

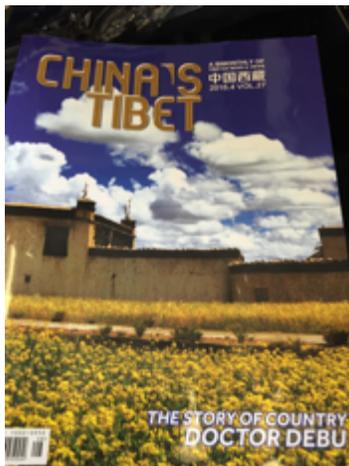
Shanghai Journal 10-6-16 (Tibet Trip)

Tashi delek (Hello in Tibetan):

We arrived in Lhasa on Friday September 30 and were supposed to stay until Friday October 8. Unfortunately, Ravi was too sick to go to Everest so we missed that part of the journey and came back to Shanghai two days early. We were heartbroken to miss seeing Everest, but all that we did get to see was unforgettable.

Our guide for the week, Tashi Yongphel, was at the airport holding a sign with my name on it and was surprised when he saw me because Lee is a common Korean surname. Our driver for the week, Dolma Tsering, was very friendly though he did not speak English so we communicated mostly through smiles and the two Tibetan phrases I learned – Hello (see above) and thank you (tu jay chay).

The airplane magazine and signs along the road on our drive from the airport reinforced what I read in *The Emperor Far Away* (see previous journal) about the relationship between Tibet and the current Chinese government. The magazine titled “China’s Tibet” makes clear who is in control and we saw that phrase repeatedly. The sign below depicts Chinese leaders from Mao to the present with the seat of government in Beijing in the background atop images of happy minorities below. Another sign read, “Enhance ethnic solidarity and build a beautiful China’s Tibet.” In the past twenty years, the government has created incentives and built housing for Han Chinese to move to Tibet and there are high rises going up all along the outer rim of the city.



Our hotel was right in the center of the old city where most Tibetans in Lhasa live, shop and pray and was also near the Muslim quarter and the Lhasa mosque. It was a perfect location because we could wander through the winding lanes around Barkhor Square and Jokhang Temple, and find many small shops and places to eat. Behind our hotel was a workshop of artisans who craft statues of Buddha and other objects for all the temples in Tibet. It was very cool to watch them work. Next door

was a shop with items made by Tibetan artisans and all the profit goes back to them. I bought a small wool bag and carved rocks in the Tibetan language.



As prescribed by our NY doctor, Ravi and I started taking the medicine we got for altitude sickness (Diamox) the day before we left for Tibet. Big mistake! It really did a job on Ravi's stomach and he never recovered. For me it created a weird tingling in my fingers and toes, but once I stopped taking it I was fine. We brought ginkgo biloba from the U.S. but forgot it in Shanghai. That or the Tibetan medicine would have been far better for us.

Our tour group included Marianna and Milos from Slovakia, Max from France, Debra from Holland, Adrian from Mexico (who teaches Spanish in Beijing), and Susan from Australia. We were the oldest by far. Susan was probably in her 50s, Marianna and Milos mid-40s, Debra early 30s, Max and Adrian twenty something.

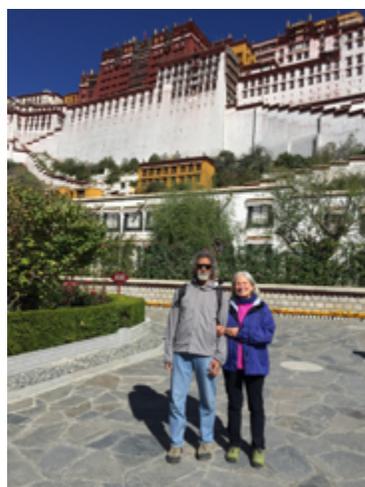
It was a very congenial group except for Susan who we found hard to deal with – very Eurocentric in the worst way. Just one example: at dinner one night she said, “I won’t consider China civilized until they deal with the environment, human rights and animal rights.” I was triggered by her righteousness and use of the term “civilized.” My response was that many Chinese people are concerned about these issues too and it’s not fair to confuse current government policies with the people, let alone with a 5000+ year-old civilization. I could have cited Australia’s treatment of aboriginal people (and U.S. treatment of Native people and people of color for that matter) and nobody calls these countries uncivilized. What bothered me was that she was always very definite in pronouncing on other cultures as she described her travels in India and other places. I also observed the imperious way she spoke to our guide and others who were providing service to us. Luckily, everyone else was terrific- really interesting, thoughtful people who were genuinely open and fun to be with. Unfortunately, Ravi was not there when we took the group photo below but Adrian is going to photo shop him into the photo and send it to me when he gets back to Beijing.



Susan, Adrian, me, Marianna, Milos, Debra, Max Tashi & Doma

Ravi and Milos

The tour packet said we would stay in Lhasa for the first two days in order to take it easy and get used to the altitude (almost 12,000 feet above sea level). The first day was anything but easy! Our first stop was the Potala Palace (built between 1645 and 1690) where we climbed 24 floors and according to Ravi’s iPhone walked 10 kilometers in the hot sun – and that was just the first stop of the day! The Potala is a spectacular sight – home to every Dalai Lama from the fifth to the current fourteenth (until he went into exile in 1959 in Dharamsala, India). It is considered one of the great wonders of world architecture and is truly awe-inspiring.



The Potala has 1000 rooms and we saw many of them full of amazing murals, statues, jewel encrusted tombs of previous Dalai Lamas, meditation rooms, and libraries. Photos inside not allowed so cannot show you here. My favorites were the libraries full of scrolls placed in carved wooden boxes covered with beautiful woven cloth – floor to ceiling rows and rows of them. Amazing! The Potala was shelled during the 1959 popular uprising against China but luckily the damage was not extensive. It was spared again during the Cultural Revolution at the insistence of

Premier Zhou Enlai who is said to have sent his own troops to protect it. Many other temples were not so fortunate and were damaged or destroyed.

By the time we finished it was 2:30 so we had a late lunch at a great place that specialized in momos – dumplings for which Tibet is famous. They had several varieties of vegetable momo that we all shared.

Our next stop was Sera Monastery that in its heyday was home to 5000 monks and ran five colleges of instruction. Today the population of monks has been reduced by 90% but it is still thriving. In the afternoons, the monks have debating practice and we were able to watch that. It was very interesting, with lots of clapping and showmanship to emphasize points. Most of the monks are fairly young and maybe exaggerated for the tourists photographing the whole scene. They seemed to be enjoying the whole spectacle along with us. Ravi says he is going to introduce this method to his class!



By the time we got back to the hotel we were ready to collapse. After resting, we dragged ourselves to a Nepali restaurant for dinner where we had pretty good naan, dal and yogurt, then home to early sleep.

The second day brought an equally full schedule. We began at Drepung Monastery outside of Lhasa, once one of the world's largest monasteries. It was founded in 1416 and attracted monks from all over Asia growing to about 7000. Today there are 450 monks. The palace inside was home to the Dalai Lamas until the fifth one built the Potala Palace. There were lots of Chinese tourists as well as Tibetan visitors and pilgrims. This week is a Chinese holiday so that is why we were able to do this, but it meant we were there with lots of other folks who also had the holiday off.



(On my right is a Chinese tourist and on my left some Tibetans). Do you like my hot pink fleece? I got it for 24 yuan –about \$4 at Decathlon store in Shanghai and it was perfect for the weather in Lhasa. I wore it every day.)

After lunch we went to Jokhang Temple, said to be the most revered religious structure in Tibet. In fact, every morning we got up early and walked from our hotel to Barkhor Square and around the temple with the hundreds of pilgrims and locals who walk this path daily swinging prayer wheels and fingering wooden beads, some prostrating every few steps along the way. It is a profoundly moving sight and brought me to tears the first morning we did this walk.

Unfortunately, by the time we visited the temple with our group late in the afternoon, it was so full of tourists that I started feeling claustrophobic and a little sick from the burning yak butter at all the altars. Jokhang Temple is truly a beautiful place and I wish we had seen it at a less crowded time. After shuffling through incense filled rooms with hundreds of other people I was ready to faint, but once we climbed to the roof, we could breathe and see the full glory of this place.



After another full day, we tried another Nepali restaurant that was packed with tourists. We met a couple from Guatemala who were trying to get a table so I suggested we try to get a table for four and see if that worked better. They gave up in the end, but we persisted and were finally seated with a Chinese family of six. It was fun trying to converse and they were very welcoming, but it seems they had someone in their group waiting for another table so at some point they all up and left, and there we were with a huge table to ourselves. Soon two young Chinese women were seated with us and we enjoyed talking with them. One was from Sichuan and the other from Shanghai. I asked if they were sisters because they seemed so close but they said they were “net friends” and this was the first time they were meeting in person. Watching them you would think they had known each other forever. Their dishes came first, I think because our order went with the first group and it took awhile to sort that out. Anyway, there we sat with our two small

dishes and they ordered seven or eight things and ate ravenously, though both were small people! I told them it was fun to watch them enjoy their meal so much. Wish I had thought to take a photo!

The next morning was the big day to set off for Shigatse and then on to Everest Base Camp. We were able to leave things at the hotel so as to bring only what we could carry on our backs. The drive to Shigatse took about seven hours. By the time we got to our hotel, Ravi had a booming headache. He decided to stay and sleep while we went to visit another monastery.

Ta Shi Lhun Po Monastery was really spectacular and because we arrived so late in the afternoon that it wasn't crowded. See our van with writing on the side "Heavenly Tibet Beautifully Journey." We had a relaxed stroll through the place and enjoyed the views of mountains covered with prayer flags. The guide said the inscription below is in an ancient form of Sanskrit that no one can read now. I love the vivid colors. The white stupas are so striking against the blue sky.





At one point, I had some time alone with our guide and noted, “It is so striking that the current Dalai Lama is completely absent in all of these temples and monasteries where every other Lama is pictured and acknowledged. Do the people acknowledge him in private?” He said they cannot have any public displays but people hold him in their hearts and celebrate him privately. A couple of times along the way we were admonished not to talk about politics in the van which had a camera and recorder in it, and he was always very careful in everything he said. To enter Barkhor Square, everyone must pass through metal detectors staffed by armed Chinese soldiers. I asked at the hotel and the young Tibetan woman (Dickie) who runs the hotel said this has been since the self-immolation protests in 2008. There is a real sense of occupation.

When we got back to the hotel in Shigatse, Ravi was still not feeling well. In the middle of the night I started worrying that he had severe altitude sickness and that we had to get him to a lower altitude. Ravi couldn't sleep and I told him we had to return to Lhasa the next day and forget about Everest. He agreed. As soon as possible in the morning, I woke up Tashi and asked him to bring oxygen to the room. He helped us get train tickets back to Lhasa and I went downstairs to say goodbye to our group. They were very sorry we couldn't go on and promised to send photos so we could vicariously experience the trip to Everest. Susan had a very bad cold and I told her she could come with us back to Lhasa if she wanted. She decided to do so.

When we got to Lhasa, we went to the hospital to try to find out the source of Ravi's discomfort. The doctor prescribed some Chinese medicine that made him nauseous. So I went to a pharmacy nearby and asked for antacid pills to calm his stomach. That seemed to help for a while and we considered meeting the group on their way back from Everest so we could see the other sites planned along the way. But then it

became clear Ravi was not getting better and luckily we were able to change our flight back to Shanghai without having to pay an extra charge. Meanwhile, I seem to have caught Susan's cold and was starting to feel ill myself. Now that we are back home, both of us are feeling much better.

On our last morning before coming back to Shanghai, I went for a walk around the temple and pilgrims were lined up around the entire edifice waiting to get in – many more people than I had seen on other early morning walks. When I got back to the hotel I asked Dickie if this was a special day and she told me the Dalai Lama was born on a Wednesday so people quietly celebrate him in this way.



Tibet was an unforgettable experience and we feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to go there. It's not at all clear how long the culture will survive, but the quiet persistence of the people we saw argues that it will. I hope so.

Ka Lee Shu (Goodbye for now),

Lee

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