

TIBET AND THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

May 2016

For one moment it seemed as if the Chinese had once more blocked my attempts to get into Tibet but our local contact had other ideas. The border between Nepal and China had been closed once again, so the original plan to ride from Kathmandu into Tibet and return via Everest had to be revised. Now we would fly from Kathmandu to Lhasa, capital of Tibet, and pick up our motorcycles there.

It didn't seem right, flying into Lhasa in a modern A319 aircraft and landing at a shiny new airport. My boyhood vision had been one of a remote, inaccessible Shangri-La, populated by Buddhist monasteries and bordered by the Himalayas. The last 20 years of Chinese influence have brought huge change and a drive for modernisation.

We touched down early evening, in time for dinner and our first night at 3,600 metres. Everest Base Camp sits at 5,000 metres and the route to it even higher, so we needed to take our time acclimatising. It was necessary to get out and about, so we visited the Norbulingka, Summer Palace of the Dalai Lamas, walking to exercise our lungs. Every physical task had to be undertaken slowly so as not to make you gasp for breath and bring on dizziness. Poignantly, the clock in the entrance hall to the Palace is set at 9.30pm, the exact time that the current Dalai Lama left on horseback in 1959 and crossed the Himalayas into exile in India.

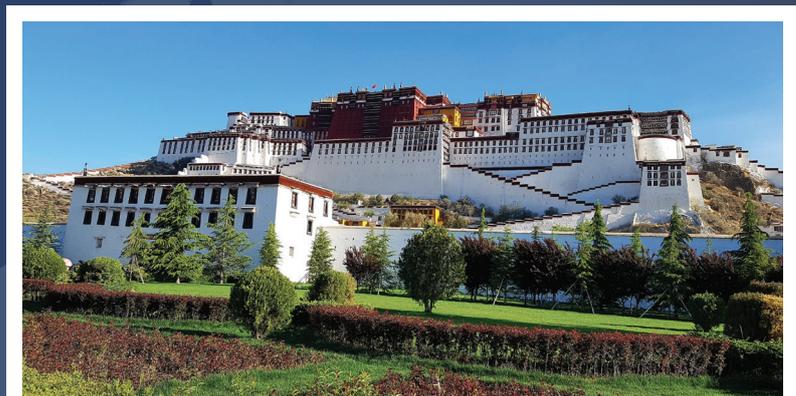
The second day we were more adventurous climbing the many steps to the top of the Potala Palace, symbol of Lhasa and an icon around the World. That afternoon we ventured out on motorbikes for a ride to a monastery at 4,000 metres. Debatably, it's now accessible by an immaculately surfaced hairpin road, a motorcyclists dream but a questionable addition to its once remoteness.

After three nights in Lhasa we set off across the "Roof of the World" over passes higher than Mount Blanc. This whole trip was only made possible by the Chinese authorities' willingness to grant us a Group Travel Permit for Tibet.

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Mount Everest



Potala Palace

TIBET & THE ROOF OF THE WORLD (cont.)

The first day's riding took us over two passes of 4,900 metres, down past the sacred Yamdrock lakes. A spectacular ride, that lifted the spirits after our time in Lhasa. We were now truly in Tibet crossing tall mountains, passing huge glaciers and riding through deep ravines.

Not one but two gear levers fell off the Yamaha machines today. They were both replaced and secured with the help of a shoe lace and a handlebar bolt. It's unlikely that the originally intended Royal Enfields would have been so sensitive. Bizarrely, for so called safety reasons, you cannot take your motorcycle into a petrol station and fill it up. You have to park outside, fill a can with petrol and carry it to the bike before pouring it into the tank.

A less scenic day followed, all over 4,000 metres, including our overnight stay in a Tibetan Farmer's Hotel.

Ahead of us on the third day was the mighty Gyatso La at 5,220 metres, one of the highest roads in the world and our first glimpse of Everest. Stepping off the bikes to warm our fingers on the cylinder block we gasped for air and felt the full impact of the altitude. The stop for lunch down the other side was necessary but little was consumed as we were losing our appetite with the increasing height. Between us and Everest Base Camp was just one more pass of 5,200 metres.



The experience of riding up, down and around countless hairpins, mile after mile, with constant views of Everest and the Himalayan range ahead, surpassed any mountain road in the world that I've ridden and is unlikely to be beaten.

Not for the first time we had to stop and deal with the bureaucracy of check points as we crossed Tibet, this time it was the entrance to the Everest National Park. From here we climbed past the Rombuk Monastery, negotiating Yak herds in the middle of the road until we reached Base Camp at 5,000 metres and our tented accommodation.

Earlier in the day Everest had been a white pinnacle on the horizon but now she towered above us, in all her glory. Chomolungma to Tibetans and Sagarmatha to Nepalis but to outsiders she's simply known as Everest, after the 19th century surveyor, George Everest. It was a cold breathless night, with limited sleep but well worth it for the superb panoramic views and the emotions they drew.

Morning dawned and a late start after -15°C and a heavy frost, further delayed by frozen batteries. Jugs of hot water and jump leads finally saw us off, heading back to Lhasa. Somehow everything looked different riding in the other direction. Before departing Kathmandu for Lhasa I managed a ride out on an Enfield, leaving early for Nargakot hill station and later the Guru Narayan Temple, seldom visited by Westerners. If I wasn't going to ride from Nepal, I was at least going to ride in Nepal.

Read more overleaf...

TIBET & THE ROOF OF THE WORLD (cont.)

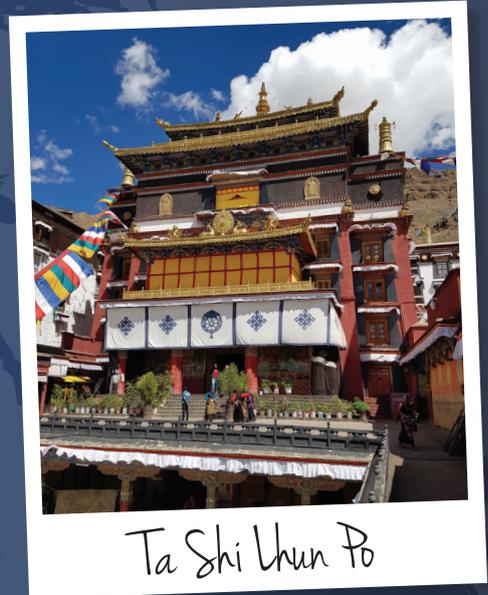
Our last stop before Lhasa was for two nights in Shigatse and an opportunity to visit the Ta Shi Lhun Po Monastery, founded in 1447. The Monastery is fully functioning as a place of worship, pilgrimage and the training of new Monks. The massive gold covered Buddhas are stunning examples of Tibetan Monastery sculptures.

We were expecting the last day's ride along the main route to Lhasa to be somewhat bland but it turned out to be far from that. The sweeping road squeezed through tight river valleys, dropping down the final 200 metres and competing for space with the new railway before it widened out, finding room alongside cultivated fields, hemmed in by towering cliffs.

It was not the first time in my life that I have been forced to pull over by a uniformed man with a big gun. I sensed that he was bored and misusing his authority but a Chinese uniform and a Chinese gun are not to be argued with. All our papers were in order and we had every right to be there but occasionally the authorities just like to remind everyone who's in control with a show of force. Almost every day the Military parade and march around Lhasa in small units as a stark reminder that Tibet is no longer free.

The motorcycling content of this trip had been fairly straight forward; two days in Lhasa acclimatising to altitude and then three days riding on good roads up to Base Camp. It had taken George Mallory a month, each time on horseback, to cross the Tibetan plateau and reach Everest for his attempts on the mountain, the third in 1924 being fatal. I felt a bit of a fraud. The demanding part of this motorcycle adventure was not the actual riding but the challenge of altitude, cuisine, hygiene and an irritating Aussie, all formidable foes.

If you interested in reading about Tibet before and after the occupation by China I can recommend 'A Life Unforeseen', a memoir of service to Tibet written by Rinchen Sadutshang and published by Wisdom Publications.



Contact Gordon

Email gordon@linbeck.co.uk for a chat or advice on your next motorcycle adventure.