

Road Trip Tibet

— The Lhasa to Base Camp Run

Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett

At dawn, atop Khamba-la Pass at 4,794 meters (15,728 feet) overlooking the icy Yamdrok-tso Lake, the yaks dropped in to see what humans were doing on the ridge. The two frost-proof and extraordinarily nimble bovines descended from even higher altitudes. Despite the fact they smelled pretty bad, they seemed a little too self-satisfied, a little too comfortable in the climate, and perhaps a little too showy, decked out in the pastel ribbons and bone rings gifted to them by reverential high-altitude local human residents.

Nevertheless, the image of the two shaggy horned beasts with sky, lake and mountains behind was too good to miss. So I trudged through a cold so cold it burned, pushed another 100 meters beyond the beckoning warmth of the Land Cruiser and about six feet below the yaks I forced my creaking legs into a crouch for a few more shots.

I was out of the vehicle for only about 10 or 15 minutes total, but now back rapping on the keyboard in my toasty Beijing apartment, the tip of my smallest finger remains numb.

It was worth it. What an extraordinary place.

High altitude en route between the mountain passes of Khamba-la and Karo-la.



Presiding over the remote mountain town of Gyantse, Pelkor Choede Monastery, in operation since 1440.

Prelude to Passage

To reach Lhasa, one no longer must fly, nor must one face the grimly enduring and perhaps precarious alternative of a smoke-filled cross-country sleeper bus. The new Lhasa-bound Qinghai-Tibet Railway now connects Chengdu, as well as other cities via a more northerly route, and in 48 hours one can ride the rails from Beijing to Tibet's capital, and visa-versa.

For those who love trains, this run offers hard and soft seats, and hard and soft sleeper cabins. The line, the highest on Earth, also offers some spectacular views as it traverses the Roof of the World along the Tibet Plateau, a slice of geography once thought impossible to lay rails across.

Monks and Monasteries

Although while relying on the thin high-altitude air one must climb 125 steps to finally get inside, in Lhasa the obvious must-see is the one-thousand-room, 13-story-tall Potala Palace. In the early 7th Century, Tibetan

king Songtsen Gampo installed a more modest palace on the present-day site of Potala as a gift to his bride, Princess Wencheng of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). That structure remained essentially unchanged until 1645, when additional construction began under the directive of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

Prohibited from taking interior photos, as I toured this dark sacred place made smoky and pungent by the ceremonial burning of yak butter lamps, my thoughts turned to the gold. There's tons of the stuff in there. Just the tomb of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682), at about three stories in height, is coated with 3,700 kg (8,200 pounds) of gold. I figured the pricey decorations for this guy's final resting place, plus the tons of precious metal heavily applied to and stored within other chambers, were not dug out of the ground by the monks and masters of the day. But I guess the hard-laboring peasants got a big spiritual kick out of the deal.

Tucked into the upper folds of Mount Gambo Utse and spanning 250,000 square



In the Tibetan hinterlands, about 600 kilometers from Lhasa, in a rustic and very remote village, appears a young woman of grace and beauty.

meters, Drepung Monastery was put into operation in about 1416. In greater days gone the place accommodated more than 7,000 monks and the spiritual directors held sway over vast earthly holdings.

Getting Gone

Beyond Yamdrok-tso Lake, the place presided over by the aforementioned yaks, some jangling hours down snow-packed rocky mountain roads is the outpost town of Gyantse. Formally an important trading center on the routes between India and China, here the formidable fortress of Gyantse Dzong masters the mountainside. Here, too, is the ornate and exotic Pelkor Choede Monastery. In operation since 1440, the place comprises 108 chapels on four floors.

After touring the monastery, intruding on some chanting monks, and downing some roadside noodles, we headed for the final stop of the day, Shigatse. If the reader visits Tibet's second largest city, be forewarned that at the better hotels in this town hot showers and in-room heating are not necessarily part of the deal – no matter what the Nepalese desk clerk tells you before he's got your cash.

Heading out of Shigatse the next morning we enjoyed a long stretch of pristine highway, then we again hit dirt roads and began to climb. Finally we rounded a bend, reached a peak and there on the horizon, seemingly magnified by the thin clear air, was the Himalaya Range and our final destination, The Big Rock–Qomolangma (known

as Mount Everest in the West).

And so that evening we made our way for another five hours down winding mountain roads, past three recently capsized trucks and an equal number of disheartened former drivers, to spend a cold and not too sanitary night bunking in a truly remote and primitive village. At dawn the next day, after 48 hours on the road and more than 700 kilometers since leaving Lhasa, we rolled into Base Camp at the foot of Mount Qomolangma.

And to the volumes already written about that remarkable structure of nature... what could I possibly add? ■

Modern-day residents of Drepung Monastery (founded 1416), tucked into the upper folds of Mount Gambo Utse overlooking Lhasa.

