplant, peppers, and bok choy and sell it in the city. All the farmers want greenhouses now. In July and August we get watermelons from the greenhouses, very small and sweet. Rice we get from the mainland and from Nepal. We now have a factory here producing canola oils from rape seeds to export to Nepal. It is the best canola oil in Tibet.

The temperature in Tibet is getting warmer. July and August are typically the rainy season, but there was not much rain this year. The mountains in this area are about 5000 meters. The mountains over 8000 meters like Everest are outside Lhasa. Everest is on the west side. If you take the friendship highway between China and Nepal, which is 5000 km long, and you continue on this road to Nepal, you will see Everest. Everest is on the border between Tibet and Nepal. The north face belongs to Tibet, over 29,000 feet high. You climb Everest at the end of May and the beginning of June, or end of August and beginning of September."

The guide stopped to take a drink of his bottled water. Myrtle, who had the window seat, poked me and gestured out the window. There was a man along the side of the highway who was peeing right along the road. OK then.

The guide continued. "The pilgrims you will see coming to the temple sometimes come from far away. Pilgrimages to Lhasa from far in the north can take fourteen months or more. A family or small group of people usually leaves two people to take care of the cattle and houses, and everyone else travels together on pilgrimage to the temple here in Lhasa. They take a cart to carry their barley flour and

provisions and stay in tents or in family friends' homes or simple guest houses. Lhasa is very important for people outside the city. One time in life they must come to the city to visit the Potala Palace.

The prayer flags are in five different colors to symbolize the five elements: sky blue, white clouds, red fire, green water, and yellow earth. The water in the higher elevation is green in color. You will see some prayer flags at riverside or on mountains or on top of houses. A riverside prayer flag is to pray for no more floods.

The prayer flag is from the Bon religion, the original Tibet religion, which predated Buddhism. The Bon religion has no monastery and no scripture. Bon people believe in the sun and the moon, the stars, the mountains, the rivers. Buddhism has a 2500-year history. The majority of people in Tibet today are Buddhists. There are also some Christians and Moslems in Eastern Tibet. When the Dalai Lama preaches to people, he says, 'It doesn't matter what religion you practice if you learn and practice good things.'

We passed a military base, and the guide said there are many military bases in Tibet, which was a surprise. I suspected that they had been built by the mainland Chinese, but I did not want to comment on a sensitive issue.

The guide continued. "Cement and beer are the two largest industries here. The flags on roof tops change each Tibetan New Year. In the Tibetan calendar it is now September, so that calendar is two months behind the normal calendar. The highest railway in the world is here in Tibet, at an elevation of 1400 km. This year the first train coming from Beijing to Lhasa will begin service. The trip takes 48 hours. It is a luxury train. There is also a bus from Lhasa to Chengdu. That takes four to five days. The plane, of course, is the fastest, but much more expensive. The cost of a train ticket is several times cheaper than a plane ticket. The train goes through the northern part of Tibet, in the nomad region.



In ancient times women wore black dresses with aprons if married, no apron if not married. People from the Kung region are stronger and taller than those in other parts of Tibet. They like to keep long hair and put red or black tassels on the ends of their braids. Some tribes tuck the ends of their braids into the sashes they wear around their waist. Women like to put jewelry on their hats, especially coral, turquoise and onyx. Some put necklaces on their hats. At the temple tomorrow we will see dresses and ornaments worn by the people who are from northern and eastern Tibet."

The women in these photos are some of the ones we saw when we visited the Potala Palace.

Then we were at our hotel. As we stepped down from the minibus, I started to feel the altitude, a little nausea and vertigo. After we settled into our hotel rooms, our group met in the lobby to walk to a nearby restaurant for dinner, which was yak burgers and French fries with some veggies. Midway through the meal one woman rose quickly from her seat and left, vomiting into her napkin. Our guide followed her to make sure she got safely to her room. No one ate much after that, and soon everyone left. Myrtle held on to my arm and was walking unsteadily. Then she started dry-heaving. Yikes! We got back to the room, and she went directly to bed, fully clothed. After the sun went down, the temperature dropped quickly, and I was so cold I drank 5 cups of hot green tea, using that handy electric teapot.

At 1:30 that night I heard Myrtle groaning and I woke with a sick headache but forced myself to make hot tea, which I drank with several bites of bread, two Vitamin C tablets and one Ginkgo Biloba tablet. In ten minutes my headache was gone! I could not believe it, but I was not going to argue with that happy state of affairs. I tried to get Myrtle to take my remedy, but all she wanted was her wine. I dragged her boxed gallon out of her suitcase and brought it to her with a glass, trying to gently remind her that alcohol is not recommended for altitude sickness. She just looked at me with a poisonous frown. I went back to bed and slept.

The next morning, I was able to eat a light breakfast and be ready for our visit to the Jokang Temple. Our guide met us in the lobby, but we were down four people, including Myrtle. Well, I confess dear reader that I was pretty proud of myself. I was making it! So far. I will tell about the Temple in the next blog post. That afternoon we visited the home of a Tibetan family who lived in Lhasa. The guide had given some of her altitude sickness herbs to our affected comrades, so we were a full group for this excursion. The sun was so bright it was literally blinding. I wondered how Tibetans could deal with this bright sunshine on snow without sunglasses. We didn't even have snow!

On the bus our Tibet guide told us a little about the family we would visit. "We will be offered dried yak cheese that they put sugar on, and yak butter tea that they drink every morning. Barley beer is the best beer in Tibet. Today we will try the second level of beer. We will also try barley cake, which is made inside a sheepskin pouch. We will also see Tibetan traditional furniture.

Women who become a widow don't wear a special dress here. Six people live in the house we will visit, which is a bigger house than usual. There is a solar collector to boil the water. There is no stove in the house in the winter. People cover up with rugs and blankets and sleep late. They get puffed rice from the mainland and roasted lima beans. Donuts are served for New Years along with puffed barley (their staple food), puffed corn, hard cheese, candy with peanuts, popped peas, and yak butter tea, which is water, salt, and yak butter. Now they use blenders in the city to make yak butter. Tibetan people drink this tea all day long, sometimes staying in a tea house all morning. Most of the furniture in the houses is made of poplar and juniper wood. They paint their furniture very colorfully with flowers and decorations, like the paintings in the temples. The Tibetan carpet is put on the bed and slept on for warmth. Chhaang beer, or chang beer as it is westernized, is like Japanese saki. It is a homemade beer, the color of lemonade.

They make barley cake in a sheepskin pouch. The flour is already roasted, then they just add yak tea and butter and sugar. This is the staple food for the nomads as they travel because it lasts, and it is the best way to carry the flour and butter and sugar without them spoiling. Three barley cakes on a plate make one serving.

In primary school the children learn Chinese and English. The teachers are both Tibetan and Han. They learn Tibetan first and Mandarin, then by grade three they start English. By middle school they select Chinese or English. If you want to go to university, you must pass English. In remote areas the children learn Tibetan only. Their dialect is different and I cannot understand them. I learned English in language school in Lhasa over a period of one year. Before the 1950s life expectancy here was 37, now it is 60 because they have vegetables and better doctor care. Tibetan boots are made by the grandmother in the family. There is no left or right. The inside is made of sheep wool. Any woman who wears an apron is married, or who was married. The daughter makes the aprons. The family we visit makes its income with textiles because they have a sewing machine, a very valuable thing. They charge 25 yuan for an apron.”



We were received graciously by the grandmother and her daughter, and invited to sit on these couches, which become their beds at night. We watched the grandmother make the yak tea from a thermos of hot water she had ready. The tea was milky in color with a salty taste and oily feel in the mouth. I confess I did not fall in love with it.



We were invited into the family's prayer room, which was, I thought, astonishingly large for a single-family dwelling. Everything was decorated carefully and colorfully, with intricate designs and details. There were 19 offerings of yak butter in brass bowls in front of the shrine. "The Bon people used to offer yak's blood," said our guide. The prayer wheels were circling constantly using electricity. There was such a feeling of reverence and serenity in the room that I could imagine how comforting the room would be for the family. "A family prayer room is used even in poor families," said our guide. "Twice a month a family invites a monk or nun to pray in the family prayer room."

The guide told us that this house is better off than many because it has a water pump that taps into city water, so they do not need to carry their water. We were invited to see the family's sewing machine, their source of income. It was a treadle machine, like the one my mother used to use. No electricity is needed. A foot pedal provides the power to run the needle. The grandmother and her daughter brought out an array of aprons, scarves, tablecloths, napkins, and bedcoverings they had made. Most of us in our group bought something.

After dinner that night our guide escorted us into the hotel conference room, where we were to have a lecture by a university professor. "She is a teacher from the University of Lhasa who has a degree in pure Tibetan," said our guide, "and she teaches basic English at the university." I took notes in my journal:

"Tibet is an Autonomous Region of China. There are three distinct areas in Tibet. The north is the cradle of Tibet civilization and the Bon religion. The Tibetan antelope lives in this region, 6000 meters elevation, about 18,000-19,000 feet above sea level. The Eastern region is more comfortable, at 1000 meters elevation. A lot of Han Chinese live there, and there is a lot of intermarriage with the locals. You don't feel that strong religious feeling in the eastern region. Lhasa is in the center, at 4200 meters, about 12,600 feet elevation. There used to be a very strong religious feeling here because of the temple and the Potala Palace, but now that the Han Chinese are establishing commercial enterprises here, that religious feeling is changing. Sometimes old people who retire just want to spend the rest of their lives prostrated for their religious beliefs. Customs are changing, but among the older people you will still see the old behaviors. For example, to show respect you touch the back of your neck or stick your tongue out.

Thangka, the traditional Buddhist religious painting, is very important for Tibetans. You will hear it referred to as the hanging Buddha because it is a painting that people hang on their walls. Families buy the wisdom Buddha Thangka or long-lived Buddha Thangka, etc., according to what they want. People believe the Thangka will bless them after they take it to the temple to get it blessed. They must keep it covered until it is blessed.

Marriage in Tibet is quite ritualized. There is a proposal, an engagement, and a wedding ceremony. The wedding day is chosen by the Lama. No marriages will take place in Tibet during the dark years, 13, 26, and 36. There are three acceptable marriage patterns: monogamy, one husband with several wives, and one wife with several husbands. This arrangement is to keep land within a family. Young girls in the city have jobs and marry late, but in the countryside, marriages are arranged by the parents. The couple sits on a bench for two days to receive the best wishes of the guests who play mahjong. A country wedding will often last four to five days, with celebrations every day. A family is allowed to have two children. If they have more, they will be punished.

There are two major holidays. In spring the Tibetan women must clean the house for one week, show off their cooking, and get the first water. Then the whole family hangs a new prayer flag on the roof. Several decades ago there were no vegetables grown here. Now there are fruits and vegetables raised in the greenhouses. The air is very pure here. There is no pollution in Tibet.

Most of my students come from the nomadic areas. They know nothing about competition, so they don't study. I think the opening of the train will be an advantage to expose Tibetan youth to competition. The bad part is there is more pollution coming in with the tourists. The Han people think they can find good jobs here and they are coming in large numbers. The nomads cannot compete. My students are at a disadvantage and will feel pressures to study and work hard. Healthcare will improve, I think.

The Central Government is negotiating with the Dalai Lama. But if he passes away, I think the Central Government will not accept his reincarnation. More than 80% of Tibetan people think they are part of China. The Panchen Lama is chosen by the central government. Buddhist monks and nuns still leave Tibet to visit the 14th Dalai Lama.

I am a native Tibetan and was sent to the middle of China at age 13. I spent ten years studying, ten years in the middle of China. Tibetans who get high scores will be sent to China to complete their educations. The parents must agree. If the parents do not agree to send their child to China, the child will get an education in Tibet. Education up to the university level is free in Tibet, including meals at school. If someone can earn 2000 RMB per month, they are doing OK. High school teachers may make this, but not primary school or university teachers. High school teachers spend overtime to make money. A Master's degree is needed for teaching at the university. I teach one of two classes each day."

When she finished her lecture, some of us thanked her and left, but three people stayed to talk with her. I was glad Myrtle did not come to the lecture, because I knew she would stay to argue with the professor.

The next day we went to the Crazy Yak Restaurant for lunch and for a traditional Tibetan folk dance and opera presentation. There were only six of us. Everyone else, including the guide, was too sick. I was getting a little concerned about Myrtle because by this time she had had so little to eat she was getting weak. The guide promised me she would check on Myrtle.



The meal and performance were on the second floor of this house. The meal was interesting, served buffet style, and we were encouraged to taste the different offerings. There were several different yak dishes. My observation about many of the dishes is that Tibetan food is spicier than normal Chinese food. The little yak meatballs were my favorite. I also liked the dried yak strips that reminded me of venison jerky. Then we were treated to cold yak yoghurt and tiny pieces of special barley cake. I loved the yak yoghurt but can live without the barley cake.

Then we saw a special Tibetan folk dance and opera presentation including the traditional Tibetan Yak Dance. It was all fascinating. The first two photos are part of the Tibetan Yak Dance. As the actors sang and danced, it was easy to visualize the connections of this art form with the nomadic heritage of the Tibetan people. The performance was in the same room where we ate our meal, with a fireplace and a stove. The heat from both was very welcome.





The traditional Tibetan instruments interested me, but there was not time to get much information about them because two in our group said they were not feeling well and needed to get back to the hotel. We had the afternoon free, and I spent it in the plaza outside the Jokang Temple, watching the pilgrims and worshipers and reveling in the sensory experiences of this most holy place.

The next day was to be our day at the Potala Palace. Because we had to purchase our tickets in advance, everyone in the group except Myrtle and one other woman made an effort to join the group. Only half the group, however, ended up climbing the 300 steps up to the palace itself, at an elevation of over 12,000 feet. By some miracle I do not understand to this day, I was among those who successfully climbed those steps in that rarified atmosphere and visited the palace, as I will recount in the next post.

We had a late lunch of pizza with vegetable soup, which was tasty. By this time many in our group had adopted the same strategy that seemed to be saving me: very small amounts of food eaten slowly with lots of water or fluids. About half of the group was eating very little, which was a shame, really, since the food was interesting, and I knew the cooks had taken special care to make it for us. Even at the pizza lunch, another in our group left the table and waited out in the cold air for us. One vomited at the restaurant.

That afternoon some of us visited a Tibetan orphanage that is supported by the travel company we were with. This was a most heart-warming and heart-wrenching experience for me. There was a family of four children that I wanted to adopt. Yes, that is not a misprint, dear gentle reader. The children were just brought there two weeks ago when their mother died, and I fell in love with those four children.

The orphanage was a big surprise for me. I was expecting it to be poor, and yes, it was poor and most of the kids had runny noses. But the place was extremely clean and orderly, and the children seemed happy. The teacher lined them up to sing for us. They sang in English "If You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands" and "You Are My Sunshine," and a Tibetan song. The teacher, who is the son of the founder, told all the kids (about 15) to take our hands and show us around. A tall boy, the tallest in the group, came from the back row and grabbed my hand to show me around, and another smaller boy, his brother, as I learned later, grabbed my other hand. They showed me their bedroom. It was a big communal room with cement floors and walls, where the children sleep 16 to a room, two to a bed in eight bunk beds. This section of the orphanage is set up to sleep 32 in that way.

The two boys who grabbed my hands are from the same family of four children. The father died a long time ago and the mother couldn't support the children, so she turned to begging. She died last month, and the children were brought here. The oldest boy is 12, the next boy is 11, the girl is 9, and the baby girl is 9 months old. I gave the teacher some yuan to buy something for the four and he said, "All money and donations are shared with all." They have no heat except in the room where they eat. Oh my, I just wanted to take care of those poor kids and give them a better life. By this time I was almost planning sleeping arrangements for the four siblings in my house. Yes, dear reader, I truly had lost my heart to those children. The 12-year-old boy was extremely interested in my camera, so I let him take several pictures with it. I asked the teacher if I could send the camera to the boy when I returned home, but he said clearly, "All donations or gifts to the orphanage are shared equally among all the children."

The boys showed me their drawings. They are learning English and computers as well as Chinese and Tibetan. Then I bought a bag for 50 yuan to help support the orphanage and I talked to the teacher. Tentatively, I broached the subject of adoption by foreigners. The teacher became very firm. "We allow no adoptions by anyone from another country. Our Tibetan children are precious, and we will keep them in their country." OK, then, that dream crashed like a hot air balloon. As we left, the girl in the red jacket below, who was the sister of the boys, came to me to hug me, and I nearly cried.



To be continued . .