

On September 28, 2006 I am flying from Beijing to Shangri La airport. Loud and frequent spitting of male Chinese passengers is grating on my nerves, but incredible views of clouds and mountains of northern Yunnan fills me with anticipation of what's ahead. Right before the sunset a rainbow lights up at the horizon, which I take as a good omen. In Zhongdian at night I am lucky to see how tens of Tibetans are performing a 'square dancing'. Tibetan faces burnt by the sun are calm and beautiful. Western and Chinese tourists, as well as police, are watching, mesmerized, and can't resist to start dancing (and make fools of themselves), too. Enormous lighted praying wheel spins serenely on the hill above the square.

Next day we start driving to the north through grasslands with barley drying on platforms. Everything amazes me – cultivated terraces on enormous mountain slopes, the first chorten I see, corn and barley drying on the flat roofs, rocks weighing on roofs against the wind, intense Nicholas Roerich-like colors, man plowing a field wading behind two buffaloes. In the middle of the day we cross Yangtse River. A few tremendous Asian rivers start at Tibet – Yangtse, Brahmaputra, Mekong – and we are going to cross some of them. It's hot and dusty 'down' at 2 km. (Every day we go between 2 and 4-5 km; it's hard to sleep the first couple of nights.)

I am learning essential Tibetan words: dashe dele - hello; gore cho - buy; hocheche – thanks. Tibetans are the easiest people to get along with – you smile and say dashe dele, and they smile and laugh back. In the afternoon we go to my first monastery – Dongzhulin. 2D and 3D shambalas are stunning; I cannot imagine how long one has to do tantric exercise to visualize them in all minute details. I walk (clockwise) my first kora spinning praying wheels; meanwhile monks are chanting in dukhang. I see that some monks appear less than enthusiastic; they are sleeping, picking their noses; but some are deep into praying. Terrifying “protector” gods, primary color of the praying flags, images of tantric sex are all new and exciting.

We then go to old nunnery high up in the mountains. It is fascinating to look at nuns' shaved heads with animated eyes and impenetrable yet vivid facial expressions. We drink salty and fatty yak-butter tea in smelly kitchen covered with soot and grime. Yak cheese – chura – is drying on shelves; even flies avoid it. On the way back I peak into a schoolyard: kids are marching and singing a military song.

In the evening we stop at a pass with stunning view of undefeated Mt Cagebo (the highest in Yunnan, 6700 m) – one of 13 peaks of Kawa Karpo mountain range. As most of beautiful mountains and lakes, it is holy for Tibetans. It is bad luck to climb those, but it is very good to do kora – walk around the mountain or lake in the clock-wise direction. Wind is swirling clouds at the mountaintops; when it is getting dark, a single bright star in the opening in the clouds shines at the north, where we should go.

On Sept 30 we start driving on a long dusty unpaved road in Mekong (Lansang) valley. Mekong is a powerful, muddy river far below us. We pass looming Minyong glacier and soon reach Yunnan-Tibet border – surprisingly, there is nothing dramatic; no mean PSB checking permits. In the afternoon, we see a catholic church with bell tower built in 19th

century, which is quite out of place high up in Tibetan hills, yet very beautiful. I am delighting in a complex mixture of Tibetan smells - sweet smell of rotting apples and pears, incense, fresh scent of snow. Even weird smells – yak’s manure, cheese, rotting flesh and ubiquitous Asian mixture of roasted spices and shit strangely add to this delightful mixture. The wind switches from warm to cold all the time. Strikingly colored bird flies by the car as if showing us the way. Colors continue to be a feast: green river, golden trees at mountain tops, blue sky, white clouds, red robes. Piles of mani stones at the sides of the road with yaks’ skulls are very exotic. In Yangzhin we eat lunch – thupa – fatty noodles (that a Tibetan girl brings by small portions) with pickled radish. We see famous salt wells down by the river: in May, peasants draw salty water, wait until it evaporates, and yaks’ caravans move delicious “peach blossom salt” to Lhasa. (Watch the movie “Himalaya” – the best movie about Tibet, in my opinion.) We spend night at hot springs by the river, where I eat tasty fried mixture of potatoes, green tomatoes and rice drowned in a lot of oil.

I am spending 20-30 \$ a day including hotels and food (excluding car, of course). The quality of hotel rooms and food varies widely and unpredictably, without any correlation with the price. The thing to do is just go with the flow, try taking perverse pleasure in occasional disgusting food and lodging, and truly enjoy unexpected spacious clean room and culinary delights.

Before dark, I hike through the village along low stone fences and beautiful fruit trees, up to tiny tidy fields, then by carefully designed chutes guiding water to the fields from the mountain river. Little boys are taking care of clever donkeys. Other donkeys are pulling felled logs from the mountain tops. A peasant offers me a ride on his donkey, and we are going high up to where he has a shack near the mountain top. We pass the sight of sky burial where human remains mixed with tampa – roasted barley flour – are scattered for vultures and dogs to eat. This odor I would not mind not to smell again in my life. At night I sit at hot springs by the pool – moon shines, river noise mixes with loud cicadas, cool breeze soothes my skin – it’s the closest thing to a complete bliss.

We start from Yangzhin after traditional Chinese breakfast - tasteless rice porridge, pickles, and peanuts. Scary desolated rocky cliffs are above and below the road; the mountaintops are more flat and covered with lots of trees, many of them of beautiful golden color. Closer to the Dong La pass, the landscape starts to remind me of high alpine country in Switzerland. We watch how people try to pull up a track that went off the road. It is fascinating to watch peasants doing simple things - sowing with a hand saw, threshing, plowing. Dong La pass – about 5000 m – is in the fog. All along, crews of Chinese soldiers and local Tibetan girls are repairing the road. To the west from us, toward Burmese border, are mysterious “power places” and “safe heavens” established by Guru Rinpoche. Local river has intense red color. Funny ‘walk tractors’ are used both for plowing and driving. Wise monastery in Markham is closed, we just walk kora around it. There are lots of PSB and soldiers in Markham, but they do not bother me seeing the Tibetan driver. (In all hotel we are asked for permits.) For lunch we eat super-tasty mouth-watering momos. Khampa men with caftans on one shoulder, knives and red or black threads in their hair look very macho. We see colorful nomads at 4000 m with

herds of sheep and yaks. I find a mani stone – the story is that many of those were secretly scattered all over Tibet by Guru Ringpoche, and later ‘discovered’ through visualizing their locations in meditation-induced dreams. We cross Mekong at very bleak and dusty town - Rongme. Chinese bicyclists cycling to Lhasa are swallowing the dust swirled by tracks. We spend the night at Dzogang – usual dirty 1-street eyesore of a town. The driver tells me about local marriage practices when a woman marries all brothers in a family at once in order not to split the family farm land.

On October 2, we are starting on a good paved road along Yu Chi river. We are in eastern part of Tibet, Kham. Visiting Gelugpa monastery in Bamdo is a delight. The monks feed us with tsampa (roasted barley flour, yak butter and tea mixed in a ball by greasy unwashed hands, and yaksha – dried yak meat cut piece by piece from a big bone – all very chewy, of strange taste and smell, not disgusting, but not something to look forward to either. The customary wheel of life is terrific. I am starting to recognize images and sculptures of Dzongkapa, 2 first and the fifth Dalai Lamas; Buddha Sakyamuni, future Buddha Maitreya, Buddha of wisdom Jampelyang, Buddha of compassion Chenresig, Drolma, others...

There are tremendous, calming views of Bamdo valley, toward Chamdo, from Yela pass. We pass a Jeep crushed by a stone on a long zigzag down the road. As usual, above are beautiful alpine landscapes, below are bleak and dusty slopes. We cross Salween (Nuk Chu) – another main Asian river through the bridge with armed guards. We are rushing through Pasho, and soon come to Rawok with picturesque Tibetan part of town with old houses, barns, working peasants, fields with barley. Around is breathtaking mountain scenery. I find wooden mini-hydro-electric ‘station’. In the “modern” part of town there is much billiard playing (as in the rest of Tibet). I also got to talk to a couple of Tibetans who speak a little English. Much place in their heads is occupied with Dalai and Panchen Lamas, Karmapa, elaborate differences between Nigmapa, Kagyapa and Gelugpa, but also with modern politics.

In the morning we start along stunning Rawok-tso lake with milky water fringed with golden trees, and then continue along Parlung Tsampo valley with gorges and glaciers. We visit an old monastery ruined during Cultural Revolutions in Sundzom valley and renovated recently. It is small, dark, and projects such holiness that I have shivers. Old lama unlocks the door for us. Gloomy yak is grazing in front of it, colorful roosters sit by the old wall. The valley is surrounded by 3 holy mountains. When we are losing altitude, we rapidly go through Switzerland-, Siberia- California-like places, which I never saw in such rapid succession. Ogesanga Chu Ling monastery is on lush green slopes shrouded in subtropical fog. I see enormous unreal butterfly feeding on a steaming yak’s gung.

We crawl on a treacherous road with traces of fresh mudslides; overloaded tracks with Buddhist swastikas barely miss us at sudden turns. We are switching to Rongchu river valley. At the side I glimpse at deep impenetrable grand canyons. Near Lunang I see my first pilgrim going to Lhasa. He has rubber apron on and wooden plates on his hands. After each three steps he does ‘namaste’ – hands together in front of forehead, throat,

chest, then down on all fours, then prostrate himself on the road, then up, and so on, 10-12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for a month or so through 5000 m high passes to holy Lhasa...

Next day, Serkymla pass is in the clouds, so we do not see Namche Barwa (7700 m!), the highest mountain on the way, unfortunately. Descending into Nyang valley, we see many pilgrims walking Bonri kora. They belong to Bon, different religion than Buddhism, but with many similarities. Notably, they walk kora in a counter-clockwise direction. Some of them stick their tongues out at me – it's an old form of saying hello. One of the explanation to this strange ritual is that they show me that they are no devils (who are supposed to have green tongue). We visit Neche Goshog (Bon) monastery; it has 2000 year old juniper tree. Dead babies are put in boxes onto its branches; people dig for medicine roots under it. Through a wide valley near Baiye – big modern clean and empty city with many Hui Muslims in white skullcaps on the streets – we drive to Lamaling monastery (Nigmapa order emphasizing tantric, shamanistic side of Tibetan Buddhism and believing in primordial attainable purity). There are both monks and nuns there, tantric lingams, sacred goats, giant Sakyamuni. It has even more mysterious atmosphere than other monasteries I saw. Warm air from many burning candles waves prayer flags; chanting is so powerful that I almost start to meditate myself. We stop at the nice market where people sell apples and walnuts. Apples are very aromatic and tasty. In the evening, we get to Drakum-tso lake with small Nigmapa monastery on the island. Its kora has embracing peach and fur trees and a tree with "om mani padme hum" on the leaves, with water and sky burial sites. Wooden sculptured genitals are all around.

After spending a night at Gungujanda – very pleasant breezy town with yellow trees – I suddenly realize how many peasants and monks are using cell phones – we ascend in Nyiagh valley. It starts snowing. We pass more pilgrims; nomads are drying yak's dung at the alpine meadows. There is blistering wind on the snowed under Meila pass (it is the highest on our way - 5030 m). A statue of a cow towers with scarves covering its eyes. People throw prayer paper into the air shouting: "Sou, sou, sou!" I am trying to eat chura – yak cheese – I have to suck on it for an hour before it softens from being stone-hard to the chewable state.

In the afternoon we reach Ganden monastery – the most awesome one in this trip. The complex of its buildings, even ruined during Cultural Revolution, and later bombed and rebuilt, looks incredible at the top of the mountain. This was the first monastery of Gelugpa, founded by Dzungkapa, one can see his rooms. Head of this monastery, Ganden-tripa, is chosen by the exam results, not from re-incarnation. He (not Dalai or Panchen Lama) is the head of Gelugpa. There are a few colleges in the monastery where the monks are pretty much separated by the area they are coming from; they are debating in the yard, and we hear clapping as we pass by. There is a stupendous kora around the high mountain with great views of the valley. Pilgrims are digging for medicine stones. Makeshift stone-and-logs toilet on the kora is very impressive. In the evening we reach Lhasa.

Lhasa is something else. Thick crowds and rows of vendors on the big kora around Bakhor and Jokhang are overwhelming. I just try to merge and flow with the crowd round after round. Inside Jokhang it is dark, with striking rays of light slicing through the clouds of incense and thick smelly air trembling from chanting, drumming and horn-blowing. I go with pilgrims around inner kora, then two floors with side chapels. This is one of the oldest monasteries, built on a lake by Nepalese consort of a great Tibetan king in order to kill an evil goddess. It is amazing and moving to look at pilgrim's exercises: looking at certain stones through a hole in the fist to get visions, trying to poke the right spot on the wall of Jokhar with closed eyes; rolling on the ground imitating death; collecting Buddha-shaped stones. They think that rocks and lakes in Tibet are alive, and I am starting to see the point, too.

Potala Palace is enormous, built many centuries, also overwhelming. Even few open rooms impress with enormous amounts of treasures. Tombs of Dalai-Lamas are covered with unbelievably huge gem stones. There is a deeply peaceful and spiritual feeling in some rooms with benches by the windows with mountain views and breeze gently waving colorful curtains. Potala is lighted at night looming above the kitschy park with colored fountains, music, and rotating neon swastikas by the pool. In the dark, exhausted pilgrims one by one stop and go to sleep; and only one young slim woman continues to go up and down around Jokhang. In the morning I eat delicious momos and buy jewelry at the nunnery, and then go to Muslim quarter, where heavy gambling is going on everywhere. People boil water in blackened kettles using portable parabolic mirrors and fierce high-altitude sun.

On October 7, we drive across Tsang part of Tibet from Lhasa to the west stopping to look at enormous painted Buddha carved at the side of a mountain. We go to Jowanaka monastery (Kadampa order) devoted to the sage Jowo-je. The valley of yarlung-Tsampo (Brahmaputra) is very dry, there are occasionally even sand dunes appear. Cumba-la pass (4800 m) has an exhilarating view to intensely blue and ragged Yamdrok-tso - sacred lake of Nigmapa order, and further south to Himalaya. (Nojin Kangtsun mountain – 7200m – can be seen.) By the evening we get to Gyantse with looming dzong (castle) on a steep hill protecting the valley where the British were fought. Nearby are Pelkor Chode monastery very unusual, ecumenical one, where Gelugpa, Sakyapa and Buton orders coexist, and Kumbum - giant chorten with 13 floors, side rooms and kora going around it. Eyes of Sakyamuni at the top are penetrating and scary.

Next day we spend in Shigatse. We go to Tashilinpo monastery in the morning. It is a very significant monastery of Gelugpa, the seat of Panchen Lamas. Giant Maitreya is towering inside. There is a very impressive meeting yard and tomb of Panchen Lamas in the shape of stupa, covered with gold and gem stones. Later I walk the kora with views of the city and the dzong. I spend hours then walking around the both old Tibetan and new “Chinese” parts of the city.

I am flying from Lhasa to Beijing on October 9 full of regret that this wonderful trip is over. For hours, until we stop at Chengdu, I stare in awe at enormous, endless sea of impregnable snowed under mountains and icefields below.