

Adventures in Tibet 2013



by Paul Markland

The Explorers -

Paul Markland

David King

Bernard Gateau

Dina Bennett

Magdalene Cubbon

Martin Cubbon

Sabrina Cubbon

The Plan -

Travel from Lhasa across southern Tibet east to west and then back across northern Tibet from west to east.

The Vehicles and Support Team -

Four Toyota Landcruisers complete with two drivers two guides and a camp follower.

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Planning and Preparation

The planning for this trip has been long and complicated. Having decided in early 2012 that this adventure was something worth doing, my friend Martin Cubbon announced that he needed to go on an expedition and liked the idea of Tibet. I had previously told him how much fun we had there in 2011, and what a wonderful geographically unspoiled country it continues to be.

Whilst travelling in Tibet in 2011, David Moffatt and I met four Chinese gentlemen from Shanghai who were on their way back to Lhasa having traversed the little travelled North side of Tibet. This, they announced, had been a spectacular and exciting adventure.

With this in mind I contacted Wayne Wang, one of the participants, in Shanghai and asked him for the name of his guide. This turned out to be a gentleman called Mr Ye who neither wrote nor spoke English.

After some initial discussions through Wayne it became clear that there was not much to be done until 2013.

In the meantime I had contacted Conrad Birch, the organiser of the Great Game Rally, and got the name of our guide for that event – a Mr Wang Lum(not Wayne !) who both spoke and wrote English. It seemed to me that using an English speaking organiser would be easier and so I decided, erroneously as it turned out, to use Wang Lum.

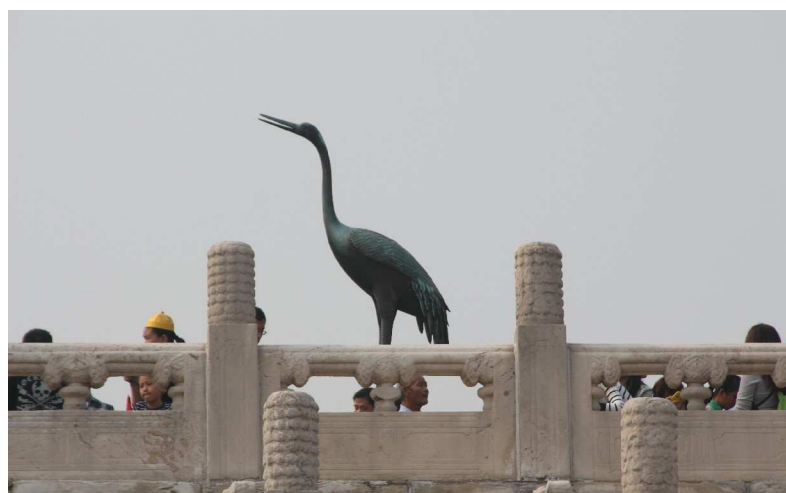
Wang Lum was adamant that nothing could be done before March 2013 as the Chinese government did not decide how many foreigners it would allow to visit Tibet until March of each year. However, once that date was passed all would be well and we would obtain visas and permits.





As it transpired Wang was very effective with the Visas but had a lot of trouble getting his contacts in Tibet to put the tour together for us. As March became June and then July it became increasingly obvious we had a problem. This became a crisis in August when Wang suddenly announced he was getting no feedback from Tibet and was ‘velee sorry’.

What a mess! In a panic I emailed Wayne in Shanghai only to get a reply saying he is on holiday in Kenya but will contact the non English speaking guide Mr Ye from there. At this point I thought it would be much easier if Martin’s wife, Sabrina, could talk to Ye as at least she was in Hong Kong and spoke fluent Putongwa (Mandarin).



Ye was a bit surprised I had not kept my dialogue up with him but immediately responded by saying he could still sort out the permits and trip details even with only a month to go. Thank heavens for Ye and indeed Sabrina for coming to the rescue.

So a frantic three way dialogue commenced, with the priority being the need to get the permits started as soon as possible. So after a year in the planning, three weeks before we depart we apply for the permits! We need three, and each one takes five working days. So the best we can hope for is to get them issued just before we fly to Beijing.



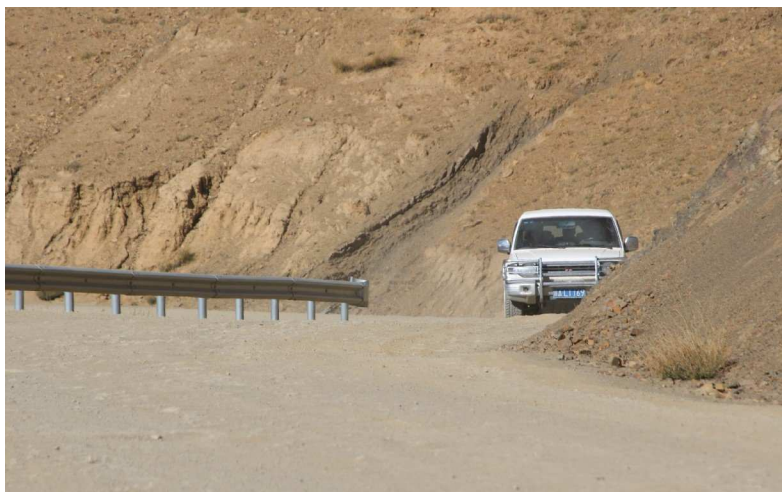
In the meantime, we send routes back and forth and try to sort out the Cubbon family who have failed miserably to lock their calendar for the three weeks I gave them a year ago. Martin needs to come home 4 days early. Sabrina will arrive two days late, and Magdalene, their daughter, who in fairness I knew could only do part of the trip, will have to fly from Gar (Where? you may well ask) in Western Tibet back to Hong Kong via Lhasa



half way through our trip. So much for the planning skills of corporate executives!

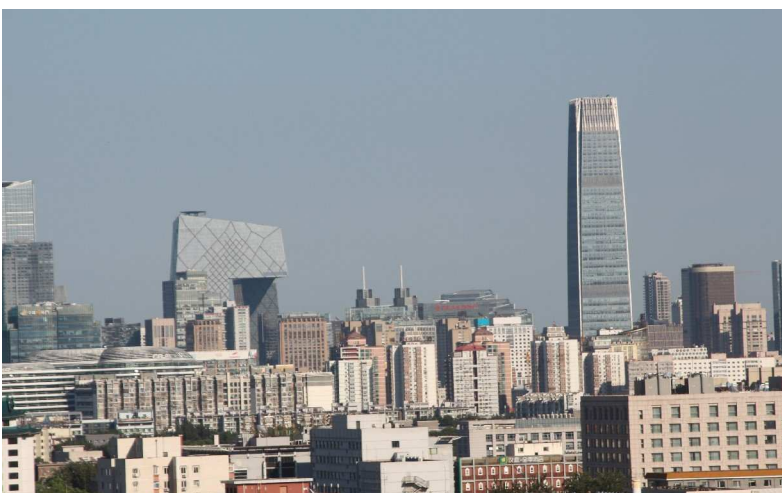
After much iteration we finally find a solution to the Cubbon's calendar problems which will give the rest of us the opportunity to drive the planned route in full.

So...the route. The basic plan is to go from Lhasa west to the border with Nepal and Pakistan along the south main highway, stopping at Everest, Mount Kalash and Toling, the ancient capital of Tibet. Then north and east through the little travelled northern territories back to Lhasa. The exact route will depend on road and weather conditions.



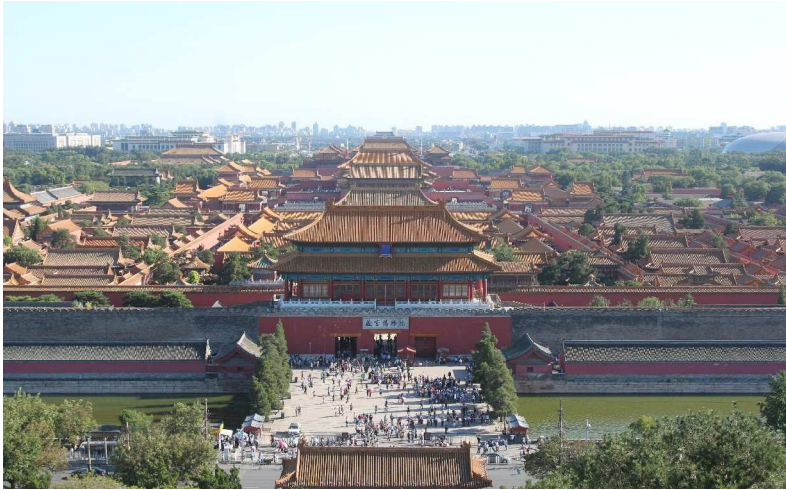
With a week to go we have two permits and are awaiting the third. Flights are booked along with hotels in Beijing and Lhasa, cars organised and bags packed.

So besides myself and the Cubbons, we also have David King, Chairman of Princess Yachts (fat lot of good they will be where we are going), Dina Bennett and Bernard Gateaux (as in 'Black Forest'). David is a great sport with whom I regularly go skiing and lives near us in Devon. This will be the first of what we hope will be many longer and more distant adventures for him.



Bernard and Dina spend their lives travelling the world. Bernard takes the photos, and Dina writes The Blog. More on her blog later. They travelled with David Moffatt and I on the Great Game rally through Tibet in 2011 and so are returning like me to explore the country further.

So, there we are; seven souls assisted by three guides, two Chinese and one Tibetan, intending to travel as Ye puts it 'The most difficult route in Tibet' ! Let's hope we can make it.



The final week of preparations is all too quickly upon us and on Monday 9th September 2013 we finally get our permits. Hooray! All set to go, Ye sends his last minute estimate of costs and we all madly transfer funds to China. Will he be waiting for us with the permit I wonder!!!

En route to Lhasa

The drive to London and flight to Beijing are uneventful. David and I meet at Heathrow. Bernard and Dina are meeting up with Martin at 'The Opposite House', the Swire Group hotel in Beijing owned by Martin's company, Swire Properties, as we fly out.



Sabrina and Magdalene are no doubt packing their considerable luggage and briefing the poor Sherpa who will be carrying it! Hopefully we will see them in a couple of day's time in Lhasa.

The Opposite House is most welcoming, and we are soon in the bar enjoying a drink before meeting up with Martin, his niece Rachael and her boyfriend Charlie. The latter live in Beijing and are to be our tour guide for the day. Thereafter Bernard and Dina arrive from their shopping trip.



I am keen we should not waste our few hours in Beijing. So Rachael and Charlie have organised a traditional lunch at a courtyard restaurant with Peking Duck. After lunch we visit the Jing Shan Park which overlooks much of the city and specifically the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square.

I have my photo taken as the 'Emperor of Salcombe' but have left the mug at the hotel. Promise to do better next time.

After a busy afternoon we rest before having an Italian, yes, I

know, we are in China!, dinner and bed. We are just on our way back to the hotel when we get confirmation our permits have arrived and are waiting for us. A big relief.

An early start sees us off to the airport to board the plane for Lhasa. The permit is checked twice but we fly through the officialdom without a hiccup and board the plane. The flight to Lhasa is about four hours.

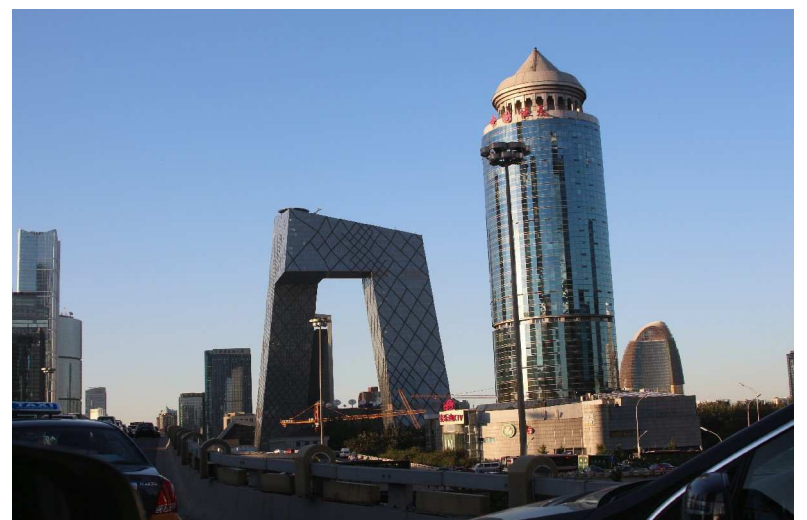
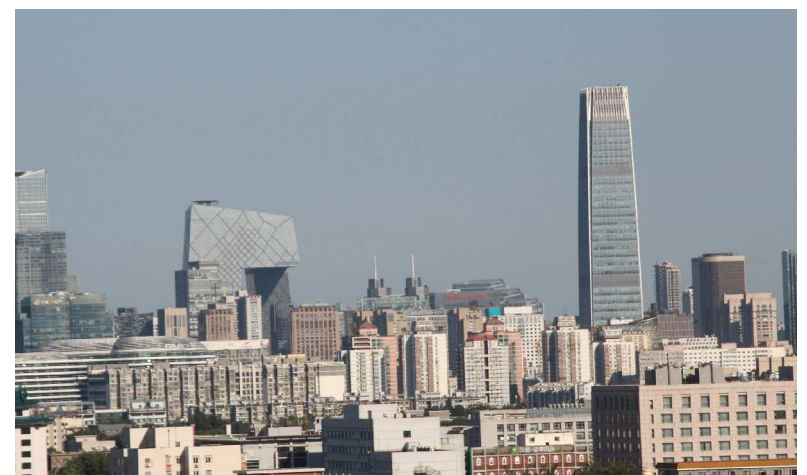
We arrive in Lhasa on time and with only a cursory check of our permits. Apparently very few Westerners have been issued permits this year with some 90% being given to Chinese tourists. We were clearly lucky.

Ye, introducing himself as Peter, meets us outside the terminal in two Ford Explorers, covered in Mobil 1 stickers. He quickly explains that the Ford's are no good for this trip and that we will be using 4 Land cruisers instead. However, it has to be said the Explorers were very roomy and comfortable.

We set off for the capital on almost empty roads and arrive at the St Regis hotel in time for lunch. Peter speaks no English so with the help of our 'Point it' books and his Samsung translator software we just about manage to sort out the basics. We have to wait until Sabrina arrives on Monday to really discuss the route and other matters.

He introduces us to our Tibetan guide, Dawa, who speaks a fair bit more English than Peter. After lunch we all retire for a snooze, jet lag kicking in, but not before we have been issued maps and instructions.

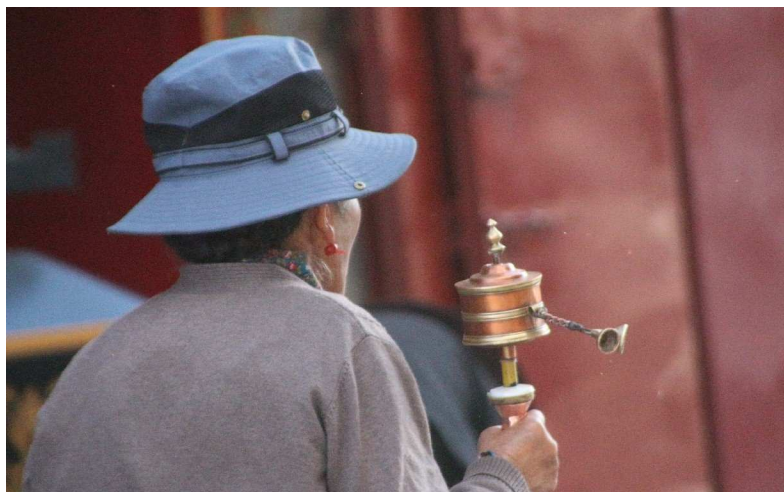
The first evening in Lhasa is taken up with visiting the Jokhang Temple and eating supper in a Tibetan restaurant overlooking the prayer circuit around the Temple. Finally we go over to the





Potala Palace to take night photos which are fun. Chinese Opera is blaring out in the square opposite and Fred Astaire, aka Martin, cannot stop himself dancing the night away much to the amusement of the locals and the astonishment of his compatriots!

Our second day in Lhasa was a free day and everyone went off to do their own thing. Bernard and Dina went looking with David for decent sleeping bags, Martin hired a bicycle and pedalled around Lhasa. I got on with the paperwork associated with producing a blog and sorted out our final equipment needs.



Peter says hello in the morning and then makes himself scarce for the day. Sabrina and Magdalene Cubbon arrive late in the afternoon and we all meet up for supper at the hotel. Not very adventurous I agree, but they were tired and we felt it was the best place to be on their first night.

The temperature in Lhasa is far higher than we expected and it is definitely a place for shirtsleeves in the day time if a bit more chilly at night. However, we are prepared and so have no difficulties in this regard.



Tuesday morning we are off to the Potala Palace. However, Sabrina has been sick during the night and has a slight case of AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness). We have set her up with some oxygen as well as headache tablets and Diamox (AMS Tablets) and wait to see how she feels later in the day. Having flown direct to Lhasa from Amsterdam via Hong Kong and Chungking she is pretty tired already, and so I think this has worsened matters. However, we are hopeful she will improve over the next few days.

The Palace is magnificent, and we have an interesting time walking around the various apartments, one for each Dalai Lama spanning almost 700 years. There are thousands of Buddhas all

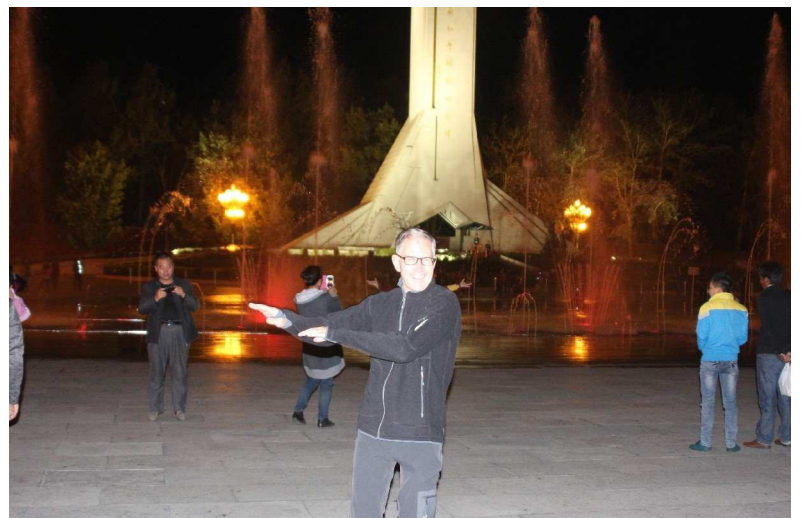
over the palace: from little gifts to enormous three ton gold ones. Some of the coffins/sarcophagus are made of solid gold as well, and the place is truly amazing. Unfortunately one is not allowed to photograph inside.

From the Potala we go downtown for lunch near the central market where I take my first Salcombe Mugshot before promptly leaving said mug in the restaurant when we leave. It was kindly retrieved by Dawa the next morning. What a Mug ! You might ask why I did not take the shot at the Potala Palace. well, I left it in the bus !!

A few words on the significance of the Mug. Since living in Salcombe I have daily attended what is locally termed the 'Salcombe Parliament'. This is a group of local reprobates that meet every morning at day break for coffee at Captain Morgan's café in the centre of Salcombe. Here, we bore one another with stories and moans about life in general and local affairs in particular. Recently I took a Parliament coffee mug with me on a trip to the Far East and sent back photos of some of the places I visited. This has become a habit and we thought it would be fun to take it around Tibet on this adventure.

The afternoon is spent at the Sera Monastery where we are lucky enough to arrive just as the monks start their chanting and debating. It was quite a sight, more akin to 'you do not know what you are talking about' rather than 'perhaps you could have a point'. Difficult to explain but quite unique in my experience.

Back to the Hotel to find Sabrina somewhat improved but not very well. We decide to stay close in the evening and again enjoy the last of the European wines before we are relegated to Dynasty (ghastly Chinese wine) and Pijou (pretty good beer).







The road to Qomolangma (Mount Everest in Tibetan)

On Wednesday morning we prepare for departure at 0800. By 0930 we are getting close to being ready. Sabrina is still unwell but has decided to travel with us to Shigatse, the second largest town in Tibet with some 80,000 people and a hospital.

We have two 5,000 m (16,400 ft) passes to cross but they are quick up and downs which we hope will not worsen the situation with Sabrina.



We have had endless hours of debate about the four cars we are using and who will be driving them. Strictly speaking all the non Chinese must travel in one of the cars supplied by the Tourist Office. This is clearly to enable the authorities to keep a close watch on us. I have agreed with Peter that in addition we will bring two cars of our own which we can take turns driving when, and this is a big when, we are not near Police Checkpoints.

Well, the Police now monitor the speed of every car all the way from Lhasa to Shigatse and therefore if we are to swap cars every time we approach a checkpoint we will never get there. So with much reluctance we all pile into the tourist cars except Sabrina and Magdalene who can travel with Peter in one of his cars.



One of the drivers is terrifying, and after 4 hours we have had enough of his carelessness and are in revolt. More debate ended with us agreeing that we will accept this arrangement for the day, but from tomorrow onwards on the Tourist cars can just drive empty when we are not passing a checkpoint.

So the drive to Shigatse which in a normal car under normal circumstance should take 3 hours takes us 7. Worse still, we

arrive too late to report to the Police Station and so will have to do so in the morning when it opens at 0930.

The point of telling you all this is that none of us really noticed the fabulous lake we passed, or the glaciers, as we were too busy hanging on for dear life!

We finally arrived at 1900 and were drained, longing for a beer and something to eat. At least the hotel was fine and the food passable. Martin breaks out the Brie he got Sabrina to bring from London and we tuck into this with some reasonable good toast.

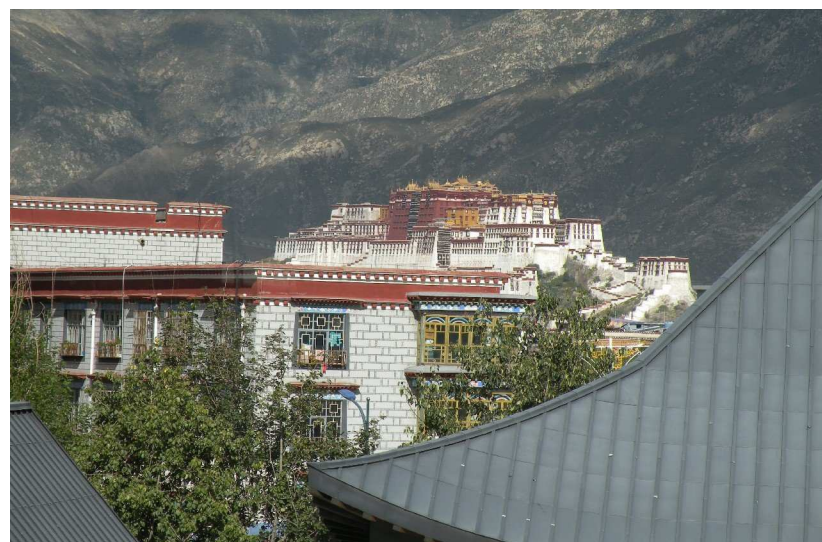
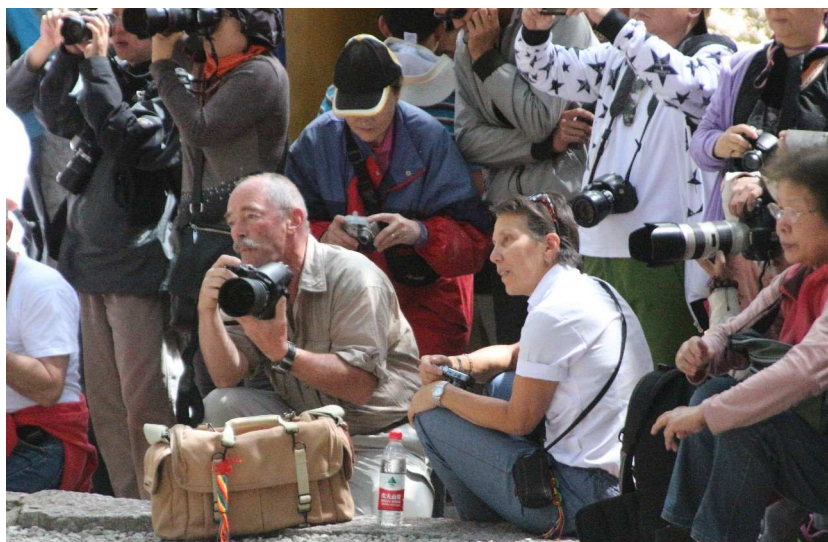
However, the AMS issue has not left us and Sabrina is still not well, not worsening but not getting better. Although the guides are fairly relaxed about her condition, Martin and the rest of the team are very worried about taking her to Mount Everest in the morning when we will be a lot higher and miles from anywhere. Lots of scenarios are discussed but in the end the decision is taken that we will get Sabrina back to Lhasa and from there to HK whilst the rest of us travel on to Everest.

I spend most of the evening trying to get a car sent out by the St Regis to Shigatse to pick Sabrina up and eventually get their General Manager on the case. He very kindly offers to find an outside car as all theirs are booked; of course it is the Chinese Autumn Festival.

We head off to bed with a sad but inevitable situation developing. Martin manages to sort out flights, a unique achievement but one forced on him by the fact Mimi (Martin's P. A.) has taken her holiday at the same time as her boss and hence cannot run this period of his life for him!!! Character building I say!

A word on Acute Mountain Sickness. This is a very frustrating





problem that only happens at high altitude. It is not something you can predict or something you can be sure you will not suffer from. Every time one goes to high altitude it may or may not occur, more frustratingly you can go to high altitude many times without an issue and then bang, out of the blue, it hits you without warning. At best it manifests itself in an annoying headache that lasts for a period and then goes away; at worst it will kill you if you do not get down the mountain quickly. Every case is different and one can only be guided by worsening symptoms or improving health.



Diamox is a drug that helps acclimatise the body to high altitude but it is not a sure fire solution. Once breathing becomes difficult and not improved with oxygen or water starts to appear in the lungs there is no solution but to get to a lower altitude quickly. AMS is a killer if ignored.

The situation worsens over the night in that Sabrina has a high temperature for a period which eventually drops but concerns everyone further. When we all get up Martin has decided that he will travel home with Sabrina which is such a shame as they were both so instrumental in my organising this adventure in the first place.



However, it has not been working and the danger to Sabrina's health is very real, so we have no choice but to say goodbye as Peter sets off with them back to Lhasa.

For our part we are still awaiting the Police Station to open so we can register our permit for Everest. This does not happen until after 1130 and I am doubtful we can make Everest North Base Camp before darkness particularly as the last 100 kms (60 miles) is a dirt track through mountain passes.



I therefore agree with Dawa that we make for Shegar (Tingri) at

the start of the track and stay there overnight before heading to Everest the following day. I have also agreed with Peter and Dawa that Bernard and I will drive one of Peter's cars and just hop out into the tourist cars for the checkpoints.

Why so many checkpoints? When we passed this way in 2011 there were none. Dawa says it all to do with Free Tibet flags being put up on Everest, but this was in 2010. I think that they have had so many fatal accidents on this very fast new road that they have had to find a way to slow down the tourist traffic. It is an average speed system using checkpoints instead of cameras. To satisfy the system, you either drive fast and end up sat by the road until just before your arrival time at the next checkpoint or doodle along at 30 kph from checkpoint to checkpoint.

We did both on the way to Tingri and we were very bored and frustrated by the time we made it to the hotel at an overall average speed of 35 kph !!!! (22 mph) We have been assured that this dies off after Mount Kalash as no tourist go further northwest but we wait to see. The drive to Everest should be OK as it all on dirt track and slow anyway.

Qomolangma and onto Mount Kalash

Day 3, and we excitedly load up for the 103 Kms (64 miles) gravel road up to Qomolangma (pronounced Chomolangma) aka Everest North Base Camp. Although the road is poor it is easily passable and has the most special views from the first pass at 5,200 m (17,060 Ft). From this pass we are able to see five of the highest mountains in the world but today we arrive to see them mostly shrouded in cloud.

Undaunted we decide to sit and wait it out. Over the next hour and a half the clouds slowly lift until we can see all five be it not all at the same time. Having taken endless pictures of Makalu



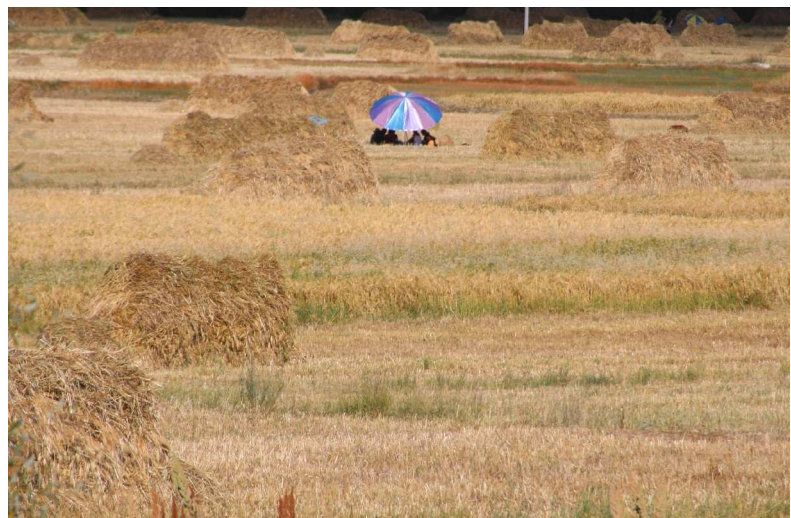
8,463 m (27,765 Ft), Lhotse 8,516 m (27,939 Ft), Everest 8,850 m (29,035 Ft), Cho Oyu 8,201 m (26,906 Ft) and finally Gauri Shankar a mere 7,135 m (23,408 Ft) we finally climb back into the Landcruisers and wind our way, quite literally, down the other side of the pass to the tiny town on Tashi Zoul where we have a traditional Tibetan lunch of yak and potatoes.

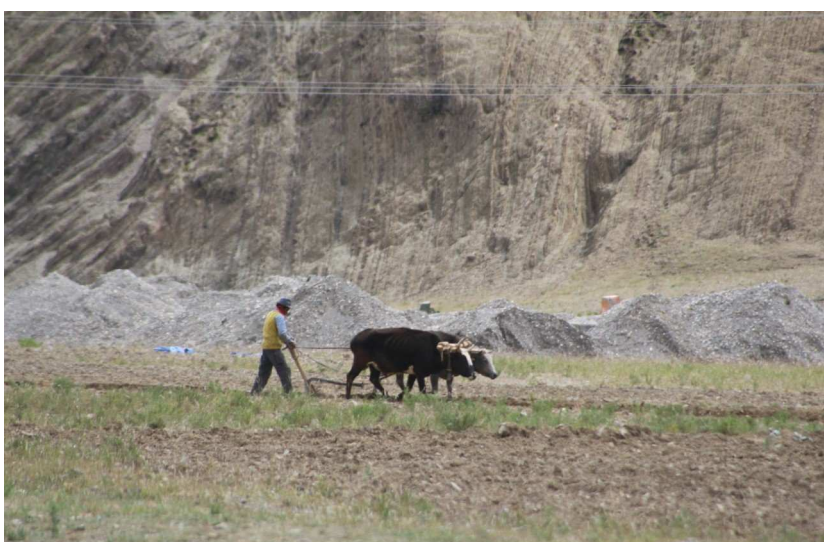
We are a tantalising 50 kms (30 miles) from Everest now and hold our breath for the first close view of the mountain from about 10 kms (6 miles). This comes sooner than expected and we are very quickly upon the Rombok Monastery with Base Camp just in sight beyond.

After a brief visit to the monastery we make our way into the camp and find our yurt. These are actually more like army tents but with blue plastic sheeting instead of canvas and then covered over in yak wool. The inside walls are made of brightly coloured rugs hanging from the metal support bars. They are functional but offer minimal insulation from the cold.

Once we have stowed away our gear we decide to hike the four kms to the Mountain Line, beyond which you need a mountaineer permit to cross. Hiking at 5,500 m (18050 Ft) is not that easy, both David and I felt it a bit, okay as long as you stay at a steady pace that allows your body to assimilate the lack of oxygen but not so good if you apply a burst of speed. Maddie seemed to have no problems with the altitude and soon left us in her wake.

However, only a guide could leave 30 minutes after us and still catch us up before we arrive. Dawa comes up behind us with our passports as the mountain line is controlled by the army and we will be checked. Unlike two years ago they have tightened things up a lot at the viewing area and one can no longer wander up to the glacier. It is a pity but I guess with increasing numbers of





Chinese visitors and the experience of Nepal's South Base Camp they need to ensure they keep control of things.

After another 200 photos we decide to get the Eco bus back down the hill to the camp. Eco does not mean electric; just that it is the only bus allowed up to the viewing point and hence stops multitudes of Landcruisers from polluting the place.

Everest was quite well covered when we arrived but by 1900 the clouds had cleared completely and we were able to take some stunning shots of the mountain at dusk. Supper is a fairly difficult affair with some vegetables we brought up from Tingri for the yurt maître to cook up. With this we had Spam, well pork luncheon meat, Brie brought to us by Sabrina and Martin and finally local beer, Lhasa Beer, to wash it all down with.

The temperature up here plummets once it is dark and we know we are in for a cold night. However, putting long johns on and covering ourselves in duvets we finally settle down to a somewhat difficult night's sleep. Thankfully no one is showing any signs of AMS and with any luck this is behind us.

Our issues with drivers and speed checks had diminished considerably as we were on mountain tracks all the way up to Everest, and the police do not bother to check them.

However, the issue of endless speed checks is not behind us and we anticipate these will continue until we drive north into the remote Northern region of Tibet.

Notwithstanding this we are much more settled now in our travel and I am sure will find the restrictions bearable in the next day or so.

It is difficult to explain the feeling of seeing and being close to



Everest. It is a really very special place and somewhere most people will never get to experience. We linger in the morning here before heading off to Saga as we just feel close to nature, standing below the highest mountain on earth.

Across the plains to Lake Manasorovar

The drive back down involves a shortcut which is basically a dirt road down the mountain. It was very exciting to drive although I did manage to swipe one of the side mirrors off my car when passing a truck which I rolled into. Cost 100 Yuan to calm down the driver and now means I cannot see anything on the nearside rear! Tourist drivers thought it hilarious but they would, wouldn't they?

Anyway once back in the second town of Tingri - this one I think being Old Tingri - we head off on the Chinese Nepal Friendship Highway towards the border for Kathmandu. Just before the final high pass into Nepal, we turn right and head to Lake Pekhu Tso. This is a beautiful area with the central Himalayas on our left including Shisha Pangma, 8012 m (26,286 Ft).

We arrive in Saga in time for supper. Saga is the most awful town I have visited in years. It is the combination of a trucking hub and military base coupled with the digging up of all roads in order to install mains drainage; absolutely foul. However we find a very pleasant restaurant which specialises in what I would call a Tibetan Hotpot cooked on a stove in the middle of the table. We choose beef but the five of us cannot start to eat all the food that arrives and rather embarrassingly we leave three quarters of the hotpot behind when we leave.

Saga is strictly a stopover for us and we leave as quickly as possible, and without breakfast, to drive the 400 kms (250 miles) to Lake Manasorovar which is our next major scenic spot.







The road west is a smart new black top and it is an easy if frustrating drive as we are forced to average no more than 80 kph (50 mph) the whole way and have to pass through three Police checkpoints. As we are not supposed to be driving here we have to swap around cars before every checkpoint and speed check to ensure the four Westerners are all in the Tourist car. Only Maddie, being Chinese, can stay in the hire cars. Not to worry, we are getting use to this now and as soon as we clear the checkpoint we swap back to Bernard and I driving the hire cars.



Peter has rejoined us having dropped Martin and Sabrina back at the St Regis in Lhasa. He has done a tremendous mileage in the last couple of days but thankfully without incident and he is back in the fold for a few days before he has to take Maddie to Lhasa for her flight back to Hong Kong.

This bit of the drive I had expected to be unexciting but in fact it turned out to be another great day with sightings of Black Necked Cranes, Tibetan Asses and Tibetan Deer. In all it was a beautiful drive and we got our first glimpse of Mount Kalash just before arriving on the shores of Lake Manasorovar.



The lake itself is magnificent and extremely blue as with all the water up here. We are staying in a Guest House by the lake adjacent to the Chiu Gompa, a famous monastery which overlooks the lake from a rock top with views North to Mount Kalash.

Having decided there was a better guest house next door, i.e., cleaner beds, electricity for 3 hours, no running water but an outdoor hole in the floor loo, we decided to move to this one. Just goes to show how basic the first one was, best left to your imagination.



After a walk along the lakeside we repair for supper in a Tibetan style eating house; basically everyone sitting around a yak dung burning cooking stove, drinking beer and trying to avoid asking too many questions as to what we are eating.

A great few days, Everest lived up to the expectations of all and we have not had a single day without really interesting sights, sounds and activities.

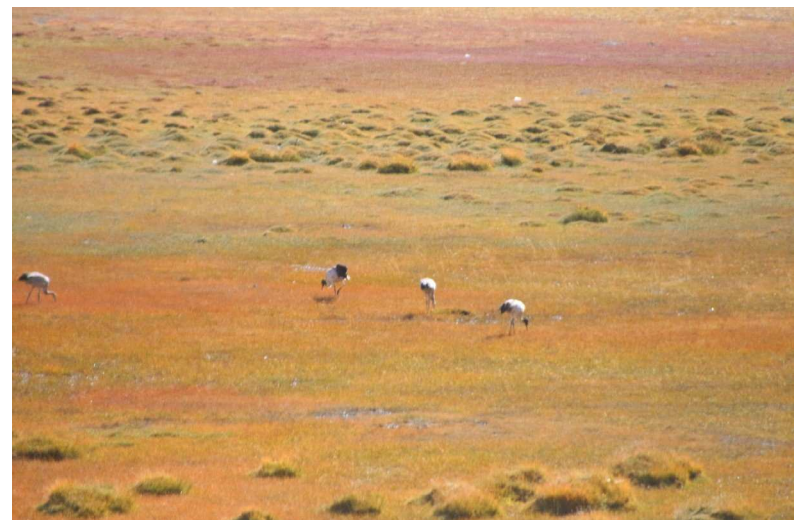
Mount Kalash

Day break at the lake is very special with stunning views of Nemo Nanyi, 7728 m (25,354 Ft) appearing on the horizon to the south. We arrange to visit Jiu Mon Gompa (monastery) adjacent to the lake from where one can clearly see Mount Kalash in the distance.

By mid morning we are ready for the short drive across to Darchen the town at the base of Mount Kalash.

The religious significance of this mountain is considerable. It is a place of pilgrimage for both Hindu and Buddhists. There is a trek across the Himalayas from Nepal that many people take each year just to see the mountain and prostrate themselves in front of it. Hundreds walk the 88 kms (55 miles) Kora (protestation path) around the mountain that takes from 4 to 30 days depending on how you do it. No one has ever climbed Mount Kalash, every expedition that has intended to do so has been talked out of it by the monks that look after the area.

There are two sky funeral sites on the lower spurs of the mountain and many Buddhists are laid out here for the bones to be taken by the wildlife on the mountain.





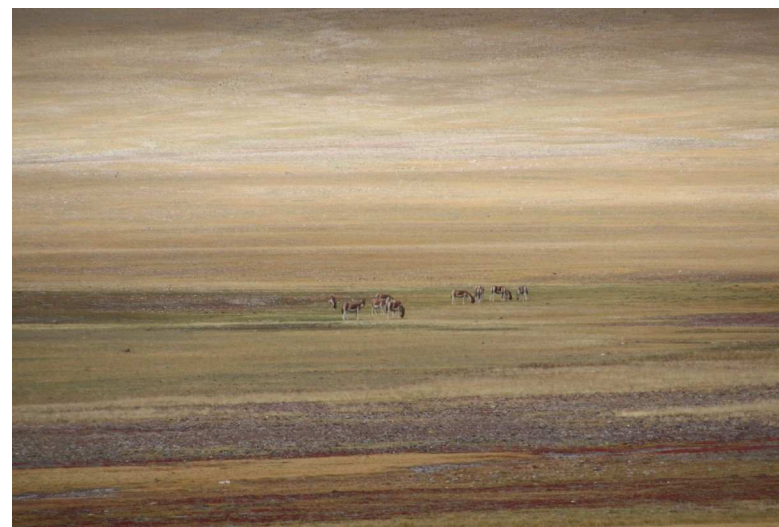
We are incredibly lucky to be here when the mountain is fully in view, and more or less the only Westerners in the town.

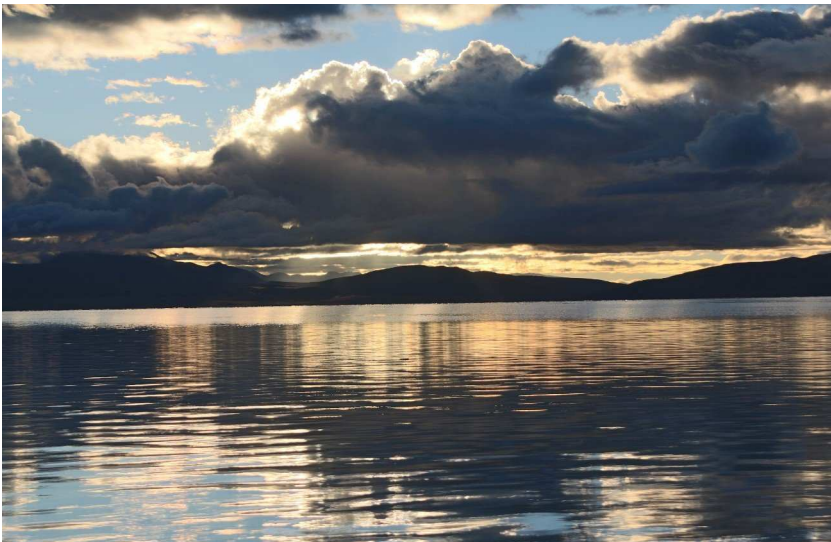
We do two treks on the hillside below the mountain, the first to a viewpoint 500 vertical metres (1,640 Ft) above the town from where we can see the mountainside Monasteries, Mount Kalash and the Kora below. On the next day we walk 8 kms (5 miles) along the Kora to the west as far as a small hamlet from where the trek becomes much harder and commits the walker to continuing right around the mountain.

All in all, a great experience! None of us have any problems with AMS, and are generally finding we have almost recovered our normal levels of energy.

Unfortunately Magdalene's time is up; she is due back in University in a few days and must get back to Lhasa. The original plan was to fly her from Gar to Lhasa and then on to Hong Kong. However, we have established that the flight from Gar is extremely unreliable so Peter Ye will take her by car the 1,300 kms (807 miles) back to Lhasa, sharing the driving with the driver of one of the other vehicles. They will also take back one of the tourist vehicles with them as we do not need three cars for 4 people. So, the rest of us will travel onwards in two cars; the tourist car being driven by their driver and crewed by Dawa and a Chinese girl, Chung. The second car will take the four of us and Bernard and I will share the driving. If we encounter a checkpoint then Chung will come over and drive the vehicle through the checkpoint.

It has been great having Maddie with us as she has acted as interpreter for the last week and made life a lot easier for us. In preparation for her departure she has been recording the Chinese name of our favourite dishes so we can continue to order them





after she has left.

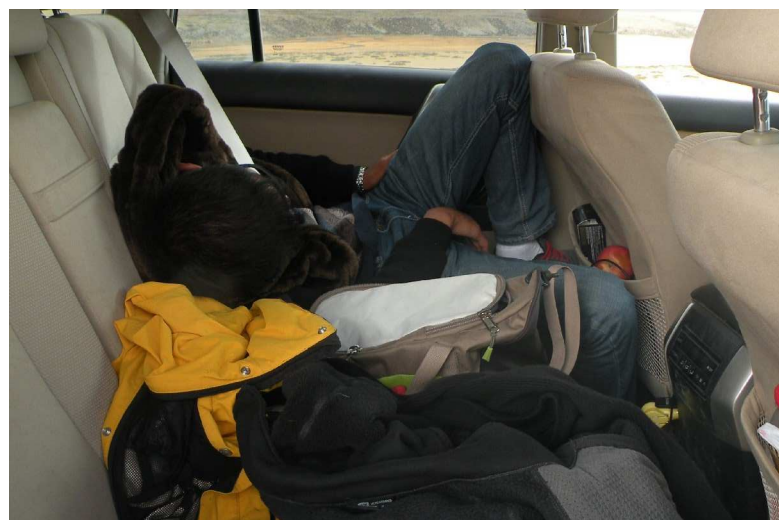
On to the Old Capital of Tibet

From Darchen we drive south and west to Zanda (Toling), the ancient capital of Tibet and the location of the original palaces of the Tibetan kings in the 9th century. The hotel we are staying at is awful, and we are a bit tired of bad accommodation and the worsening food. On the positive front we have come down from 5,500 m (18,044 Ft) to about 3,700 m (12,139 Ft) a similar altitude to Lhasa which makes breathing and moving around much easier, at least for a day or so.

Although nights and eating are a challenge, the day light hours are brilliant in that we continue to see amazing scenery and many historic sites. In Zanda we visit the ancient city of Tsaparang which, although partially rebuilt by the Chinese government, still entralls us with a magnificent view from the top of the palace.

During our stop here Bernard finds a restaurant that is owned by one of the few Muslims that live in Tibet. They are a minority here and not particularly liked by the Tibetans or Chinese. However, the food minus beer at their restaurant was very good and we ate there two nights running. We were unaware at the time that this would be the last good meal before our return to Lhasa 8 days hence!

Dawa, our guide, is proving to be a real star and very helpful at giving advice on what is worth seeing and what is not. He has helped me re-plan the next week across Northern Tibet which we know will be quite difficult in many respects.







Northern Tibet

Leaving Zanda behind us we have decided to reverse our steps back to Lake Manasorovar instead of continuing Northwest to Gar. This is primarily as with Magdalene going by car back to Lhasa there is little need for us to visit this expectedly horrible military town and thereafter having to travel along 500 kms of trucking routes to Rendao.

Instead, by going back to Manasorovar and turning North towards Yakra we save a considerable amount of uninteresting and tricky driving whilst ending up at the same destination, Rendao. As soon as we leave the main road we are onto tracks. We quickly establish that none of our maps are any use with lakes appearing on the wrong side, tracks existing that are not on the maps and tracks on the map that do not exist.

Using the Iphone GPS we plot our position on the one map we have which has Latitude and Longitude and use this to record our progress whilst at the same time ensuring we are going the right way. Average speed is down to around 25 kph on these roads and the ride is not at all comfortable. On this first day to Yakra and Rendao I think it's true to say we saw little, and did not enjoy the journey that much.

We arrived rather despondent and very tired at a guest house in Rendao which was barely better than the yurt at Everest. Hygiene is almost nonexistent, and the entire central plain of Tibet seems to be littered with rubbish. A swathe of several hundred feet either side of the road is just littered. Damn shame and something that will come back to haunt them if they ever get their tourist industry going.

We have met no Westerners for some time, but do run into a dozen camera toting Chinese from the lowlands who have come



up for a tour of Tibet during the National Day holiday period. Some of these people speak reasonable English and at least one of the group was from Vancouver. They are all very pleasant and like us, travelling in Landcruisers.

Rendao had nothing to recommend it except a strip of concrete road adjacent to which the small community lives and which extends about 100m (330 Ft) each end of the town before the road reverts to gravel.

This is one of the towns that have been built by the Chinese to relocate Tibetan herders off the plains and into villages. This relocation is an attempt by the Chinese to control the movement of herders and to change their agricultural habits. It is a disaster akin to the Chinese 'Great Leap Forwards' and has meant that these towns become ghettos for unemployed Tibetan herders. Social engineering at its worst.

Both David and I suffered over night with mild AMS. I think because we had gone back up to high altitude after Zanda. I kept waking up unable to breath and had a terrible nights sleep, choking every few minutes when I could not get enough oxygen. The explanation for this is that during waking hours one breathes deeper to compensate for the thin oxygen. However, at night whilst asleep your body goes back into its normal breathing rhythm, and this does not supply enough oxygen to the lungs. The outcome is that one wakes with this terrible choking and gasping feeling. After a few deep breaths one drifts off to sleep again and the process is repeated.

I went back on to Diamox straight away and by the following night was sleeping much better and re-acclimatised once again to 5,500 m (18,000 Ft).

Leaving Rendao for the drive to Coqen we are somewhat



disappointed after our first day in the outback. However this drive is far better, only 200 kms (125 miles) to cover and lots to see on the way. Specifically, we pass several very pretty lakes and mountains whilst driving more or less on a 4,700 m (15,419 Ft) plain. We start to encounter Tibetan wildlife and by the evening have seen Tibetan Donkeys, Foxes, Chinese Water Deer, thousand of Yaks, sheep and goats, Lammergeyer (very large vulture like birds).

We also pass groups of Tibetans camping, having parked their lorries on the side of the tracks and disembarked onto the plain. These groups of a hundred or more complete with tents and horses etc are obviously some sort of get together. Indeed on my return to the UK I was watching a documentary on Tibet and this covered these camping trips which apparently are traditional get togethers where the group have a sort of sports week involving horse racing, trick riding and other competitions. It is one of the few traditions that the Chinese have not stopped or forced their way into. In hindsight I am disappointed that we did not stop at one of these gatherings and watch their activities. However they were obviously a local affair and at the time it did not seem appropriate.

We arrive in Coqen to another fairly awful hostel but at least this one had a shower with hot water. No electricity though. We are getting used to this shortcoming.

Food – well, this is OK if you like Yak and Potatoes, vegetables or rice but otherwise generally uninspiring. Yak Butter Tea is the most revolting drink on the planet as attested to by Michael Palin and seconded by Paul Markland. If it is a toss up between eating Louisiana Grits and Tibetan Barley Porridge then I am in the grits camp.

Breakfast usually consists of a hardboiled egg, possibly a



chapatti and a three in one sachet of Nescafe (Coffee, Milk and Sugar). The alternative is Jasmine tea or Tibetan Black Tea (the latter is the best diuretic I have ever encountered).

We have become fond of some really strange things since entering the Tibetan outback, in particular Luncheon Meat of the Spam variety which I have taken to eating in bulk straight from the tin, sharing as little as possible with the others. This stuff is very edible and when all else fails and Yak cannot be faced has been a staple of our diet. In addition to this we have consumed large quantities of Snicker Bars. Although these have to be kept hidden as Peter has had a habit of finding and helping himself to the entire stock. As a result, Snickers are closely guarded by Dina.

However, we were never here for the food and knew accommodation would be challenging. The sights and sounds of Tibet more than make up for the difficulties we have encountered and everywhere we go we find the Tibetan people delightful and fascinating in their traditions.

Return to Lhasa

From Coqen which is on Tibet's central north-south road we head off back into the outback to see Lake Tashi Namtso and from there on across the central plain to Lower Wembu (Ombu) on the banks of Lake Dangra Yutso. This is a great drive and we see Tibetan Antelope along with many more of the before mentioned species. The scenery is spectacular and we have got the driving on these tracks down to an art form.

Bernard and I share the driving whilst David and Dina swap seats from front to rear. It is pretty hard on the back sitting for long periods with the car bouncing up and down.



We stop a lot to take interesting pictures, get snacks, go into the bushes etc but in general travel is much easier now we have sorted out the vehicles.

However, the struggle we face every night is taking its toll and after yet another awful night in Wenbu we decide we will skip the penultimate night by driving 470 kms in one go to the town of Baingoin.

Awakening on the side of Lake Dangra is fairly magical, the first of the winter snow has occurred overnight and the sky is still fairly black in the distance. The snow is just a sprinkling but predicts the long winter to come.

On leaving the lakeside we drive to the larger older village of Wenbu to the north. This is the first really unspoiled Tibetan village we have seen, no outward sign of Chinese influence here beyond a couple of windmills. The village is quaintly laid out on the hillside and boasts its own Monastery with the largest prayer wheels we have yet to see.

The villagers are very friendly and inquisitive and we are soon shown around the outer Monastery and prayer wheels. Most of the people here are farmers and this is obvious from their homes and tractors etc.

From here we press on to Nyima, a town 40 kms west of where our map puts it. Another horrid overdeveloped village but one that is purported to be on the main East West northern highway; another gravel track, poorly maintained and not recently graded.

However the road onwards is slightly better and as we still have 300 kms to go we push the speed to the maximum for the road condition as we traverse between Lake Serling Tso and Lake Tso



Ngoi to the town of Baingoin. Here we anticipate a slightly better hotel with running hot water, showers and electricity. Indeed we arrive to find all these things, but the place is still an unhygienic dump!!

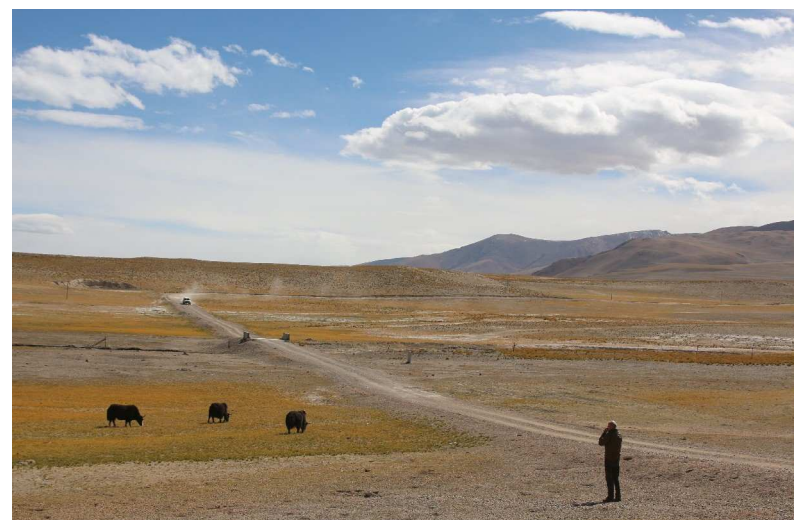
Not to worry as this is our last night in the outback and we proceed swiftly the next day, speed checks included, back to Lhasa past Lake Namtso Chukmo, the highest freshwater lake in the world at 4,900 m (16,076 Ft). However, this day is not without incident. No sooner have we left Baingoin than it starts to snow! By the time we reach the 5,200 m (17,060 Ft) pass to Damzhung the road has been closed by the police. We have visions of being marooned in a one horse town whilst waiting for the snow to thaw. Luckily the police have a snow plough to hand and this is dispatched up the mountain to clear a path for all those waiting to cross the pass.

The final leg into Lhasa is uneventful and we parallel the Beijing/Lhasa railway for much of the final 200 kms (125 miles).

I cannot say we are not all relieved to be back in Lhasa at the St Regis. We are! Fifteen days on the road has been wonderful and the scenery we have seen magnificent, however the daily grind in regard to hotels and sanitation has finally got to us. We are much relieved to be back in a civilised western hotel.

We have all taken thousands of photos and now have the task of sorting these out. As we have arrived back two days early we intend to fly down to Lijiang, the town China calls it's 'City in the Clouds'. Although this is in Yunnan province of China it is directly adjacent to Tibet and we hope will complement our trip to this part of the world.

For those of you that remember my London to Sydney rally in 2005 you may remember that Lijiang was where we towed the



car to after the accident in the Yunnan mountains. There, 36 mechanics spent 39 hours rebuilding the Mercedes so we could continue, ultimately to Sydney. I plan to go and visit the Kia dealership that amazed us so with their skills whilst we are in Lijiang.

The long way down

Departing Lhasa was a sad moment for us, leaving behind the sublime beauty of the mountains and plateau, people and animals but also the tough way of life that exists here in modern Tibet.

When we set out on this adventure I was fully aware that it would be difficult in many respects having already experienced the poverty of the plateau. However, seven days in the Northern Province made us realise how lucky we are in the West to have basics such as water and electricity. It was a constant struggle to get any water, never mind hot, electricity at best exists for 2 hours in the evening, food is extremely basic and nearly always involves Yak and toilets are nonexistent in any Western form!

However, an adventure is not much good unless one experiences some form of degradation of one's lifestyle, Tibet certainly gave us that.

We left the mountains just in time as the first snows hit us on the ultimate pass into Lhasa and there was a concern we might have been stuck there overnight. However, the one thing that China has brought to Tibet is organisation and progress and we were saved by the appearance of a caterpillar snow plough just at the right time.

David, Dina and Bernard, like me, have taken hundreds of photos and it is going to take quite some time to reduce these to a manageable number. However, many of the scenes we captured



cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world and that makes them super special. Just seeing five of the eight highest peaks on earth all in one go is an awesome spectacle but we had many more such exciting experiences during our trip to Tibet.

To be honest Lijiang and Beijing were tame after our adventures in the mountains, and I am not going to bore you with our sightseeing in either town.

It's been a great trip, and I do not regret the discomfort, but do regret Martin and Sabrina having to break off early. At least one Cubbon, Maddie, got to see most of the sights and I am sure will make her father jealous for all time over what he was unfortunate enough to miss.

This trip would not have been possible without Peter and Sabrina's help and indeed Maddie's with the translation between Chinese and English, so many thanks to you all for that.

Until the next time...

