

## 18 THE SOUL OF TIBET

The Jokhang Temple built in 647 is not only the heart of the city of Lhasa, but also the spiritual center of Tibet. It is where the pilgrims end their long journeys to worship the Buddha. Once in a lifetime people must come to Lhasa to visit the temple. If you live well in this life, you will be a god or Buddha in the next life. If not, you will be reincarnated as an animal. It is karma.

Because we were scheduled for a big day at the Temple and Potala Palace, our guide distributed bananas, cookies, and Chinese herbal remedies to each of us early in the morning. Everyone was feeling altitude sickness to a greater or lesser degree. I was grateful for our guide's thoughtfulness because I had been up since 4:00 am with headache, nausea, and a little vomiting; and I was determined I would not miss the Temple or the Potala Palace.

Our hotel was close to the Barkhor Bazaar and Jokhang Temple, so we could walk. The air was cold and brisk and very clear. Prayer flags were everywhere, and their gentle movements in the breeze did indeed lend a feeling of peace and reverence as we walked through the Bazaar to the Temple.



Our guide talked quietly as we walked. "Jokhang Temple is the oldest temple in Tibet. The pilgrims you see are from all over Tibet. People with lambskin robes are from the Nomadic regions. Those with colorful robes and long pigtailed are from the northern and eastern regions. They love jewelry.



Those who live in the southern part and central part of Tibet wear a robe with an apron. There are different clothing styles, different dialects, and different customs in the different regions of Tibet, just as we saw in China. Hand prayer wheels are turned in a clockwise direction to pray. People also pray with prayer beads. The temple faces east, and there are currently 109 monks living here. The monks from Sera monastery come here to debate to select their next chairman. The man who is the top debater becomes the chairman of the main monastery in Tibet. In Tibet if someone becomes a monk, it's for life. They come at age 12, 13, or 14, and once they enter the monastery, they remain celibate for life. I have heard that sometimes some men leave, but I think most of the monks remain for life.

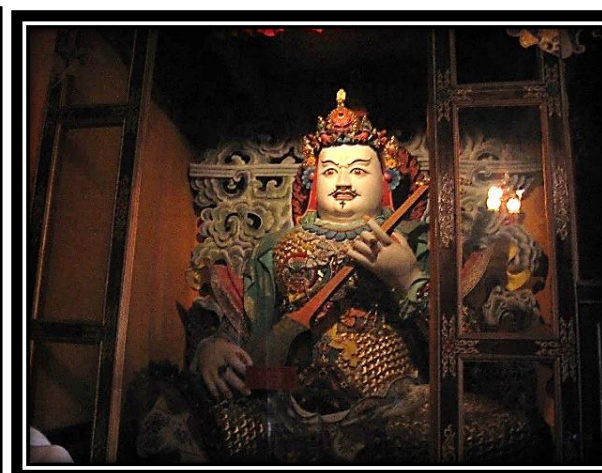
Every day from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm the monks use the main assembly hall to do their chanting. You will see pictures of the Panga Lama, who passed away in 1989. His stupa is here. There are two living Buddhas now, the Dalai Lama and the Pancha Lama. The Dalai Lama is the ruler of all Tibet. The Pancha Lama plays only a small political part, but on a spiritual level they are the same. There are over 1000 Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism, for energy, health, long life, etc. People adopt different religious practices, like offering yak butter for happiness or when someone has died. The butter serves as an intermediary. There is the Wheel of life and the beads. A Mantra is chanted to take care of the suffering for the six existences.”







We came to the Temple entrance and most of us gently touched the brass prayer wheels to make them spin in the clockwise direction. Our guide reminded us to remove our hats to go into the Temple. No photos are allowed. The Temple was very dark inside, and we shuffled along in the outer circle following the pilgrims. The floor was so shiny it seemed to glisten and reflect the lights on the shrines and statues. I learned later that the floor is regularly coated in yak butter.





The pilgrims walked around the inside of the Temple spinning their prayer wheels, and they prostrated themselves on their prayer mats before the deities. There was silence except for those who were chanting softly. Our guide told us that the pilgrims typically chant one phrase during their worship or when they are prostrating themselves: “Om man padme hum” which translates to “Hail to the jewel in the lotus.” Many of the pilgrims were carrying white scarves, which they reverently placed around the Buddha’s neck.



As we exited the Temple, our guide offered to buy some blessed water for us. “You can drink this here, or you can take some home to your family. It is blessed water.” My attention was totally taken by the devotion of the pilgrims. I thought about the fact that some of them had walked for years to come to this holy place. Our guide said she heard that some of them walk for as long as four years to make this pilgrimage.











The feelings of authenticity and honest devotion were so profound in this place of worship that I returned here whenever we had free time, to witness this deeply moving event. Altogether I estimate that I spent about three hours standing on the sidelines, being a witness to this powerful human experience. I felt that I might never again have the opportunity for such a thing. That has proven true. I have traveled to over 100 countries, and the closest I have come to the feelings I had

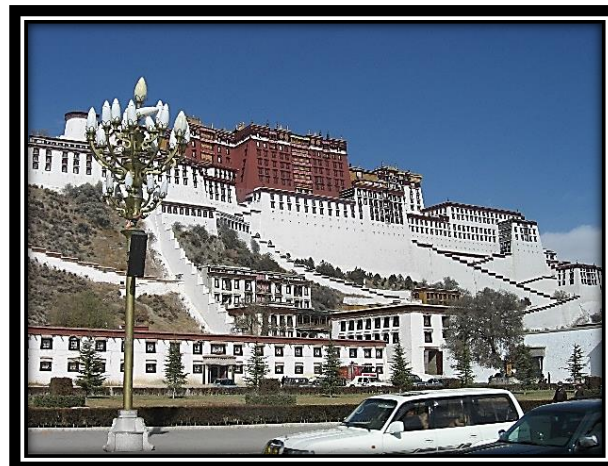


in this plaza was when I was standing on Rupert Glacier in Neko Harbor in Antarctica, overwhelmed by its majesty.



The first photos I took of the Potala Palace were taken through the windows of our minibus coming from the airport, pinching myself that I was actually going to have the opportunity to see this in person. At this point Myrtle was still herself, and she shared my excitement. Our guide said we need to take our passports and flashlights for our visit to the Potala Palace. We need the passport to get in because hucksters sell tickets on the black market for high prices. Only a limited number of visitors are allowed daily. As many as 5000 people a day were

visiting the palace at one time. Now only 1600 are permitted daily, though that may increase when railroad service from Beijing begins.



We climbed the 300 steps to the Potala Palace, a kudos-worthy achievement when you are feeling woozy from too-thin air and annoying altitude sickness. Tibetans do not call this the Potala Palace. They typically refer to it as Peak Potala, or simply, the Peak.

The Potala Palace is impossibly impressive: 130,000 square meters, over 1000 rooms on thirteen stories, 10,000 shrines, an estimated 200,000 statues, sloping stone and clay walls averaging 9.8 feet thick with no cement, with copper poured into the foundation to help make it earthquake proof. The current building constructed in 1645 is built upon an earlier palace built in 637. There are thirteen stories that rise 384 feet above the top of Marpo Ri, the Red Hill.

“The Potala Palace is the five star hotel of the Dalai Lama,” joked our guide. But her joke fell quite flat. She continued, “The White palace used to be a government office building but no longer serves that function. It is used as a monks’ living area and for storage rooms. Before 1959 The Potala Palace was the winter residence of the Dalai Lama. This palace is very important for all of Tibet. There used to be performances of Tibetan Opera and folk dances in the courtyard here, and the Dalai Lama watched from the yellow windows.

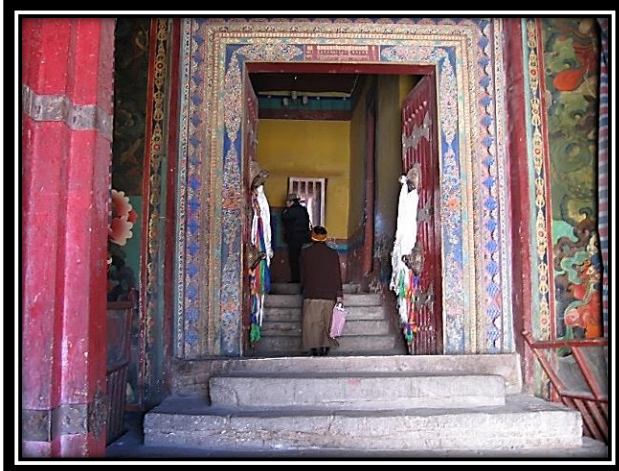
The Potala Palace is now a World Heritage site and you will see many rich decorative paintings and jeweled art and architecture. There are two chapels in the northwest corner of the Palace that were built on the original palace from the year 637: Phakpa Lhakhang and Chogyel Drupuk. There is also a cavern there identified as the meditation cave of Songtsen Gampo. About 40-50 monks live here to take care of the chapels. The special symbol of knots that you see everywhere is the symbol of unending love and harmony in the family. Brocade fabric is only allowed in monasteries, not in the homes. The round hanging you see made of many small pieces is called the Banner of Victory.”

We visited so many different rooms that they soon started running together in my mind: the Second Room, Reception Rooms for the Potala Palace where foreigners are received; the Golden Room, which used to be the Dalai Lamas’s meditation room and reading room; the Eastern Sunshine Palace, where meetings were held; the Sleeping Rooms of the Dalai Lama; the Red Palace; the First Chapel or Maitreya Buddha Chapel; the Buddha for the future; the Three-dimensional Mandala room said to be 200 years old; the Chapel of Immortal Happiness, which used to be the residence of the #6 Dalai Lama; the Burial Stupa of the #7 Dalai Lama in 1757, over 9 meters tall divided into three parts, the lower part holding things belonging to the Dalai Lama, the middle part for his texts, and the upper part for his preserved body. There is solid gold here.

“The oldest chapel in the Potala Palace is 1300 years old,” said our guide. “Here are the Burial Stupas for the Dalai Lama #8 and Dalai Lama #9, who died at 10 years old in the 1850s, assassinated for political reasons. The Main Assembly Hall has the chapel of enlightenment. It is the largest assembly hall in the Potala Palace and is used for coronations, rituals, and prayer meetings. You also see Stupa #5. That Dalai Lama made great contributions to Tibet. The Dalai Lama #4 was Mongolian and so was #5. They were probably relations or friends.

It is said that there are 3721 kg of gold in the Potala Palace and an estimated 18,000 different jewels. A fire in 1984 burned some of the tapestries. That big black curtain you see is waterproof and windproof because it is made of yak fur. In essence, the Potala Palace is a place of meditation and retreat. It is the palace of the Buddha and paradise.”





As we walked down that long Potala Palace hill and saw the prayer flags flying so bravely and eternally and the Tibetan people praying the prayer wheels and going about their business, I felt a deep surge of appreciation that these kind and generous people had shared their world with me, however briefly. I knew I would never forget Tibet, no matter how their culture might be shifted and



changed in the future by the expected influx of Han Chinese. For one moment in time the Tibetan soul had embraced me.



A new guide sang for us as we came to the airport to leave Lhasa. I'm sure he had a lovely voice, and I am sure he probably sang his song very well, and I am also sure that under different circumstances, he would probably have received from our group a rousing cheer. But five days of altitude sickness will quite effectively sap your levels of energy and enthusiasm. Both were sadly flagging in our group. I did not even want to walk next to Myrtle because she never stopped that mantra she had been moaning for five days: "Get me out of here."

Myrtle wanted nothing to do any of my stories about Tibet. She just kept moaning, "Get me out of here. Get me OUT of here." It wasn't until we were back on what she called terra firma that she took any interest in what I had done in Lhasa. As I waxed enthusiastically and exuberantly about everything, she picked up on only one thing she wanted to talk about, and she would not let that go, reminding me at opportune times all the way home how "deranged" I had become in Tibet. "You wanted to do WHAT? You have GOT to be kidding! Adopt four children? Are you NUTS? Where do you expect to put four children? You have no room in your house for four children! And a BABY! You really have lost your marbles! See, five minutes on your own and this is what you do? You have GOT to be kidding! JoJo, seriously, what is WRONG with you? I can't leave you alone for five minutes and then you go and try to adopt FOUR children? What is WRONG with you? You are so proud of yourself that you managed the altitude? I have news for you, sister – your mind became UNHINGED in that altitude. You totally lost your marbles. I can't believe you wanted to do that" Etc. etc., etc.

I let her ramble on and on about this, but do you know what dear gentle reader? I finally had enough and told her to shut up. "Just shut up, Myrtle. You are totally pissed off at yourself for missing out on Tibet, and to make yourself feel better you are haranguing me because I actually experienced this amazing country. And then you made me carry your stupid wine while you walzed down that gangway carrying absolutely nothing except your oxygen tank. I was loaded down with four bags including your stupid purse, like a mule I was, just like a mule. You know what? I am sick and tired of being your mule. Just shut up and go and drink some more wine! And don't EVER talk to me like that again!"

OH MY! Where did all that rancor come from? Honestly, dear reader, it took me a whole day to get over it. That night, when we were back on terra firma and Myrtle was instantly cured of her altitude sickness malady, I found a box of dark chocolate on my pillow that night. Not one chocolate bar, dear reader, but a whole box of that luscious chocolate. What could I say? I gave a good HMPPHH and ate the chocolate and forgave Myrtle and she never did speak of any of that again. Amen.

To be continued . . .