

My Latest Adventure – Tibet

I am so blessed to have had the opportunity to spend my last bit of time on this side of the world exploring yet another part of it. On August 2, I flew north to Delhi, spent a sleepless night in the airport, and then caught another flight to Kathmandu, Nepal. I caught up on my sleep and then explored this wonderful city. I had a hotel in a neighborhood called Thamel. This is the tourist district, and it was full of culture. And, although it was full of people too, it was quite a bit more calm and quiet than what I have seen of India.

There is a lot to see outside of Thamel, as well. On my guided city tour, I was taken to the Monkey Temple. There were monkeys there, but they weren't too big of a bother. And I was a lot more interested in the prayer wheels, which Buddhists spin clockwise to earn some good karma, and the prayer flags, which are put up for "good luck" all over the place, as I was to find out throughout the rest of my journey. After Monkey Temple, I went to the Bouddhanath Stupa, the largest stupa in Asia. It is a beautiful building, and it has a beautiful history – both Hindus and Buddhists have been worshipping here together, in peace, for ages. What a wonderful lesson in acceptance and respect. I also saw Patan Durbar Square, which is full of ancient monuments, temples, and shrines, noted for their exquisite craftsmanship and architectural beauty. It was a beautiful place and a good ending to one really long, hot day.

The following morning, which was August 5, I woke up even before the crack of dawn to join my tour group. We took a bus from Kathmandu to Kodari, which is the Nepal-Tibet border. On the way there, we got to see Nepal's lush countryside, which is comprised of terraced farmland and wild vegetation in every shade of green imaginable. It is a beautiful country.

The border proved to be stressful, but we crossed without any problems (unless you count loss of precious time). The bus had stopped before the border, and once on the Tibet side, we traveled by jeep. There were four people to each one, plus a driver. In mine were a Canadian named Tracey and two Austrians named Valerie and Koko. We never caught our driver's name, but we did bond with him as he drove us from point A to point B hour after hour and day after day.

The first two nights in Tibet were difficult. We were in very remote areas way up high in the Tibetan mountains, and it was cold and uncomfortable. The hotels we stayed at were more like dormitories; the beds we slept on were more like cots; and the toilets we used were not more like anything, but were exactly what you might call smelly holes in the ground. I went all year in India without having to master the squat toilet, but I have done it now, thanks to Tibet.

We spent a great deal of time in our jeeps during the days, sometimes seven or eight hours of driving with only short stops, often at the coldest points. We made one stop on the highest plateau of the world, located 5,050 meters up in the air. I was so glad I had purchased a wool hat and a matching pair of gloves in Kathmandu just days before. That was a scheduled stop, but our driver was good about the unscheduled ones too. If we wanted a picture, we tapped him on the shoulder and pantomimed a camera. If we had to use the bathroom, we waited till we saw a nice, big rock, then tapped him on the shoulder and held up our rolls of toilet paper. We communicated quite well, really, considering that the only English he ever spoke was "We go, we go!" which we loved to hear.

On our third night, August 7, we stopped in the city of Xigatse (say: Shee-gaht-say), which is Tibet's second largest town. There, we ate a good dinner, got a hot shower, and finally slept in a comfortable bed in a real hotel. The following day, we toured the Tashilhmpu Monastery, a beautiful place that just happened to be a bit ruined by the rainy day we saw it on. Still, it was quite an experience. Later in the day, we drove on to the town of Gyantse (say: Gee-ahnt-say). Here, we toured another monastery, this time in beautiful weather. At this monastery, there was a large stupa, and visitors were allowed to go up to its top, level by level. On the way up, we could stop in the little rooms dedicated to different Buddhist gods and goddesses. Some of them were rather scary, and we learned later that they are the "protectors." At the time, though, we thought they might come to life and eat us alive, so we hurried to the top, where we had an incredible view of the city and the Tibetan mountains in the distance.

The next day, August 9, we drove on to Lhasa, Tibet's capital, which was our final destination before heading back to Kathmandu. By the time we reached Lhasa, we had driven nearly 1000 kilometers. Some of this driving was very nice and smooth. The Chinese government is currently overseeing the building of a road from Kodari (the border) to Lhasa, in the hopes of increasing Chinese tourism by nearly 100 percent. But the road is not complete and is under construction at many points. This meant that we had to off-road it in our 4x4 jeeps quite a bit. And, despite the head bumping that occurred, the off-road portions were, by far, the best parts of the drive. We drove through mud puddles – no, mud lakes – like it was nobody's business; we flew over rocks, and we created our own paths more often than not.

When we finally got to Lhasa, there was so much to see and do and take in. But it was a challenge because hardly anyone speaks even a lick of English. When we arrived it was mid-afternoon, and we had not yet had lunch. Tracey, the Canadian woman, and I went to appease our huge appetites, thinking it would be easy as ordering up some momos (authentic Tibetan food, kind of like dumplings). But we could not find a restaurant with a menu in English, and we weren't about to try ordering in Tibetan. Finally, at about our tenth restaurant (I exaggerate not), we found, not an English menu, but a customer who spoke English. We explained that we simply wanted some rice and vegetables, and, 10 minutes later, the sweet waitress came out with two big plates of rice and one even bigger plate of the most beautiful vegetables I have ever seen. We got the soy sauce and dug in. It was our best meal of the trip, so good, in fact, that we decided to go back two more times before leaving Lhasa.

When we weren't eating, we saw many beautiful sights. We went to Potala Palace, which was built by the fifth Dalai Lama and has been occupied by all succeeding Dalai Lamas up until the current one, the fourteenth, who has been living in exile in India for the past 50 years. The fifth through thirteenth (but excluding the sixth because he didn't follow all of the Dalai Lama rules and regulations during his holy reign) Dalai Lamas are all buried inside the palace, with huge stupas decorated with real gold and precious gems (especially turquoise) to commemorate them. The palace was absolutely stunning, but it wasn't the only thing.

We also saw Jokhang Temple, a beautiful building that, in my opinion, could boast one of the most beautiful paint-jobs ever completed. It is an old temple, though, and much of this paint is worn away. They are touching some up, and it was so neat to see the incredible difference between the old and new. (Check out the picture site.) We also saw two monasteries – Drepung and Sera. And we shopped in Barkhor Bazaar, where you could talk a merchant down from five yuan to one or from 60 to 15. It was lots of fun.

We spent three nights in Lhasa, and, on the morning of August 12, we woke up really early and headed to the airport to catch a flight back to Kathmandu. I had to fly out of Kathmandu that very afternoon, and I wish I'd had time to see more of the city and more of the rest of Nepal. But it was not to be, for, as it was, I only had two days until I had to fly from India to the USA; and there was laundry to be done (Tibet is one dusty place!) and bags to be repacked.

Now that is all done, and I face my onward journey with a huge smile on my face at the incredible memories I made in my last two weeks in India...I mean, Tibet.



The Bouddhanath Stupa in Kathmandu, where Hindus and Buddhists worship their gods together. This is the largest stupa in Asia and an incredible sight to see.



Nepal's lush countryside, cut down its middle by the road that leads from Kathmandu to Kodari, the Nepal-Tibet border.



A kind Tibetan man took a break from his labors to let us photograph him and his horse. The sparse Tibetan mountains make a perfect backdrop for the scene.



The snowcaps of the Tibetan mountains appeared through the clouds. This is not Everest, but I did get to see that great, snowcapped mountain too.



The city of Lhasa, which was, at one point, the capital of Tibet. It is no longer the capital because, officially, Tibet no longer exists. It is still referred to as a particular region, but it is now completely governed by the Chinese.



Potala Palace, in Lhasa, where the fifth through thirteenth Dalai Lamas lived and are now buried. The current Dalai Lama, the fourteenth, has been living in exile in India for the past 50 years.