

TRAVEL

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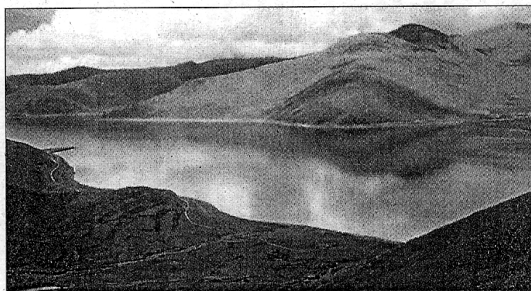
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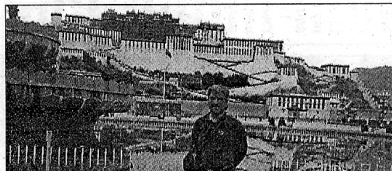
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PHOTOS BY TERRY LEWISKY/WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Lake Yamorok-tso sits high in the clouds in the mountains of Tibet.



Reaching for the heights

Terry Lewisky, a Winnipeg-based international communications consultant, writes about his recent journey to Lhasa and the mountains of Tibet, one of the most isolated and least-visited regions on Earth, where he found beauty, peace and solitude on top of the world, looking down on creation.

Looking down ON CREATION

View from mountains of Tibet an awesome, spiritual experience

By Terry Lewisky

LHASA, Tibet — I could not understand why these lyrics kept playing in my head after my second day in Tibet.

"On top of the world looking down on creation" — words from a popular 1973 song by the Carpenters, that I first heard on a transistor radio in my parent's grocery store in a small, rural Manitoba town. Why would those lyrics come back to me here, and why now?

Why here in Tibet, one of the most isolated and least-visited regions of the world, would I now think of this music?

Called the roof of the world, Tibet sits on a cool plateau at an average altitude of 4,267 metres. Mount Everest, the world's tallest peak, stands at 8,848 metres above sea level.

Tibet is surrounded by three resource-rich mountain ranges — including the famous Himalayas — which have helped to isolate the country geographically, culturally and economically from the rest of the world for more than 1,000 years.

It is a country so removed from the 21st century, with our prevailing information technology, cyber commerce and globalization, that kids with constant running noses still wave enthusiastically at jets flying over, in expectation of being seen.

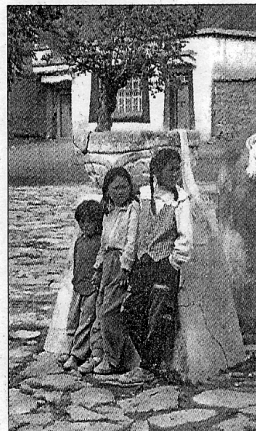
Why would those lyrics find memory and purpose in my sub-conscious here in Tibet where the culture is so opposite from what I knew growing up in rural Manitoba? What was the connection that would trigger that song? Why, here in Tibet, a nomadic, peasant society with one of the lowest literacy rates in the world?

The people walk with prayer wheels and beads chanting Buddhist scriptures from memory. The mantra most repeated, "om mani padme hum" literally means "by practice of right method and wisdom of which I can become Buddha."

Tibet is a Buddhist society that has not had the influence of other major world religions in more than five centuries.

Small Muslim community

While a variety of Buddhist sects offers differing spins on the same prayer wheel and a small Muslim



Children in the streets of Lhasa.

tains by yak and then reassembled in Lhasa at the same time the United States was starting its interstate highway system. There are no trains to Lhasa.

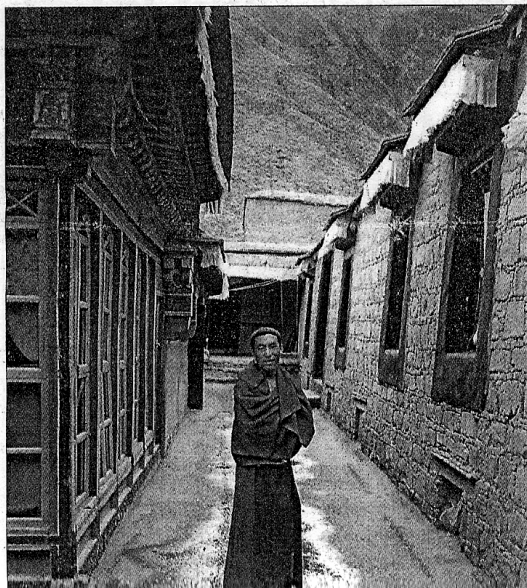
While Tibetans believe and refer to Tibet as an independent nation that is occupied by the Chinese, the Chinese consider Tibet historically part of China and refer to it as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR).

Regained health

At first I thought the memory of that Carpenter's song was prompted because I was finally regaining my health after two days of altitude sickness. The headache was not strong, but still lingering, and my queasy stomach was calm. My body was adjusting to the lack of oxygen and I was getting some energy back. I was still waking up at night and gasping for air to fill my lungs.

I had also remembered an old lesson from the altiplano of Bolivia — always walk downhill and ride up.

Lhasa, at an elevation of 3,683 metres (about three kilometres higher than Winnipeg), is flat and relatively easy walking, yet I could not do more than one flight of stairs without stopping to rest.



Tibet

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The other main entry point is by road or flight from Katmandu, Nepal, to the south.

My friend in Chengdu, Zhenming pmg, had arranged the six-day, all-inclusive tour I was required to join to get my Alien Travel Permit (ATP) for Tibet. (There are only two types of foreign travellers in Tibet—those on tours with limited time and lots of money, or those with backpacks with unlimited time and a bit of money.)

Our group of 10 included Chinese couples and single girls from Beijing, a trio from Hong Kong, and an American who was teaching in China. Benny, our Tibetan guide, spoke English, Chinese and Tibetan.

While people in the cities are acquiring some of China's promised benefits of economic development, Tibetans in the country side are still hoping to buy their first solar panel to generate power for a simple pump, radio or hot-plate.

All they need is something to replace the piece of tin they use to reflect the intense ultra-violet rays from the sun to boil river water in a kettle and make tsampa tea.

Clean and comfortable

While my stay at the Holy Swan Hotel in the Tibetan side of Lhasa was clean and comfortable, with a flush toilet and hot shower, I knew that this was an exception for most hotels and homes of the local Chinese leadership. On Sunday, we did the scheduled tour of the 17th-century Potala Palace considered the highest palace in the world and the traditional home of the Dalai Lama until he fled the country in 1959.

We visited the Jokhang Temple, the most holiest spot in Tibet where the pilgrims and devout Buddhists prostrate themselves as they crawl to the entrance. Here the grime and smell of ghee, yak-butter and candle smoke permeate the wood, the pavement and the antique statues of Buddha.

We walked through Barkhor Square where women will squat and relieve themselves by a hill of dirt, while crowds of monks in from the monasteries mingle and chat.

We visited Drepung and Sera Monasteries and heard the musical din of debating monks who bring their religious arguments to a climax with a lunge and a clap of their hands.

We went to the Norbulingka, the

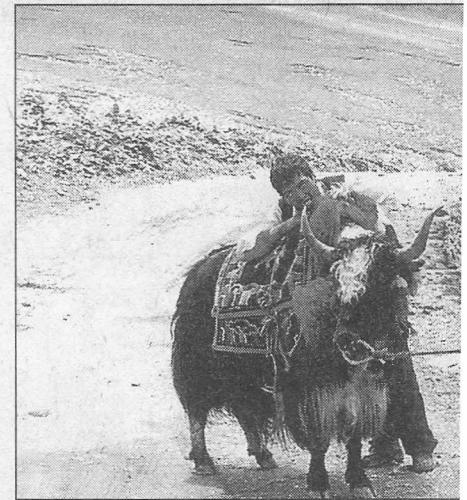


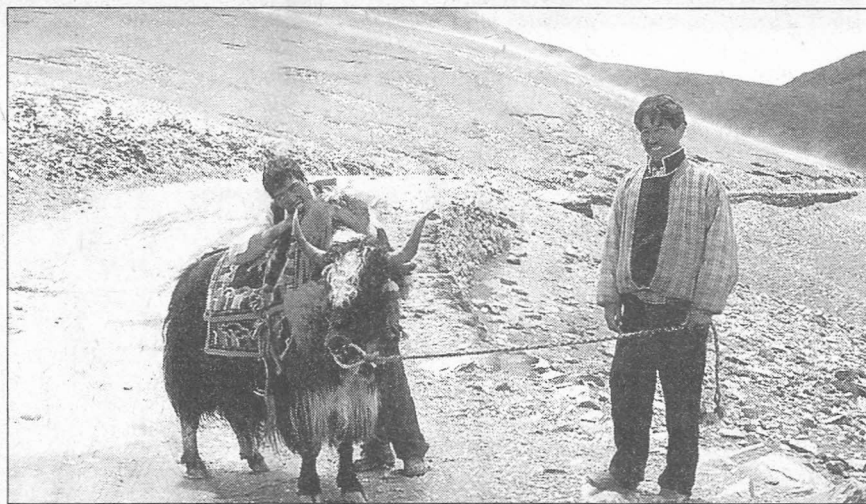
PHOTOS BY TERRY IEWYCKY/WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Monks gather at the plaza in front of the Potala Palace, former home of the Dalai Lama, above. At right, two Tibetans and their yak at the summit of Kamba-la Pass, summer residence of the Dalai Lama but did not get to see the original 1927 Austins and 1931 Dodge car carried over the mountains to Lhasa. We did the circuit with about six other tour buses of similar groups and numbers.

By day four, I could neither solve the mystery of the constantly replaying lyrics in my head nor handle the reality of another day on a scheduled tour. While my group went on to visit the cities of Gyantse and Rikeze I headed out to explore the vastness of Tibet. I was "assigned" a guide who arranged a vehicle to take me about 140 kilometres south of Lhasa to Yamdrok-Tso Lake.

At 4,488 metres, the jade Yamdrok-Tso is held as one of four holy lakes in Tibet. The road over the Kamba-la Mountains is a gravel track with a 1,000-metre shear drop if you get out of the wheel ruts. We pass plateaus of vegetable plots and wild yak grazing in far away meadows and wind our way up through the mountain pass at a summit of 4,974 metres.





My assigned Chinese guide, John, had a strange twitch with his fingers that I could not figure out (I thought maybe a religious exercise) until he told me he did this drive once a week. As we drove into the clouds, my fear subsided when I couldn't see anything and knew my life was in the hands of a higher being - and the driver.

My mind cleared as I realized my fate was very simple, but then the clouds broke and there in front of us was Yamdrok-Tso Lake. The vast serenity of the lake and terrain around it was over-whelming. When we stopped, the silence was deafening.

Here on top of the world, at 4,500 metres, was a place so magnificent in its beauty and pure solitude that I felt a closeness to heaven that I could never feel in an airplane. A closeness I had felt before, once at Machu Pichu in the Andes, again on the Beartooth Pass coming out of Yellowstone and even on top of Ayres Rock in Australia.

There is something spiritual about high places.

I wondered what it would be like to live here. Could I move a Winnebago onto that mountain over there; the one with only a couple of stone peasant huts visible in a 100-kilometre radius?

Could I buy some of those solar panels that I saw in the shops around Barkhor Square? Could I pay the neighbours to carry in my food and petrol? Could I become a one-person industry for the region?

We made it back to Lhasa and like the Pope and the pilgrims circumambulating the Jokhang, I got out of the car and kissed the ground.

I tried all three Internet locations in Lhasa but could not connect to check my e-mail. I was feeling very isolated and alone.

I decided what I needed was a good meal at the Hard Yak Cafe in what used to be the Holiday Inn in the Chinese part of Lhasa. I ordered a \$20 pizza and planned my last full day in Tibet.

John showed up the next morning-even though I had begged him not to bother. He said he was told to accompany me.

Shopping

I dragged him to a shop to buy some Tibetan medicine, then to leave my old down parka for my friend Tashi to wear around the Potala, and finally back to the Bank of China to change some travellers cheques.

By the time I flagged down a cab to take me to a mountain for the day, even John had had enough. He could not sit on a mountain all day while I figured out a sound in my head. We agreed, on a common explanation if ever asked about our activities for the day and we parted company on the side of Nangra Lam Road.

The taxi took me out of town and dropped me at Chupsang Nunnery, from where I hiked over the mountain into another world.

I sat, I looked, I thought and I absorbed. As I thought how ideal it would be to have a babbling brook to sit near, a peasant farmer working the field next to me opened up his irrigation channel to flood the plateau. There was my babbling brook.

The farmer left his hoe in the field and sat beside me with his prayer beads and repeatedly chanted, "om mani pad me mum."

It was not a question of why here and why now - there was no here and there was no now. There was no question, there was no answer, there was no opposing thought.

I was on top of the world looking down on creation.

Terry Lewycky is a Winnipeg-based international communications consultant.