

Tibet



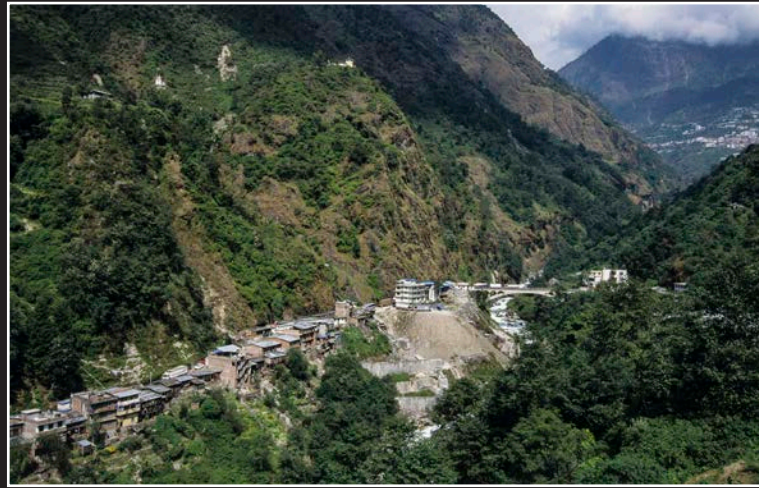
Images gathered by Tony and Jan Waltham
during visits to Tibet in 1992 and 2002

www.geophotos.co.uk/travels/Tibet pictorial

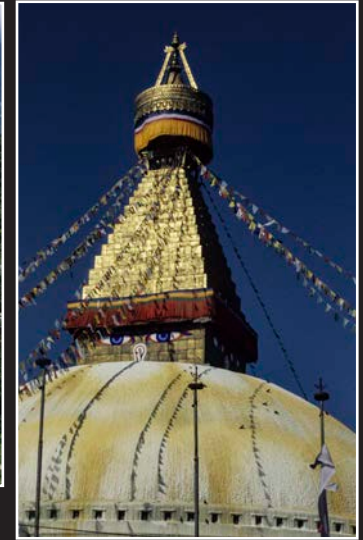




The great Buddhist stupa of Boudhanath in Kathmandu.



Kodari and the Friendship Bridge on the Nepal-Tibet border.



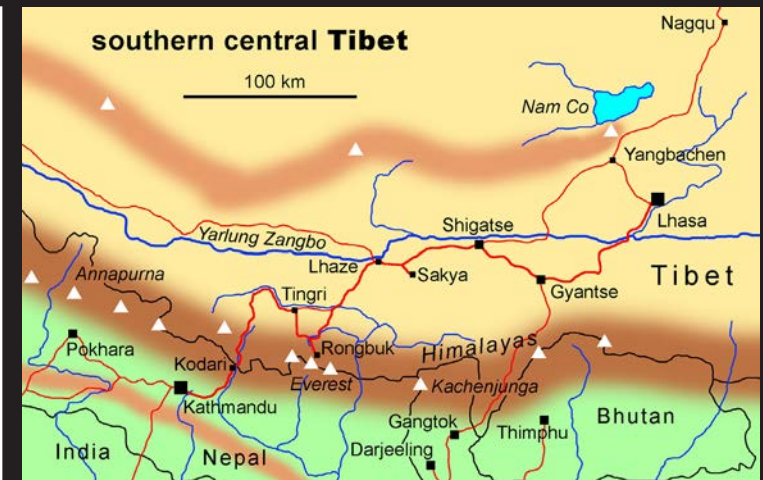
There is nowhere else in the world quite like Tibet. It has a unique combination in its high-altitude landscapes, the nomadic yak-herders who live there and the great monasteries that once ruled the country.

Probably the best way to appreciate a little of Tibet in a single short visit is to travel from Kathmandu to Lhasa. Easily arranged with companies in Kathmandu, this takes in Rongbuk on the northern side of Mount Everest and the magnificent monastic cities of Shigatse and Gyantse, beside sampling some of the wide open spaces before reaching the once-forbidden city of Lhasa. Jan and I enjoyed this trip in 2002, in the comfort of a landcruiser with local guides, and after ten days on land we took the short flight back to Kathmandu.



A great extension to the Tibetan experience is to venture out onto the vastness of the plateau, most easily reached around Nam Co, just north of Lhasa. I did this in 1992, along with Dick Willis, Kenny Taylor, Pete Francis, Zhu Xuewen, Zhang Ren, Wang and Zashi Duoqi, as part of a reconnaissance of Tibetan karst. With a landcruiser and a truck, we crossed the mountains north of Yangbachen on a rough track, and then spent three days lost on the trackless grasslands before finding a way to Nagqu. Along the way we stayed nights at nomads' camps and caught a glimpse of their amazing way of life.

Shishapangma, seen from a sky-burial site on the Tibet Plateau.



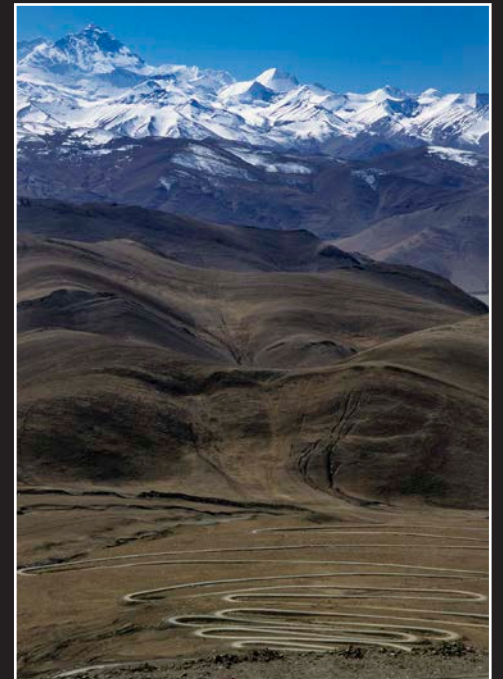
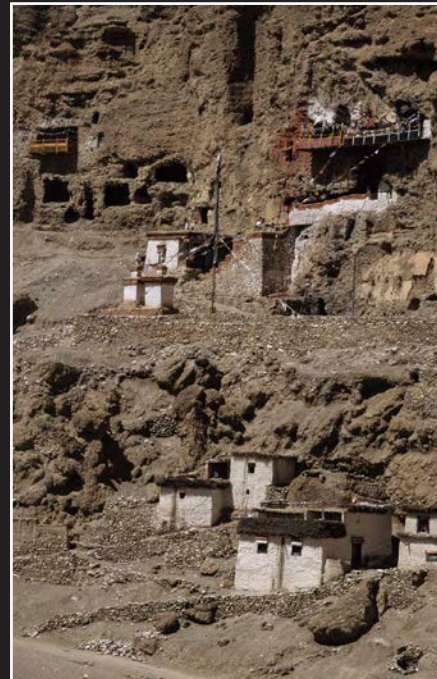


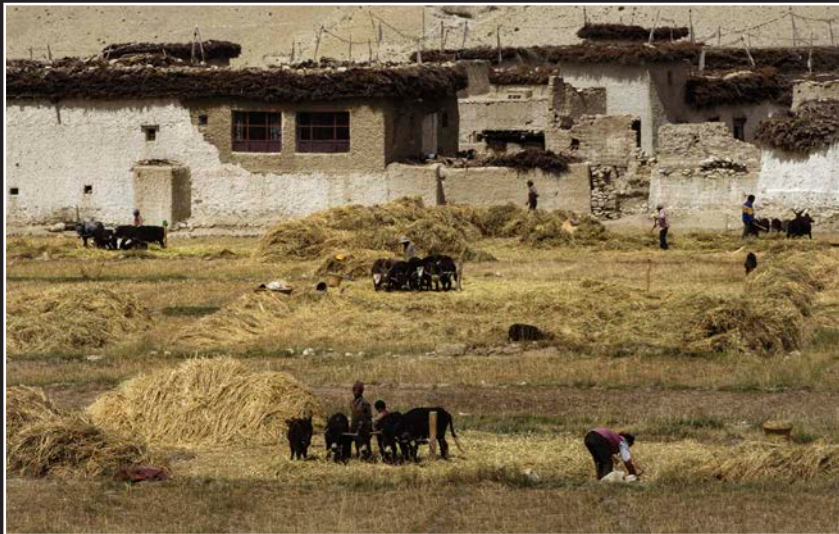
On and around the Tingri Plains, part of the Tibet Plateau northwest of Mount Everest.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The classic view of Everest (centre left) from the Pang La, with Makalu extreme left and Cho Oyu far right. Rongbuk valley. New Chinese road over the Pang La Rongbuk. Monastic hermitages destroyed. Rongbuk monastery and the north side of Mount Everest. Village below Pang La, barren in winter and with monsoon barley.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Communal ploughing
outside Lhaze. Tibet's
very best style of
solar kettle heaters.
Growing vegetables
beneath plastic, as
introduced by the
Chinese. A glitzy new
bank ignored by the
passing shepherds.
Yaks to the plough.
Threshing barley by
traditional methods.





*Country folk from
some of the remote
farms and villages
that are scattered
across Tibet.*

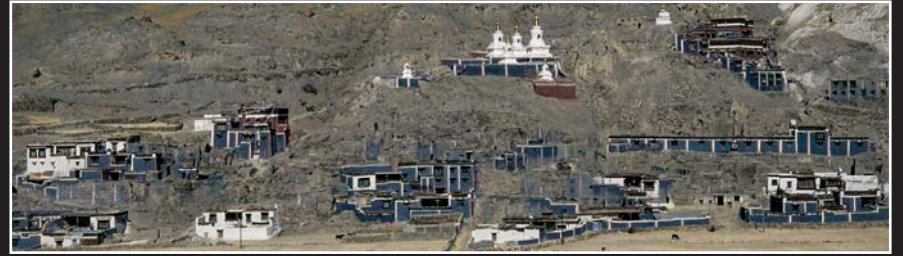




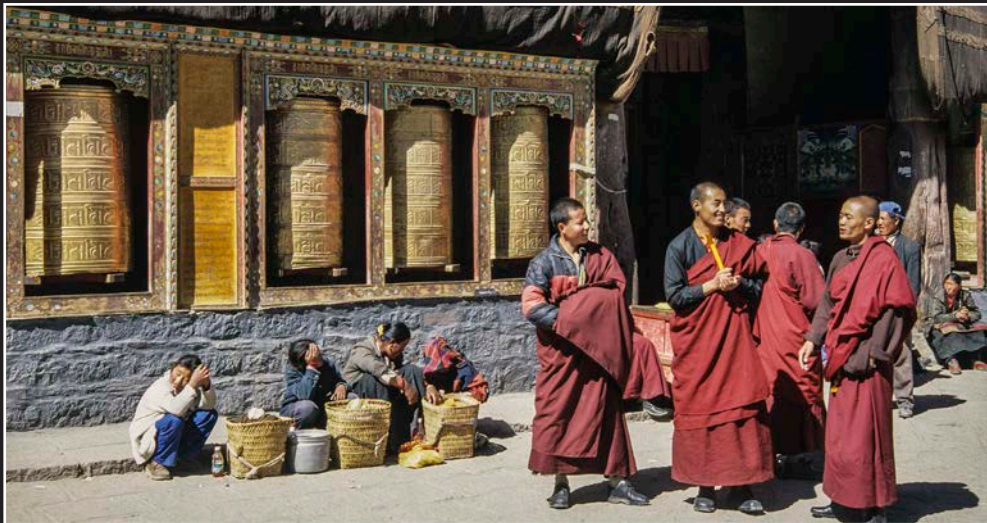
Ferry-glide, across the Zangpo without power when held by a cable and steered to drift obliquely to the current.

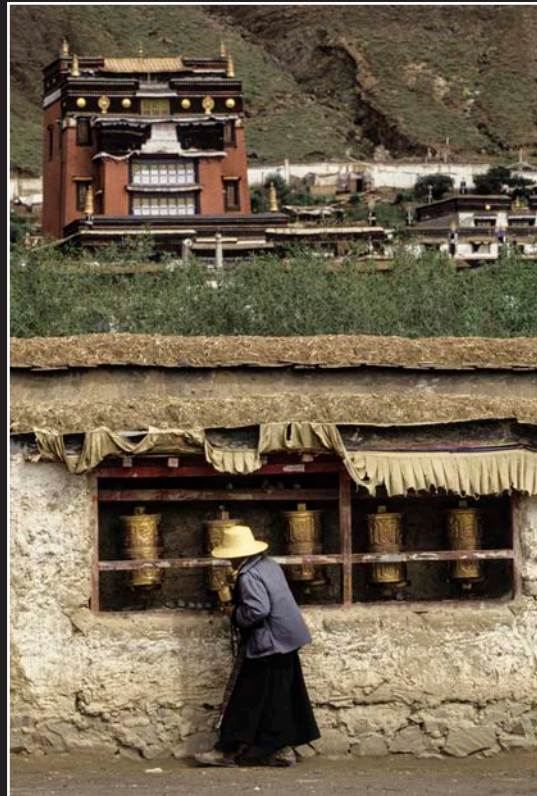
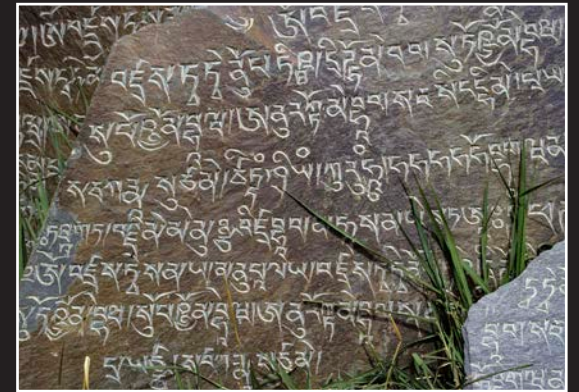
Most of the roads in Tibet were a bit basic in 1992.





The great monastery at Sakya, with visiting groups of villagers.





Making prayer wheels: a monk draws three strips of 'Om mani padme hum' on soot coating the sheet of brass; then two young monks hammer the letters into bas-relief.



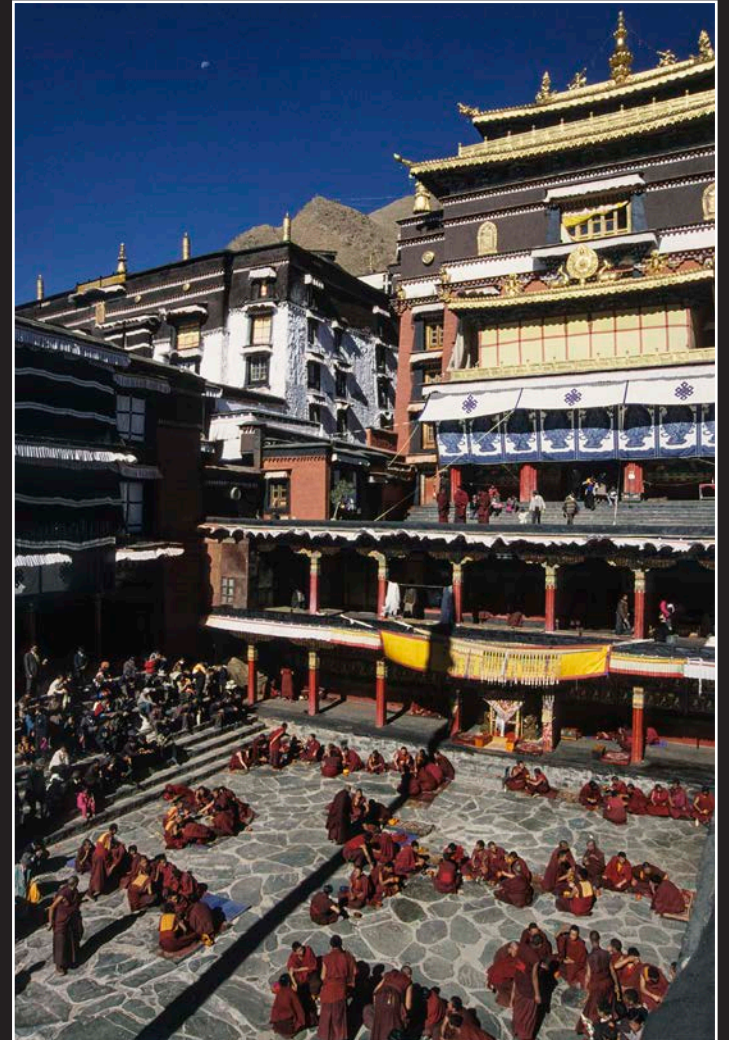


Shigatse, with the gold roofs of Tashilhunpo monastery overlooking the old Tibetan town and the sprawling new Chinese town beyond.



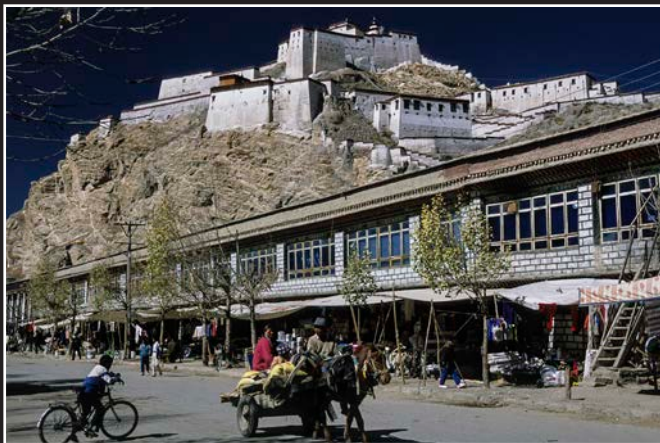
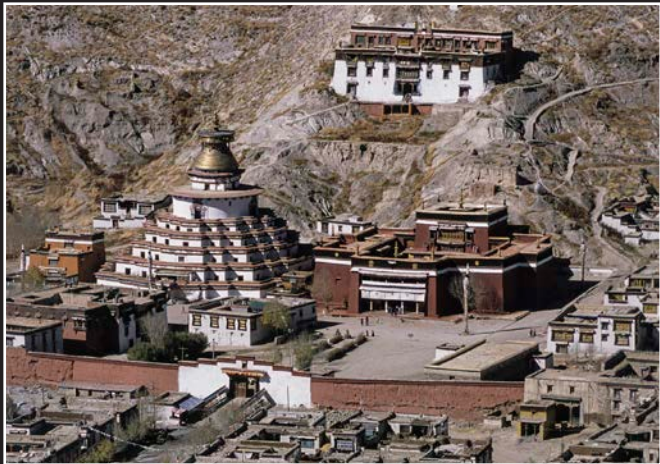
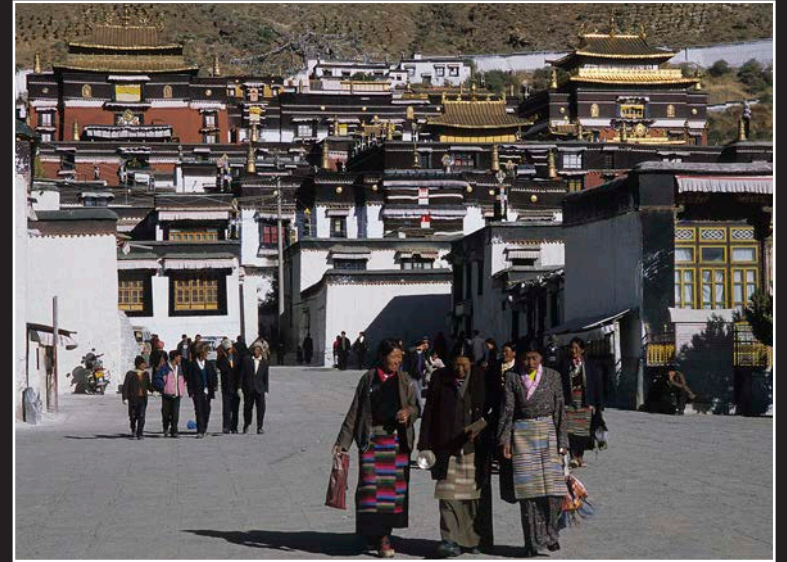
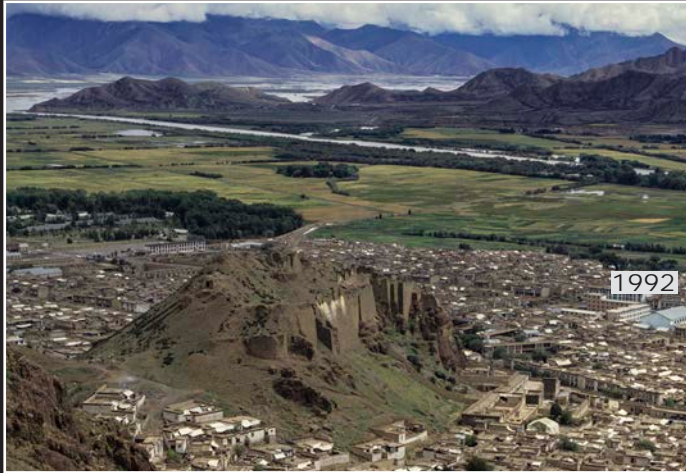


Inside the Tashilhunpo monastery with the monks gathered in groups for their daily debating session.

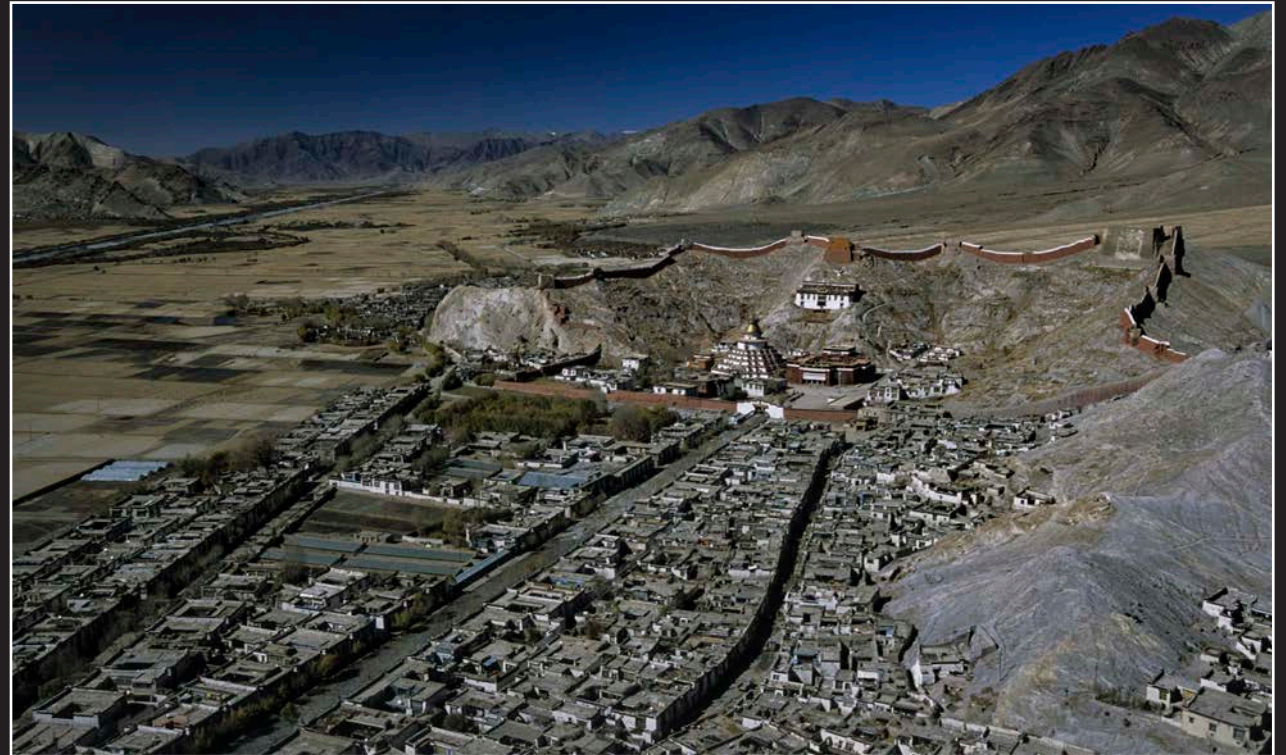


Changes within Shigatse, from 1992 to 2002.





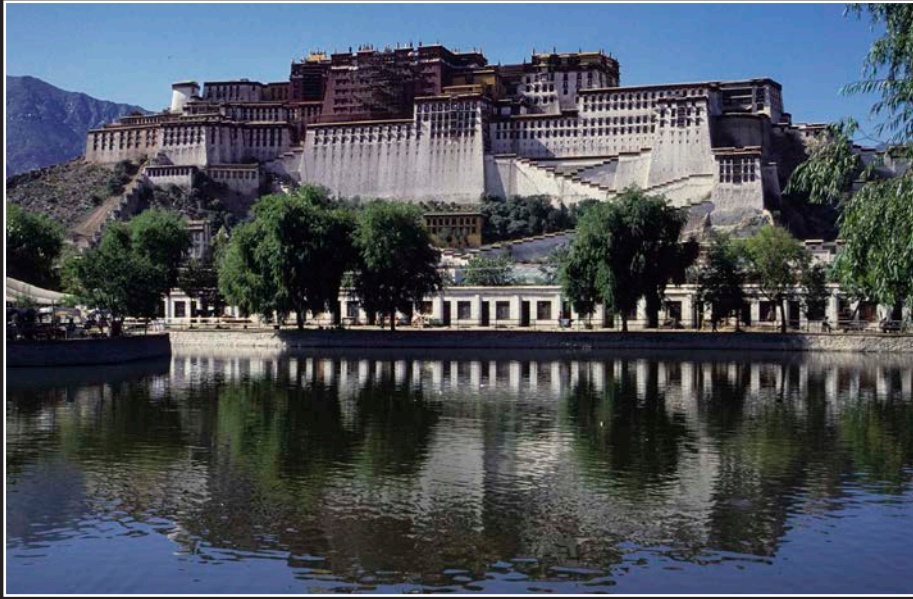
Shigatse: the castle (dzong) was totally demolished by Red Guards in 1961, and rebuilt in 2007.
Gyantse and its Kumbum stupa and Palkhor monastery seen across town from the fort.





*Along the
road from
Gyantse
to Lhasa.*

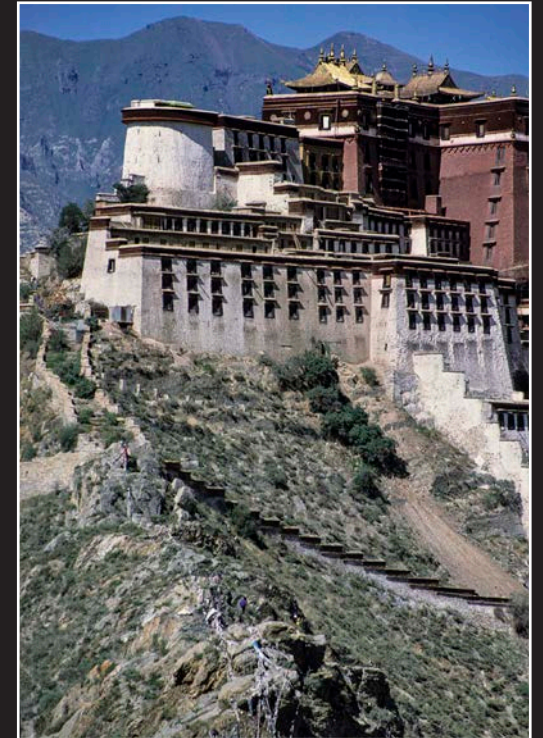




*The Potola
in Lhasa.*



*Repairing the giant thangka that is hung on the outside
wall of the Potola for just a few hours once each year.*





The Barkhor, centre of Lhasa.



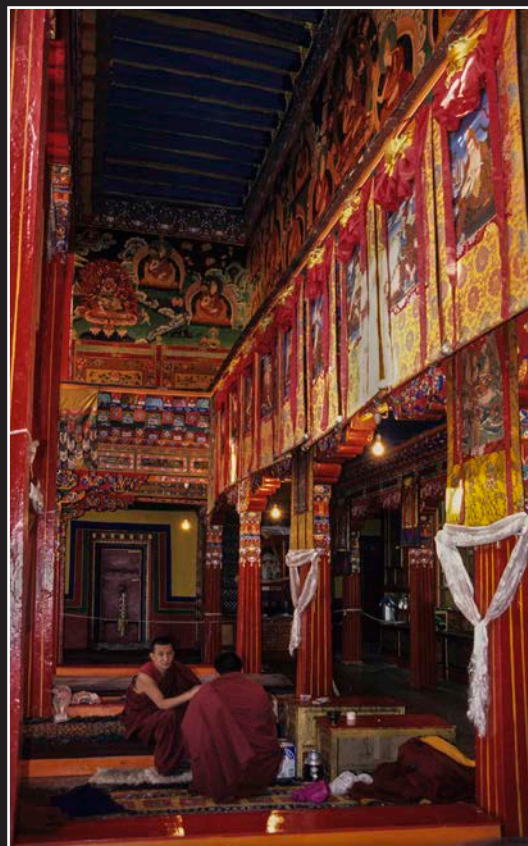
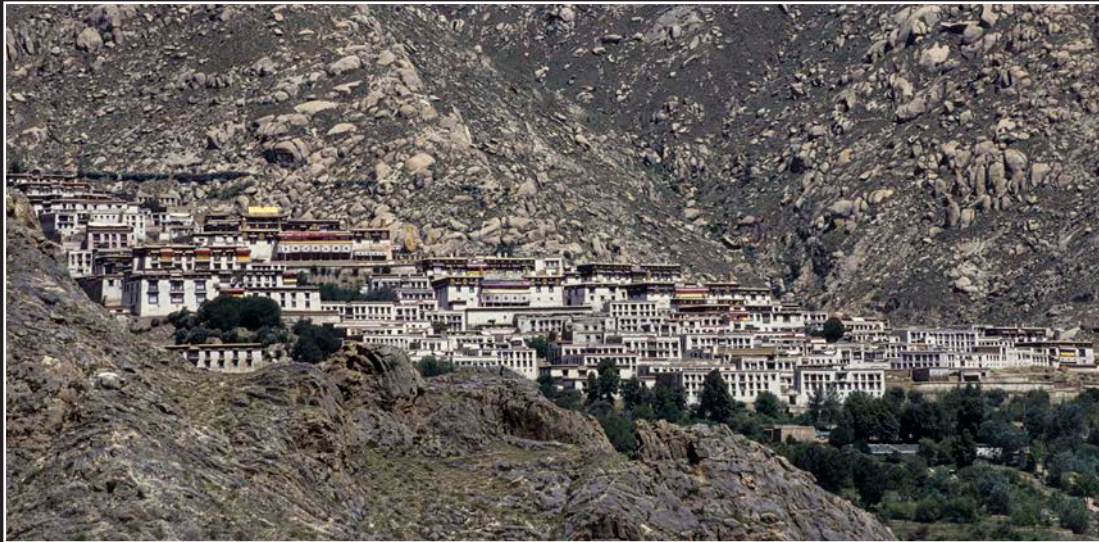
Prostrating devotees in front of the Jokhang Temple and midway around the circuit of the Barkhor.



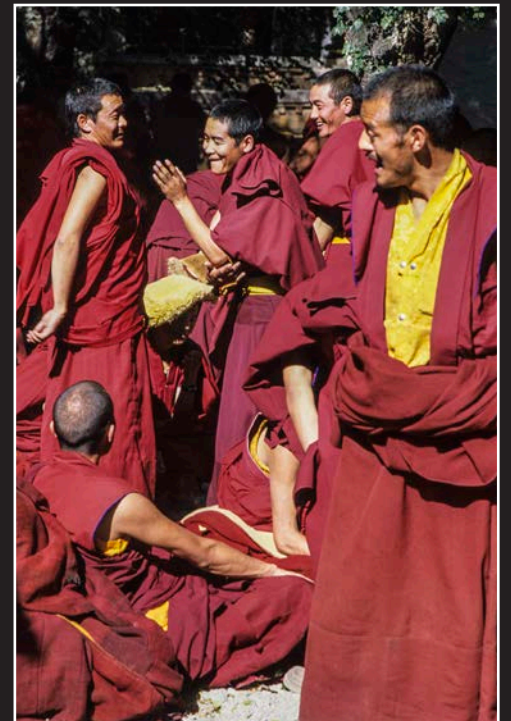
Prayer wheels inside the Jokhang.

Home heating fuel centre, a.k.a. the yak shit shop.





Drepung monastery, sited a few kilometres north from Lhasa, was the largest in the world with 8000 monks, until half its buildings were destroyed by the Chinese; it now has just 300 monks.





Changes in Tibet

There is no denying that Tibet has been slow to enter the modern world. A great empire of a thousand years ago was over-run by Mongols and then Manchus, until Tibet finally recovered its independence in 1912. But this was a monastic society, which also included a large proportion of nomads outside any effective government. Lifestyles stagnated, and there was little opportunity or interest in real progress within a community isolated by both politics and the sheer remoteness of its location.

Then Tibet was invaded by China in 1950. The Chinese claim of 'peaceful liberation' was a mere front for a massive land-grab, the exploitation of Tibet's mineral wealth and a strategic frontier along the Himalayas. Towns and cities in Tibet have been progressively swamped by immigrant Han Chinese, with the aim of creating a majority in the population, though few Han can endure the harsh life of the nomads out on the high plains.

The Chinese have introduced improvements to what was an undeniably backward society. They have built roads and the railway (in from the north), have improved agriculture and therefore the diet, have raised hospitals from primitive to basic, and have brought in television and mobile phones. All to the extent that some young people in the cities reckon that China's intervention has been a good thing. On the other hand, there is no excuse for the appalling destruction of Tibetan culture; monks have been persecuted and killed, monasteries have been razed to the ground, and the Dalai Lama has been branded a criminal, now living in exile in India.

From 1950 until the mid-1980s, Tibet was completely closed to foreigners. Since then, visits have been possible, and offer an amazing experience. Even though the unstoppable Chinese influence can be seen to grow year on year, Tibet is still an extraordinary part of the world.



Mount Everest seen from the flight back to Kathmandu.

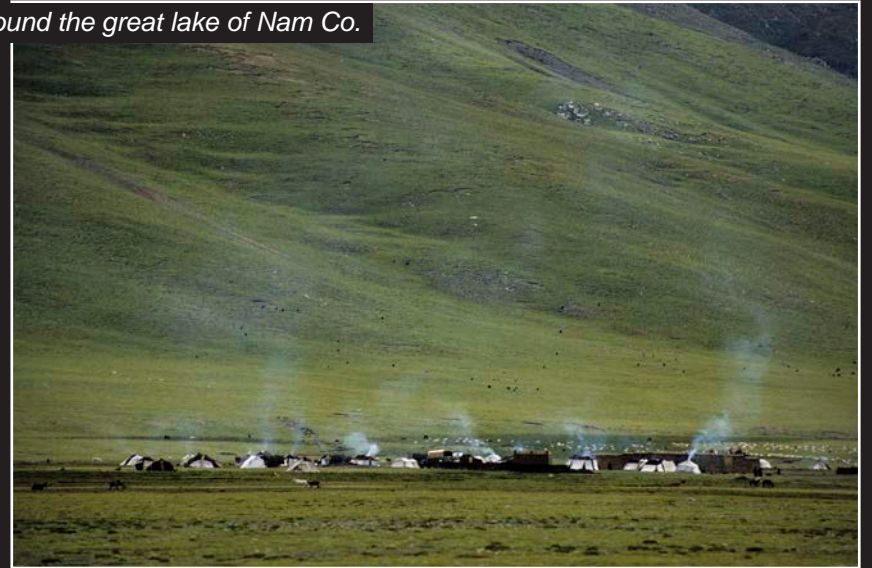
Military convoy on the road from China.

The new geothermal power station near Yangbarchen.

A vigorous debating session for monks at Sera monastery.



Nomads on the grasslands around the great lake of Nam Co.

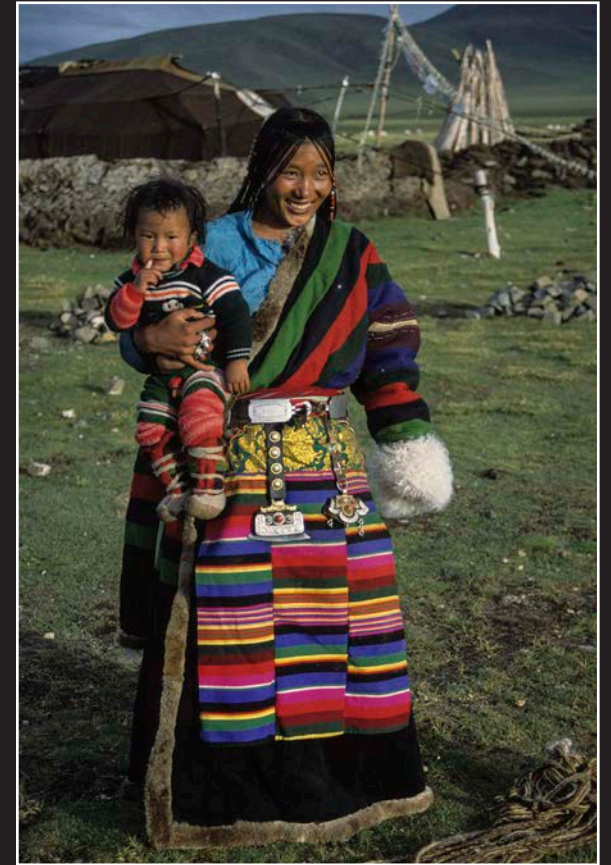


Wang buys dinner from a farmer.



Monks prostrating themselves by repeatedly measuring their lengths on the ground for a journey lasting eight months from their monastery in Qinghai to Lhasa; they wear leather aprons and steel-plated gloves, and a novice wheels a hand-cart containing their food and tent.





Nomads gathered at a camp on the grasslands; their tent of yak-hair is pitched over stone shelving at a site to which they return for a season each year.

Cave house beside Nam Co, and its resident matriarch.

Yak market, butter churns and pool tables in the growing town of Nagqu on the main road into Lhasa.

