

Advice for tourists to Tibet

The more people who visit Tibet, the more committed supporters there will be for the Tibetan cause. To visit Tibet is to be convinced of the outrage perpetrated on Tibetans and their culture. So writes Gyurme Dorje, author of a guidebook on Tibet. Gyurme's knowledge and experience is reflected in the following points of advice:

* China's policy towards tourists - and especially towards the individual traveller who visits Tibet outside an organized group - fluctuates, as do the areas open to tourists.

* Many visitors find difficulty at first in distinguishing between indigenous Tibetans and immigrant Chinese. A small number of Chinese wear Tibetan dress, and some Tibetans wear Mao suits. If you want to find out for sure, you may have to speak a little Tibetan or alternatively, point to any word written in Tibetan and ask what it means. A Tibetan, even if illiterate, will soon be joined by another Tibetan who will give you the answer: a Chinese will feel insulted to be asked and will lose face for his ignorance.

* Photographs of the Dalai Lama are hugely welcomed but you may need to exercise caution and discretion in handing them out. If you think there is any danger to your intended recipient, refrain. In all dealings with Tibetans, remember that they remain behind after you go: avoid doing anything that might get them into trouble. They may be in trouble even for talking to you, so understand if they appear guarded: they may be being watched. They will not dare to accept an invitation to visit you in your hotel. Nomads may refuse your offer of Dalai Lama photographs. This is not rudeness but incomprehension of what you are up to.

* Nomads in particular, even in towns, are sensitive about being photographed and in general it is a matter of courtesy to ask permission before you take a close-up photograph or any photograph in which the subject may become aware that he/she is being photographed.

The formula is: purh - di-gi-re-be (purrh - di-gi-ray-bay) Photograph? All right?

If you have difficulty with the Tibetan word for photograph, simply point to your camera and say: "Di-gi-ray-bay?" (Is it all right?).

* Chinese plain-clothes police are everywhere: you may be being watched or followed even when you are unaware. Surveillance cameras operate in some areas. Chinese stooges may appear out of nowhere; Chinese spies may dress in monks' clothes. You need to be alert to this. Tibetans live in constant fear.

* If you get into trouble with the police, act. Adopt an air of complete innocence; never admit what they charge you with. Deny it strenuously. Laugh at the sheer absurdity of their accusation, but be polite. Offer them a cigarette. Be very friendly. Praise the Chinese for the wonderful job they are doing in Tibet (hypocrisy gets you everywhere in China). Say you have never seen streets so clean! If you are in serious trouble, pretend that you have a husband/wife and baby depending on your instant return: the Chinese have strong family loyalties and will be moved by your concern. Never get angry or assertive or cause your accuser to lose more face than necessary. The Chinese are very sensitive about Tibet and what foreigners think of them: they want to be loved.

* If you are invited to visit a 'sky-burial' site, you may of course do so, but don't badger Tibetans into taking you to one. Funerals are private occasions for family members and should be treated with respect and courtesy. If you approach uninvited, do not be surprised if a sling-shot hurls a stone in your direction. Should you be on the receiving end of thrown stones, remember that you will have done something which offends the thrower and retreat gracefully and apologetically.

* Make a point of patronising Tibetan shops and restaurants. You can buy curios and souvenirs at any market and this helps the Tibetan economy. You can buy Tibetan tents, boots, chubas (long robes) and hats. If a Tibetan offers

something for sale, you will help him by buying and he and bystanders will enjoy it more if you haggle. But never press a Tibetan to part with something he shows unwillingness to sell. Tibetans have been left with few objects of value: those few they have may have a sentimental value for them and it is unfair to use your superior economic power to persuade them to part with them.

* At religious sites, follow the practice of Tibetans. Circumambulate shrines (including the Jokhang and Potala) in a clockwise direction. Chinese frequently walk in the opposite (anti-clockwise) direction, and do so deliberately to show their contempt for Tibetan culture. You are entitled to show your disapproval; you can even, in a jocular manner, turn them around and suggest they walk in the manner approved by Tibetans.

*Use your time in Tibet to gather information if you can, in any area that interests you. When you return to the U.K., please feed back any information you might think useful to our office or to the office of one of our allied groups. This is very important. Please consider writing a short report on paper and sending it to our office. We depend on members to keep us up to date.

A recent visitor to Tibet published the following tips for people wanting to visit the region. [NB we strongly urge visitors to tour the country as part of a group - there are plenty of 'alternative' tours].

When to visit

I went in early October, when the days were sunny, the skies were crystal clear, and a few layers of fleecewear got me through the chillier nights in major towns.

Lhasa has moderate daytime weather year round. But if you go to the Everest region, or other alpine areas, be prepared to layer up and bring your down jacket and sleeping bag.

The months of April through June are also supposed to be good times to go, but my guide told me that he took a group of photographers to Everest for a week in April, and they never saw the peak of Everest because of clouds.

Check weather conditions when you are planning your trip. During the rainy season (July/August), many of the main roads had been washed out by flooding and landslides and had not been fully repaired by the time I went in October. Visas/Getting there

Most people enter Tibet through China or Nepal. To enter through mainland China, non-Chinese nationals need a Chinese tourist visa.

Currently, only tour groups are officially allowed into Tibet. When I went, a group could comprise two people. Sometimes, a group has to have a minimum of five or six people with confirmation of an organized tour itinerary through a Chinese travel agent.

Some travel agents can arrange for you to enter on a group visa and then split from the group upon arriving in Lhasa. Depending on the political situation, regulations may change, so check with your travel agent on the current entry and visa requirements.

You will also need a special Alien's Travel Permit to travel through most parts of Tibet outside of Lhasa. Get the permit through a travel agency before you enter Tibet. I was able to arrange a Permit through one of many travel agencies in Chengdu, which is the most common Chinese gateway to Tibet.

When applying for your travel permit, be sure that you specify all possible destination towns and routes that you might want to visit outside of Lhasa, because you need authorization to cross into each zone.

Direct flights on China Southwest Airlines from Chengdu to Lhasa are about US\$200.

Many people also make travel arrangements and arrange all visas/permits in Kathmandu, Nepal-from where you can fly to Lhasa, or drive across the Southwestern border on the Friendship Highway, although this can be dangerous during rainy season or during heavy snow.

If you have a lot of time, you can also be more adventurous and take a 30- to 50-hour bus ride (depending on mountain pass weather conditions) from Golmud, China.
Accommodation

Lhasa, and other cities like Zhigatse, Tsetang, and Gyantse, have modern, but bland hotels that range from three-star downward, which cater to package tours. For example, the top-end Lhasa Hotel (formerly the Holiday Inn), provides oxygen bags and has a doctor on call 24 hours a day (very useful during the first few days getting used to the altitude) but doesn't have much character.

There are many reasonably clean and friendly guesthouses in most towns, with common bathroom facilities, which are listed in guidebooks like the Lonely Planet.

At Everest Base Camp, you can rent a very basic dorm-like room at the Dzarongpu (bring your own sleeping bag) or pitch a tent. In smaller towns, you can find very basic, roadside guesthouses, which have outhouses and well-drawn water. In more remote areas, camping may be your only option.
Other tips

Take it slowly when you arrive, especially if you fly in. It usually takes a few days to acclimatize to the high altitudes.
Symptoms of

altitude sickness include: nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, headaches, insomnia and shortness of breath. If you plan to do any heavy-duty trekking or mountain biking, take extra precautions and read up on acute mountain sickness.

If you plan to travel overland into more remote areas of the plateau, pick up some instant noodles, biscuits, fruit, a thermos for hot water (which is available in most guesthouses), and other non-perishables from main towns before you go.

You may not be able to stomach the tasty, but not always sanitary, food served at roadside stalls outside of the main areas. Otherwise, there's plenty of basic Chinese and Tibetan food in the major towns.

Most tour packages set four-to-five day itineraries which take you to Lhasa, and maybe a couple of nearby towns. But, with the vast distances between all the spectacular sights and variable road conditions, two weeks is just barely enough to scratch the surface. Trekkers and other adventure travelers will need at least several weeks. "Into Thin Air", by Jon Krakauer, is a good read before you go.

Internet access: In Lhasa, the Barkhor Cafe has a few PCs with Internet access at 7 yuan (US \$0.84) for 10 minutes, or 40 yuan (\$4.83) per hour.

Resources

Here are guides I used and would recommend for traveling in Tibet:

Tibet Handbook, Gyurme Dorje (Footprint Handbooks, 1996): The most comprehensive guidebook, with lots of historical detail, good maps and tips for preparation.

To view and purchase Gyurme Dorje's guidebook for Tibet please click here.

Lonely Planet Tibet (3rd edition): A handy companion, with just the right amount of background on each site; the 4th edition has just been published [1999].

Further information on travelling and trekking in Tibet can be found at www.tibettraveling.com.