



ticket to tibet

Photography by Angel Lopez Soto

The list of legendary train journeys just got longer. Tibet's new Sky Train—the highest on earth—is an adventure traveler's ticket to a fast-changing world. / By Leslie Woit



In the pale Tibetan twilight, we see the fearsome Himalaya Mountains that rise in the distance. Under the Kunlun Mountains, from a terrace bar overlooking the Jokhang Temple, I watch a ceaseless stream of worshipers make their way toward Lhasa's holiest shrine. Pilgrims swirl prayer wheels on their way, pausing only to kneel at the shrine's gate. Beside me sits a crimson-robed lama; his bald pate and smiling eyes glisten in the candlelight. Soft-spoken yet direct, he has never left this isolated land. He excuses himself to take a call on the cell phone ringing from within the folds of his robes. Initially surprised—no, amazed—I then realize that in Tibet, even lamas and monks must inhabit two planes, the spiritual and the physical, to live in today's world. This is Shangri-la, high on a plateau, ringed with peaks, flung as far as the imagination will stretch. Mystical and uninhabited. ▶ ▶ ▶

At least, it used to be. Tibet's capital, Lhasa, closed to foreigners until just a few generations ago, got a whole lot closer with the recent opening of the world's highest-altitude passenger train. One of the most difficult countries to reach is now accessible in a new and adventurous way.

Three days earlier, I was among the first group of Western visitors to make the 15-hour journey across the remote terrain from Golmud to Lhasa on Tibet's new Sky Train, complete with supplementary oxygen.

I started in Beijing and took The Shangri-la Express to Golmud. Now on the newest, highest part of the journey, the railroad cars are both high and high-tech. Powered by special diesel engines, the train crosses the permafrost on artificially refrigerated ground; an expensive system of ventilation pipes and stone embankments maintains stability as the ground alternately warms and freezes. At an estimated cost of US\$4 billion, the train is expensive and controversial. Some wonder whether the earthly paradise will be able to cope with the influx of development that's expected to come with easier access.

The Tibet-bound train traveler has two choices when starting in Beijing. For those taking the most indigenous approach, there's the government-run passenger train that reaches Lhasa after 48 hours of no-frills public transport. But for the comfort-minded explorer, it's all aboard for Mao's Train—The Shangri-la Express.

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Left / All aboard the Beijing-Lhasa train at Golmud's station; right / majestic views inspire passengers along the way.

This is the ne plus ultra of luxury train travel. Though nothing except some crockery actually survives from the cars used by the Great Chairman during his private forays across China, the spirit of opulence lives on. Rich, lacquered wood lines the carriages, red carpet runs throughout, showers stream with hot water. A staff-to-guest ratio of nearly 1:1 ensured that our every whim was addressed. Now used only by Chinese government VIPs and tourists (never at the same time), this cruise ship on wheels connects three days on with the high-altitude Sky Train in Golmud.

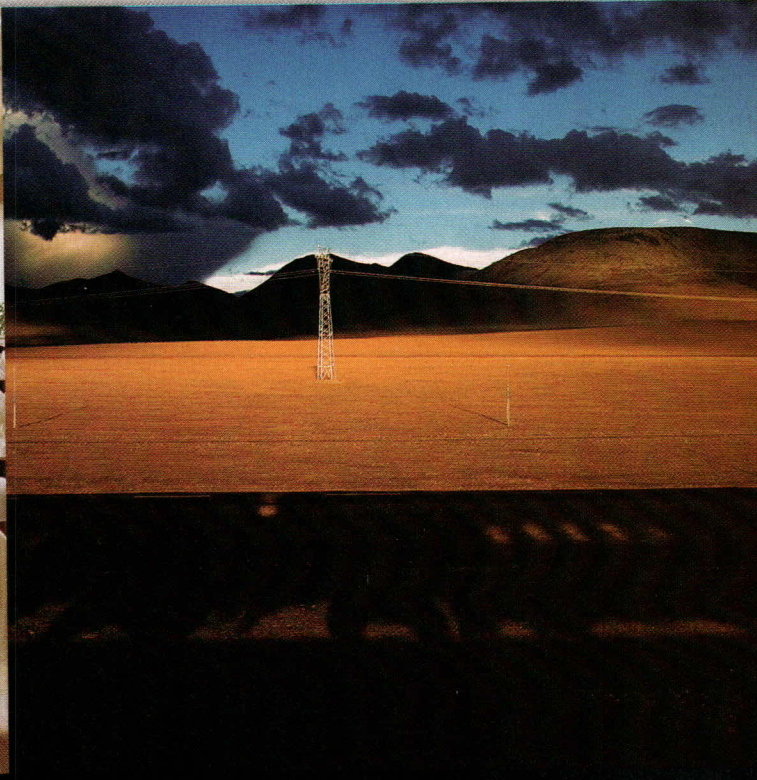
The 70-strong passenger list on the Shangri-la was a diverse group of characters. A few Arctic explorers, an elderly professor of Chinese philosophy, five handsome Norwegians on a 50th-birthday party, and, not surprisingly, a great many train enthusiasts. In addition to visits to the Great Wall and the Forbidden City in Beijing, the train paused for the day in Xi'an, the home of the splendid terra cotta warriors. During a further two days of rail travel, punctuated by poker games, piano concerts, and Chinese lessons in the bar car (the aftermath of which the staff must dread), we rolled through cornfields and past the belching chimney stacks that are rural China. During our endless Asian happy hour, the train pulls away from another faceless rural platform. With a pop of the cork and a pull of the lace curtain, the Shangri-la lives up to its name. We were in a secret paradise en route to the roof of the world.

On day three, we wake to Chinese music blaring across the platform as the sun rises over the new Golmud train station. From here, the 710-mile segment to Lhasa promises a record-breaking journey. More than 80 percent of the route has an altitude above 13,000 feet. Half the track is on permafrost over which we'll zoom at 100 kph (62 mph). We'll board at just 9,100 feet and top out on Tanggula Pass at a dizzying 16,630 feet. In true Confucian tradition, we are about to live in interesting times.

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Roughly 85 percent of Tibet's 2.7 million people are rural, living in huts or tents nearly three miles above sea level. The conditions are unyielding: Winter temperatures plummet to 30 degrees below Fahrenheit, and summer reaches 30 degrees above. Miles slip past. A solitary man swaddled in traditional robes padded with sheep wool appears motionless on horseback—staring, gazing. He may never before have seen a train. We pull ever upward, past a place where time seems to stand still.

The land, however, does not. In the distance, white peaks sprout like rows of dog's teeth. Heaving glaciers form the headwaters of rivers such as the Yangtze and the Yellow.



Left / Wait staff prepare for dinner in the restaurant car; right / the train passes serene scenery at dusk.

By 10,000 feet things start expanding: Chip packages pop, shampoo squirts, and the first of many oxygen pillows our group has brought to augment the supply bursts with a bang.

A handful of the group experience symptoms of high-altitude sickness—nausea, headache, dizziness—and a few retire to a reserved four-person cabin with white sheets and oxygen tubes that give it the ambiance of a mobile hospital. Despite the extra oxygen that's being pumped through the carriages and the Diamox medication most of us have been taking, an attendant appears with a quiver of clear plastic tubes and gestures toward the oxygen plugs beneath our seats. As the official Web site for the new train reminds us: "It is OK to get altitude illness, it can happen to anyone. It is not OK to die from it."

From next door, a sweet sirocco of yak butter wafts across the air. The carriage is filled with Tibetans. Saffron-robed monks doze on the blue polka-dot padded seats. Giggling children press their noses against windows double-reinforced for the barometric pressure. They slurp from pots of noodles, eat dried barley *tsampa* with their fingers, and drink floral tea from glass jars. The children are keen to show us their tiny pendants adorned with the image of the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader. In response, an Englishwoman delights them with displays of her large plastic watch that shows us that we've nearly reached 5,000

meters (16,404 feet), the height of a light aircraft. A herd of yaks jogs into the void.

We're well into yak country now, inside and out. The youngest member of our group, just 11, sums up the menu. "There are two yak courses. One is basically bits of yak, and the other is big lumps of it." Along with *tsampa*, barley that can be grown at high altitude, the yak provides meat, dairy products, warmth, and transport crucial to Tibetan survival.

The sun falls quickly beneath the beast-speckled horizon, and a last bouquet of flags fades in the distance. Buddhists believe that when prayer flags flap in the wind like manes of galloping horses, their blessings are carried to all four corners of the earth. As we pull into Lhasa's pristine new station—three days and 2,500 miles after leaving Beijing—it feels like we've reached the end of the earth.

A US\$1 rickshaw ride will get you where you want to go. The 1,000-room Potala Palace, the home of successive Dalai Lamas since the 17th century and now a museum, perches high above the city but is still reached by pilgrims who can manage the steep climb. Norbulinkga, the summer palace of the Dalai Lama, sits tranquilly on the valley floor. It was here that Heinrich Harrer built a cinema for the 14th Dalai Lama, as told in *Seven Years in Tibet*. Literary and film accounts of exotic Lhasa are numerous; Sherlock Holmes, Tintin, and even Lara Croft have had adventures here. Perhaps most famous of all is James Hilton's 1933



Left / Cars pass patio diners on a main Lhasa street; right / a passenger at peace aboard the Golmud-Lhasa train



*** BOARDING PASS / On Track for Tibet / To get to the Beijing beginning point for your own Tibet train journey, fly United from Chicago (Flight 851, a daily B747 service) or San Francisco (Flight 889, also a daily B747 service). DOT also has decided to award United the right to operate a route between Washington's Dulles International Airport and Beijing. The proposed service begins March 25.

novel, *Lost Horizon*. Few may remember the title, but his depiction of a lost utopia called Shangri-la has become the last word in Tibet's lexicon of mystery.

It's a mystery that still resonates—in the yak butter candles that illuminate the monasteries, in the guttural chants of the monks who fill them. But a new reality is growing ever louder. Some call the growing sprawl of neon-lit souvenir shops “Lhasa Vegas.”

Most Tibetan-owned shops are in the area that surrounds the Jokhang Temple. From one of hundreds of stalls packed into the Barkhur market, with the help of an elderly female vendor elevated by a tight hair bun and weighed down by heavy amber necklaces, I select a pendant. It bears the hum symbol, the final note of *om mani padme hum*,

the mantra said to reflect the essence of Buddhist teaching.

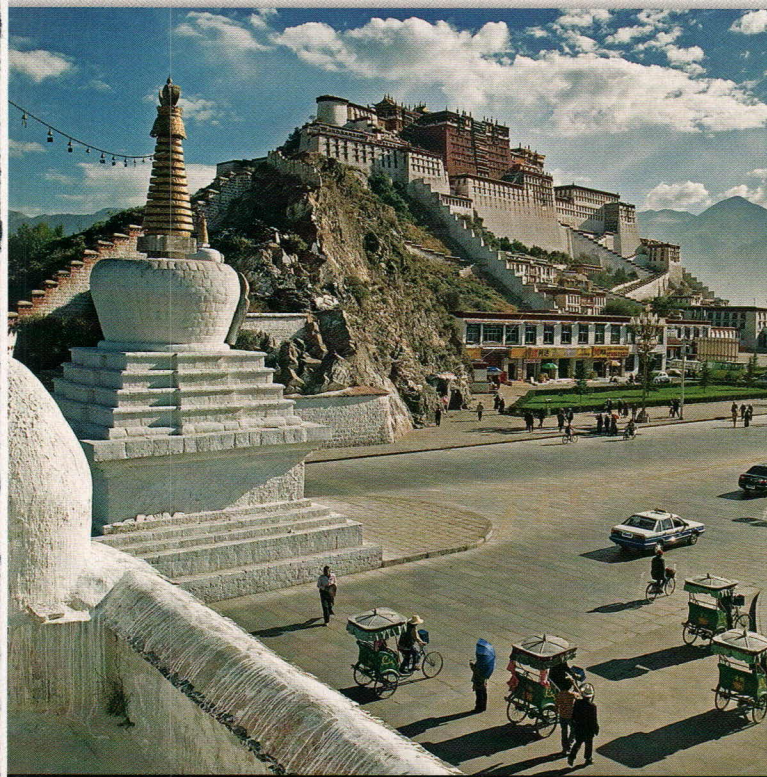
On my last night in Lhasa, as I am about to leave the cell phone-answering lama, I ask what he thinks of the new train. “Too much noise” is all he can say after a long pause.

He asks if I will stay in Tibet. When I explain that my departure is set for the following day, he graciously takes the long view that Tibetans have taken for centuries: “We will meet in our next life,” he says.

Details, Details, Details / GW Travel (www.gwtravel.co.uk) offers eight Tibet tours in 2007, from July through October. A fully escorted 10-day tour from Beijing to Lhasa (or reverse) starts at US\$5,395 per person, based on two sharing. This includes accommodation, transfers, rail fares, food, and guided tours. U.S. reservations through MIR Corp., Tel: 206-624-7289; Fax: 206-624-7360; mircorp.com. GW Travel uses Tibetan-owned and -operated outfitters for its Lhasa itinerary.

For information on booking seats on the Sky Train independently, see chinatibettrain.com. The two-day trip from Beijing to Lhasa one-way costs US\$49 for a hard seat, \$102 hard sleeper in a six-person cabin, \$158 soft sleeper in a four-person cabin. ■

Leslie Woit writes about travel, food, and wine for various North American and UK publications, including *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post*.



Left / The Potala Palace reigns from on high in Lhasa; right / good food and passing scenery make pensive passengers.