

The Sabbatical Journey - Part 2: Tibet

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We were moving on to a country where Buddhism lies close to the native people's hearts. The Buddha had discovered that 'Nirvana', which means literally "blowing out", is finding the sacred within oneself.

The Buddha said that the pursuit of our desires and needs, which fill up and spoil our own lives and those of others, can be blown out by loving kindness or Maitri. This loving kindness can be found in each one of us but it needs to be practiced and meditated upon by right mindfulness.

Tibetan Buddhists practice this through prayer, meditation, pilgrimage, and alms-giving - seeing the need to transcend ourselves as at the heart of their faith.

Greeted by white prayer scarves and prayerful words we landed in Tibet, the prayers of the pilgrims and monks having worked, despite the bumpy landing by China Air!

It had always been an ambition of mine to visit Tibet and see the Himalayas and here we were on a very bumpy bus journey from the airport to Lhasa, about 2 1/2-3 hours surrounded by icy mountains and stone-built two storey houses beautifully painted and fluttering prayer-flags.

We passed many newly planted trees which the local Buddhist guide pointed out had been planted by Buddhist Tibetans as part of their care for creation. There were painted ladders on the cliff faces which were prayers for tranquillity and success, reaching for the heavens, and fluttering, coloured prayer flags tied on strings across the roads and from every building along the way.

We stopped off at our first Buddhist stupa or shrine housing a relic and marvelled at the devotion and care shown to it by pilgrims and those who lived nearby. We had a quick stop at our hotel before wandering

out into the town, slowly, to acclimatise to the altitude.

The town of Lhasa was heaving with pilgrims, Tibetans, market traders, monks and armed Chinese militia on every street corner. We had a huge meal which included the local meat, yak, and then found ourselves with headaches: the altitude sickness and acclimatisation had set in! This was not helped by the local karaoke bar noisily keeping us awake until about four in the morning.



The hotel had provided a couple of cylinders of oxygen and altitude sickness tablets in case we needed them – Doug and I went for the tablets and others who suffered from asthma in our party found the oxygen a relief.

We had to acclimatise slowly so we had a quiet day visiting the Jokhang Temple, only metres from our hotel.

Hundreds of pilgrims were prostrating themselves on prayer mats outside the temple (apparently they do this for eight hours a day for three months as part of their devotions). Others were prayerfully walking around the temple in a clockwise direction, most of them women in Tibetan long black skirts and colourful apron-like front pieces and blouses.



Alms-giving was very important and the pilgrims were given food and water by the local people. Money was being given all around every shrine in the temple, and copious quantities of yak butter were brought in by Tibetans for the lighting of prayer candles – wicks set into this heavy, sickly smelling melted butter filling the air and atmosphere of the darkened temple.

There were the gold statues of the Buddha, Ashoka and even some of Ashoka's wives. On the temple rooftop, was a huge complex housing prayer rooms, monks and many shrines, prayer flags fluttered in the cold mountain air with clear views of the Himalayas all around. It was a strange sensation of icy winds and hot sunshine in the thin air "on the rooftop of the world".

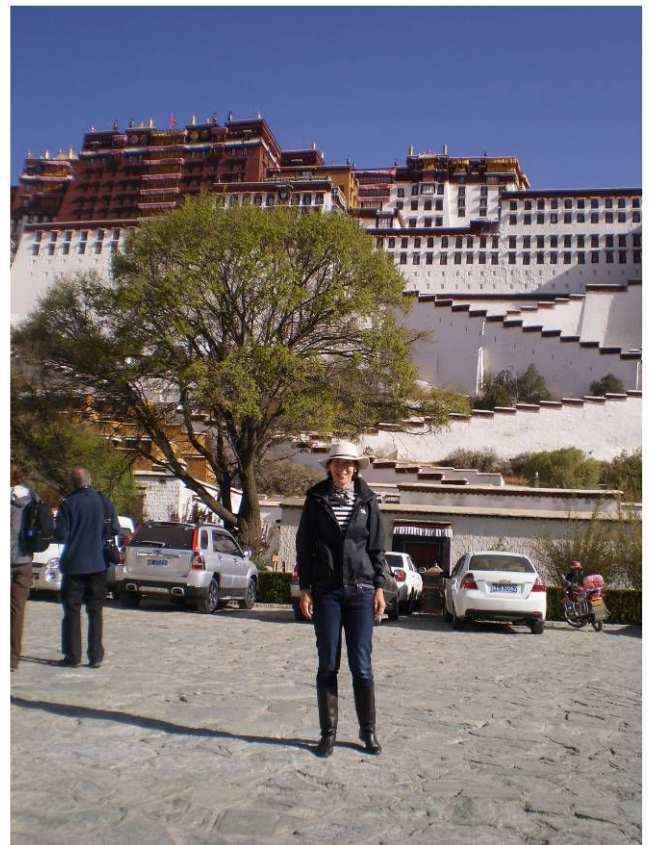
Outside the temple we haggled for prayer-flags and beads, and then wandered around for ages to find a post office, which we eventually found in the "smart sophisticated" Han Chinese end of Lhasa, a stark contrast to the markets and peasant Tibetan side of town.

After a "yak sizzler"- yak steaks brought sizzling to the table or yak pizzas or, in my case, vegetarian Tibetan food, which were dumplings of pasta wound around various root vegetables, we caught bicycle rickshaws to see the Pothala Palace at night.

The view of the great Buddhist palace, the seat of the Dalai Lamas and other monks, was far better than in the photos in the brochures and books which seemed to

make it look more like a block of flats than the palace that it is.

Back at the Hotel it was strange to see China TV showing live coverage of Prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding, half a world away; during the sermon they cut away to talk about the economics and costs of the wedding. It seemed that for a moment the world news began with a good news item.



Another early start to get to the Pothala Palace in good time before the rush, but already hundreds of pilgrims were walking around the whole palace and queuing to get in. We were all thoroughly security checked, even more than the usual Chinese checking which was very thorough - this time not just our bags but body frisking too!

There were hundreds of very steep steps to climb and a member of our tour had to turn back which was a great disappointment to him, but the altitude made every step up or even down very difficult.

Inside, room after room was filled with beautiful painted colours, wall hangings,

statues, precious scriptures and manuscripts, yak butter candles, devoted monks and some impressive tombs for the remains of former Dalai Lamas.



The shrines had been made of huge amounts of gold that the devoted Tibetans had given, family jewellery, wedding rings all melted down to make a huge glorious golden tomb to remember the Lama.

Here we saw more examples of living, active, worship by devoted pilgrims and monks alike, carefully watched over by the Chinese. The Dalai Llamas in the past had ruled Tibet, with religion inextricably linked with politics which was still the case for the indigenous Tibetans but a huge cause of concern for the Chinese.



After lunch we went to the yellow hat monastery where we found the monks actively engaged in discourse. This involved the monks sitting outside on mats, arguing theological points by talking or even

shouting and striking their hand in a most unserene but dramatic way.

It was a great privilege to be able to sit and take in their intense and earnest discussions. Some of the younger monks, still in their teens, seemed to use this as a way of exercise, leaping from one leg to another to press their point home to the others or to question the others.

In another part of the monastery we came across a monk turning an enormous prayer wheel with a prayer stick, he offered to touch us with the stick for prayers. All of us went forward for prayer and it was a moving experience to be prayed for in this very different tradition.

By the evening most of us felt somewhat unwell due to the altitude with sickness or headaches and unfortunately the karaoke carried on again into the small hours and this time it seemed even more raucous.



Another early start to get to the airport, but already hundreds of pilgrims were walking around the city, a three hour walk, which they did every morning. They were predominantly older people, freed from the obligations of household and work, although there were some young people amongst them. As they walked they would twirl their prayer wheels and seemed completely involved in their contemplation of the divine a beautiful serene sight in the face of the hard oppression of the political regime.

Next stop Nepal!