

Finding the Transcendent in Tibet
By Suzanne Wright

The body learned from the spirit how to travel.
Rumi

Every morning as I exit my guesthouse, the saffron-hued House of Shambala, I see the same pilgrims—two men and two women—squatting in the narrow street, spinning their prayer wheels, begging with a marked lack of force. I nod and smile, drop a few coins into their cups and they grin in return, revealing flashes of gold-capped teeth.

Time is suspended in Lhasa in late November. It's cold, very cold, at night, around 21 degrees, but by late morning it has warmed up nicely to 52 degrees. Everyone—men, women, children—have red burns on their cheeks. I am told it is because Tibet is the place “closest to the sun.”

For me, Tibet is the culmination of a decade of traveling in Asia, the sacred prize. Yet it was uncertain whether I would even be able to obtain entry to Tibet. Due to the Dalai Lama's expression of frustration with 30 years of Chinese rule and a series of violent riots in March, 2008 was an uneasy year. Tenzin Bhagen, owner of the Washington, D.C.-based Tashi Delek Travel, counseled me to wait until after Beijing finished hosting the Summer Olympics, to apply for a visa.

“Have faith,” he said.

As I breathe in the crisp winter air, heavy with the pungent smell of purifying juniper which burns in giant chortens on Barkhor Square, I am infinitely grateful my faith has been rewarded.

In less than 48 hours, I've become one with Tibet, body and spirit.

Most people know Tibet only as a distant and troubled place, birthplace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the country that has inspired “Free Tibet” bumper stickers, t-shirts and celebrity crusades by the likes of Richard Gere and Sharon Stone.

Until the mid-1980s, Tibet was forbidden to travelers. Called the “Roof of the World” because it occupies the world's highest elevation, the country has been ruled by China since 1965, when it lost its independence. The vast land mass, located in southwestern China, is today known as the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Those who traveled to Tibet 20 years ago warned me that it would be “ruined” by Chinese influence.

Well, yes and no.

I wouldn't characterize today's Tibet as truly autonomous, at least not by an American's standard. In Lhasa, the effects are most onerous in the western approach to the capitol, which looks like an ugly, sprawling, concrete Chinese city. In the old town, green-uniformed, armed soldiers pace the roofs of buildings, patrol the streets and stand guard with shields at most street entrances. Surveillance cameras are mounted on numerous buildings. At the Tibet Museum, a separate building houses a propagandist history of old and new Tibet with plaques that dismiss pre-Chinese ruled Tibet as a "gloomy feudal serfdom." Erected on a sacred mountain near the Potala Palace is a TV tower. Tibetans are cautious in conversation, speaking only obliquely of their revered Dalai Lama and acknowledging the March 14 riots only in hushed tones.

And yet and yet. The Tibetan spirit endures. Its flame has not been extinguished by Chinese dominance.

I spent an otherworldly eight days in Tibet during the annual pilgrimage, when faithful Buddhists from across the country make their way to Lhasa, often spending several months visiting every sacred site in and around the city, camping in frigid temperatures, begging for alms or selling family heirlooms to extend their stay. And it's off, off-season: I did not see one other westerner during my travels.

A crowd ten deep prostrates in front of the Jokhang Temple, scraps of cardboard lashed to their hands. Inside, the faithful wait in a serpentine line, bent from the weight of carrying scripture books strapped on their backs to be blessed and brought home. There are many, many chapels in the darkened temple, adorned with offerings of fruit, corn and small bills. Pilgrims pour yak butter from a thermos or spoon it from plastic bags to keep the dozens of lamps burning in the darkened temple. Small notes—the equivalent of fifteen cents—are offered to deities.

Outside, I am swept into a sea of nomads, many who are farmers from the distant countryside who have finished planting and completed their harvest, walking, fingering prayer beads and turning prayer wheels clockwise, always clockwise (you can't turn back time). Some women have elaborated twisted lengths of turquoise and coral braided into plaits; others have blue or purple yarn threaded into glossy black buns. Some men sport large chunks of turquoise in their ears; other wear fur hats.

I feel very, very grateful to be in Tibet.

Something curious has happened: I find I need less of everything: toilet paper, food, soap, toothpaste, books, makeup, clothing—yet I am never lacking. This is the end of a five-week trip and I have reduced my movements to the elemental. My hunger for almost everything has abated. By 6 p.m., night has come. By 8 p.m. it is still. By 9 p.m., I am asleep.

And I am happier for it.

I've taken up the Tibetan custom of sipping plain hot water (popular yak butter tea is just too salty for my taste) in the mornings to warm myself before heading up the stairs to breakfast. My suite is gorgeous. It's all deep orange—which turns out to be a very liveable color—and decorated with traditional Tibetan antiques, sheer, draped fabrics, a platform bed and desk. The bathroom has a rain shower with a radiant heat lamp positioned overhead. There's also a canister of oxygen in case of altitude sickness. The staff has kindly plugged in two space heaters to ward off the chill and kept hot water in a teapot.

Bundled in layers, I take in the breathtaking view from the rooftop of the guesthouse of the Himalayas in the distance. Laundry flaps on the roofs of other buildings, a dog lies in a stripe of sun. I take my first cup of masala tea at a table adjacent to the hearing-impaired man who embroiders the flame orange pillows and lampshades that decorate the hotel. Sitting in companionable silence, we exchange smiles.

I feel as though I am living like a local.

In fact, there are just two other guests in residence in the 10-room boutique hotel currently, married Chinese-Canadian documentary filmmakers that I dine with at breakfast and dinner. At dinner, we stretch out on the pillows, sipping shots of Jack Daniels and eating yak momos (dumplings) or yak pizza. By now, I have become friendly enough to simply pull back the drape that separates the kitchen from the dining room, greet the twenty-something female chef and servers by name, and place my order. It is so cold that eggs only need refrigeration in the summer; yak butter never needs it. Yet this kitchen, like all kitchens is cozy. I perch on a stool and we talk about skin care and boyfriends. They share copies of English fashion magazines with me and I reciprocate with Swiss chocolate or a tube of lipstick. Sometimes Jigme, the office manager, stops in for a cup of tea. It sounds like a cliché, but it is true: Tibetans are friendly, with a playful sense of humor. I feel like I'm with old friends.

My guide Yangal, arrives around 10 a.m. along with our driver, and we set off touring. Sera, Drepung and Ganden are the three greatest monasteries in the country. Because of the unrest, Ganden is closed, but I visit both Sera and Drepung Monasteries. I have heard much about the famed “monk's debates” that occur in the main courtyard at Sera, but sadly, the stones are silent and empty. At Sera, I notice ash smudged on a child's nose; it is believed to quiet crying. In fact, Tibetan children seem universally good, quiet and observant, whether they are clutching their mother's hand or lashed to her back in a length of colorful cotton fabric.

The Potala Palace, once a meditation site for King Songstan Gampo, was the principal residence of the Dalai Lama until he fled to Dharamsala following the invasion and uprising in 1959. Today it's a museum and visits are strictly monitored. Situated on “Red Hill” the singular architecture—a flat roofed, sloped white and red stone structure—rises 13 stories and contains more than 1,000 rooms, 10,000 shrines and 200,000 statues. The interiors are a riot of color and opulence: handcrafted, intricately decorated furniture, gold-leafed statues emblazoned with precious stones. Peacock

feathers adorn every altar; it is considered a holy bird. And yet there are no pictures of the current 14th Dalai Lama, the beautiful and bespectacled figure so familiar to Americans. It's like visiting Vatican City without pictures of the sitting Pope.

One day, we set out early on a day trip to Samye Monastery, the oldest in the country. Our driver knows a shortcut—on bone-crunching gravel “roads.” The landscape in central Tibet is desert-like: scrubby, with undulating gold sand dunes, buttes and boulders with snow-capped mountains in the distance. At one point there is a traffic jam—of sheep. The driver honks his horn and the herder flicks a few butts with a switch, but the sheep refuse to give way. We stop at a small village monastery; our driver is related to a high lama. Inside, the light is gloamy. Our timing is fortuitous: the monks are chanting. I become lost in a trance of throat singing by a sea of terracotta-robed monks.

The unique construction of Samye, built in the 8th century monastery, draws Tibetan pilgrims, many of whom have walked on foot for weeks. It is most famous for its sacred mandala design, which represents the Buddhist universe. The complex is surrounded by a wall topped with tiny chortens; in each corner are four large, brightly colored chortens. There are beautiful murals in the temples, but the most arresting site is a statue with an eye carefully painted on the palm of each of a thousand hands.

Tattered prayer flags held aloft on twigs punctuate the landscape. They are colorful, enduring reminders: I was here, I was here, I was here.

In Lhasa, I pass countless hours wandering.

In the market, I learn to distinguish different grades of yak butter, admire the butchering skills of slender men attacking rosy yak carcasses, smell pungent chillies, sample winter fruits, finger “sky” beads, fragile, thumb-sized dark brown stones with a white pattern. In the street, I buy momos steamed in large drum-like kettles, popping them like M&Ms in my mouth. I watch an artisan paint gold curlicues onto a scarlet door in a Muslim community.

Today I buy souvenirs. A small crowd forms as Yungyal helps me buy a *chang pot*, a canteen used for rice whiskey, and a *gyaling*, a curved horn used by monks, from a street vendor. Both are wrapped in leather and leopard skin and studded with amber, turquoise and coral. Kunsang, at Shambala's front desk, carefully wraps them for my return to the U.S.

I have read about a massage clinic started by a blind German woman and staffed by blind Tibetan therapists. The room is unceremonious and certainly not private. I climb onto the table (one of three) while the therapists casually chat me up along with the other waiting patients and their families. I don't disrobe, except my feet, which are warmed by a heat lamp. The young man's practiced fingers work through layers of clothing, finding tender trigger points and soothing knots.

Late one afternoon, Kunsang offers to accompany me to Mayke Ame, a five-minute walk from the Shambala. Tibetan food is all made to order, simple but flavorful. I like the Juoma corn which has a dice of hard-to-find chicken (yak is the thing in Tibet). On the way back to the hotel, we stop to buy a brass mandala. I ask the seller for a length of string. Her fingers moving with a fierce grace as she intricately knots red string and presents it to me. It hangs from my rearview mirror in my car, a reminder of my Tibetan time.

There's other exorcisms. Chokpori Medicine School, located on "Iron Mountain," opposite the Potala Palace is a holy mountain that features more than 1,000 Buddhas carved into the rock, some dating back 500 years. It is dusk and pilgrims throng the small space in front of the mountain, as the temperature drops in the fading sunlight. Some believers press their foreheads against murals depicting power, compassion and wisdom; others prostrate, some 10 deep, in reverence.

Considered the sister temple of Jokhang Temple, Ramoche Temple was constructed as a shrine to a revered statue. Rebuilt several times, its architecture reflects both Tibetan and Han influences. A popular attraction, the temple attracts a swarm of pilgrims to the grounds and Tibetan relics including encased lotus flowers, coiling clouds and jewelry. Norbulinka ("jeweled garden") Palace is the walled summer palace of the Dalai Lama. Inside, were beautifully painted walls of the life of Buddha and the history of the Tibetan people. Numerous rooms decorated with colorful paintings and furniture can be viewed. I try to imagine His Holiness as a child scampering through the rooms.

I can imagine how lush it must be to stroll on a sunny summer day with a canopy of trees and blooming flowers amid the pavilions and pools. Today, more than 100 visiting monks pose in front of the main entrance, some with shy smiles, others with solemnly set faces. The photographer snaps a few photos, then the monks break, scattering like vivid seeds across the grounds.

My favorite interaction occurs at the Tsamkhung Nunnery, the only nunnery in Lhasa. The nuns run a printing shop. "Please sit down," beckons one as I enter the room where they work. I crouch and watch, fascinated, as they wind prayers into thumb-sized yellow cylinders. Slowly, my presence invites questions: Where are you from? What do you do? Are you married? How old are you? Are you Buddhist? Do you like Tibet? I answer, then ask my own questions and we laugh, passing 45 minutes this way.

One nun, NorYang, with close-cropped dark hair and a face that recalls Ingrid Bergman, sits in a chilly alcove offering blessings to visitors. I accept a blessing and it turns into an impromptu English lesson, as together we turn the pages of an old grammar text.

In Tibet, it seems its easy for a nun and a writer, residing in opposite corners of the world, spend an hour chatting, finding the common thread of our shared spirituality.

Travel well: Negotiating entry into Tibet can be daunting. I recommend using Tenzin Bhagen at Tashi Delek Travel, 202-492-0902; www.tashidelektravel.com. Bhagen will

customize an itinerary based on your interests, arrange transfers and secure visas and other required paperwork. The easiest gateway into Lhasa is Chengdu, China. I stayed at the ravishing Shangri-La Hotel, <http://www.shangri-la.com>.