

Tibet



Tibet dancer wearing traditional Tibetan clothing including a long-sleeved robe and colorful apron.

By Jennifer Schaefer

Land of Mystery

Are you looking to get away from the housework, the traffic and the bad news in the media—at least for a little while? This year, why not plan a trip to a place everyone has heard of but few people have visited, Tibet? This rich and remote country in the southwest corner of China lures adventure-seekers from all over the world with its amazing natural wonders and air of mystery. Visitors who brave Tibet's chilly climate (the average temperature is 45 degrees F) and high altitude (the average elevation is 14,000 feet) are rewarded with a never-to-be-forgotten look at an exotic culture, the world's highest mountain ranges and magnificent religious monuments.

For those who have a North Face jacket hanging in the closet, a trip to Tibet will give you an opportunity to put it to the test!

History and People

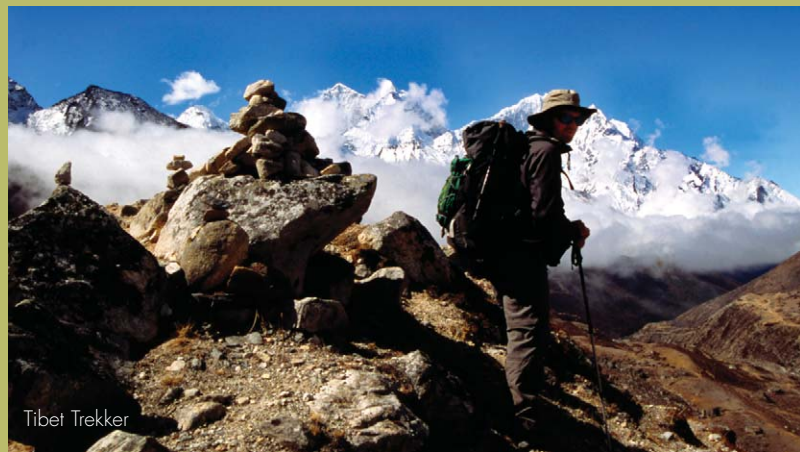
It is difficult to guess from their gentle disposition, but the people of Tibet are no strangers to hardship. In late 1949, shortly after the communist takeover of China, Chinese troops invaded Tibet, quickly defeating Tibet's tiny army. By the summer of 1951, the Chinese army was marching into Lhasa, the capital city. In 1959, the Dalai Lama, Tibet's head of state and spiritual leader, fled to India and established a government in exile. That same year, some 80,000 Tibetans crossed the Himalayas to seek refuge in India, Nepal and Bhutan. The debate over Tibet's sovereignty continues today, with the Dalai Lama and many of the Tibetan people holding that Tibet is under illegal Chinese occupation and China insisting that Tibet is, and has been for centuries, a part of China.

Despite the controversy, the unique culture of the Tibetan people has persevered. The Tibetan language, which shares some basic words with the Chinese language, is spoken by about six million people in Tibet. Tibetan folk music, usually performed a cappella or to the accompaniment of the pi wang (fiddle) or the dran yen (long-necked lute), is kept alive in the homes of Tibetans and at festivals, such as the Shoton (Opera) Festival in August. The clothing of the Tibetan people, which typically includes long-sleeved robes and colorful aprons for the women, reflects their history and culture. For meals, most Tibetans eat traditional foods, such as beef, mutton, milk and tsampa, a dough made with roasted barley flour and yak butter. Last but not least, the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism are practiced throughout the country (more on this later).

Trekking in the Land of Snow

Bordered by the world's highest mountain ranges—the Himalayas to the south, the Karakorams to the west and the Kunluns to the north—Tibet offers trekkers an experience like no other. There is a trek (a journey on foot through the mountains) suitable for almost every skill level, ranging from one-day hikes to month-long mountain expeditions.

Those planning a trek in Tibet have two choices: they can organize the trek on their own, or book it through a trekking company. Organizing an independent trek is time consuming and difficult; trekkers must obtain a permit to visit the area where they want to trek, plus arrange for a local guide, equipment and transportation. A trekking company, on the other hand, handles all of these details. Most trekking companies even arrange for trekkers' Chinese Visas and Tibet Entry Permits, both of which are required to enter the country. There are a number of reputable trekking companies to choose from; a visit to a travel agent will point you in the right direction.



Tibet Trekker

There are several major trekking regions in Tibet. They include:

The Everest Region (Central Tibet)

The base camp at legendary Mount Everest, the world's highest peak at nearly 30,000 feet, can be reached in a day hike. Experienced climbers can arrange to go higher.

Mount Kailash/Lake Mansarovar (Western Tibet)

For centuries Tibetan pilgrims have journeyed to Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar, a spiritual center for Buddhists, Hindus and Bonists, who believe circling the



Yarlung Tsangpo River



Jokhang Temple



mountain can take away their sins. The lake lies at the southern foot of the mountain and is one of the highest freshwater lakes in the world.

Mount Namchag Barwa (Southern Tibet)

The landscape surrounding this 24,445-foot mountain includes the Yarlung Tsangpo River, the highest river in the world, and the Yarlung Tsangpo Canyon, the largest river valley in the world.

The best time for trekking is April through October, when the weather is warmest. Most companies recommend that trekkers pack lightweight hiking boots, a warm jacket, long underwear, wool socks, a light pair of pants, shorts for hiking, sunscreen and sunglasses. If you forget something, all of these items are available in Tibet's major towns.

Ancient Religious Monuments

Nearly all Tibetans follow Tibetan Buddhism, a distinct form of Buddhism with its own qualities and practices. For example, Tibetan Buddhists believe there is a living Buddha who is the reincarnation of the original, a belief alien to Chinese Buddhists. The Tibetan people's dedication to their faith is represented in the country's approximately 1,700 monasteries, which are home to about 64,000 monks. Not surprisingly, most of the man-made attractions in Tibet are monasteries or religious monuments.

Tibet's capital city Lhasa (meaning "Holy Land"), and the nearby town of Shigatse feature the most accessible monasteries and monuments. They include:

Jokhang Temple (Lhasa)

Built in 647, the Jokhang Temple is the spiritual center of Tibet. Every day, pilgrims trek from all over the country to circle the temple—most on foot and some by prostrating their bodies on the ground. The temple features sacred sculptures and cultural relics, including Tibet's most famous Buddha image, known as the Jowo Shakyamuni sculpture.

Potala Palace (Lhasa)

Built in the seventh century and rebuilt in the 17th century, the Potala Palace was the chief residence of the Dalai Lama until he fled to India, and is considered a model of Tibetan architecture. Today the palace is a state museum of China.

Tashi-Lhunpo Monastery (Shigatse)

Nearly 4,000 monks once lived in this circa 1447 building, although only about 600 reside there today. Interesting sights include the Maitreya, a chapel built to house the 85-foot-tall "Buddha of the Future" statue, and a 36-foot-tall memorial from the 1600s lavishly decorated with gold, silver and precious stones.

When visiting monasteries and religious monuments, polite tourists follow these rules of thumb. Don't photo-

Kingdom in the Sky

If you really want to get away from it all, consider planning a trip to Tibet's closest neighbor, the Kingdom of Bhutan, a country about the size of Switzerland nestled in the eastern Himalayas. Boasting a pristine environment, Bhutan has been identified as one of the top 10 bio-diversity hot spots in the world. Its ecosystem harbors exotic wildlife, including 770 species of birds and the takin, snow leopard, golden langur, blue sheep, tiger, water buffalo and elephant.

Perhaps the only thing more remarkable than Bhutan's jaw-dropping scenery is the fact that the traditional culture and lifestyle of the people are still richly intact—from the traditional woven garments to the Buddhist prayer flags on high mountain slopes.

In order to safeguard the rich natural environment and culture, Bhutan has adopted a controlled tourism and development policy. As a result, Bhutan is not an easy or an inexpensive place to visit. In 2004, just 9,000 tourists entered the country. To do so, a tourist must either be a guest of the government or a registered tourist. All tourists must travel on a preplanned, prepaid, guided, package tour or custom-designed travel program. Independent travel is not permitted in Bhutan.

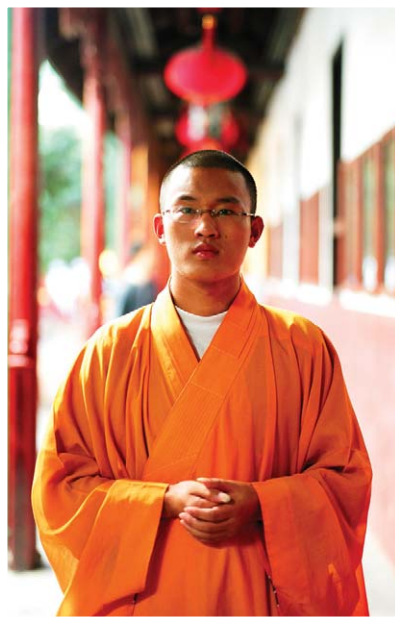
—Adapted from www.kingdomofbhutan.com



Potala Palace



Mt. Everest



graph the Tibetan people without permission, especially when using a flash. Always walk around shrines and other religious items clockwise, keeping the shrine to your right. Don't touch or remove anything from an altar. Don't wear shorts or short skirts to a monastery.

Take your hat off when entering a temple. Showing respect for the culture of the Tibetan people will allow you to experience firsthand their world-famous kindness.

For more information about visiting Tibet, go to the Tibet Tourism Bureau Web site at www.tibet-tour.com.

Above: Tibetan Buddhist Monk

Avoid Altitude Sickness

They don't call Tibet the "Roof of the World" for nothing! Tibet's sky-high altitude gives many people Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). Most visitors to Tibet will suffer from at least some symptoms of AMS, which will generally disappear through acclimatization in several hours to several days. Symptoms tend to be worse at night, and include headache, dizziness, lethargy, loss of appetite, nausea, breathlessness and irritability. Whether one is affected depends on the elevation, the rate of ascent and individual susceptibility.

To prevent AMS:

- DRINK EXTRA FLUIDS.
- EAT LIGHT, HIGH-CARB MEALS FOR ENERGY.
- AVOID ALCOHOL AND SEDATIVES.
- DON'T PUSH YOURSELF WHEN CLIMBING UP PASSES AND TAKE PLENTY OF BREAKS.
- BE CAREFUL NOT TO CATCH COLD BEFORE ENTERING TIBET.

People suffering from high blood pressure and severe heart disease should consult a doctor before planning a trip to Tibet.

—www.tibet-tour.com