

TIBET BEYOND MOUNT KAILAS

Diary of a Journey to
the End of the World

September-October 1995

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Pacific Palisades

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Cover: The North Face of Mt. Kailas, photo Peter

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A Dream Come True

Since childhood it had been my dream to once see Tibet and follow Sven Hedin's tracks to Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailas. In 1995 it became true. This is the diary of this journey into the deserted lands of Western Tibet which evolved into an extraordinary happening filled with the most glorious and most terrifying experiences. Like the Tibetan gods that watched us from the walls of the *gompas* show themselves with benevolent or fearsome faces, so every day in this vast, empty land confronted us with overwhelmingly beautiful or frightening visions. And like those gods these visions had as many heads and as many arms as there were different people, different memories, different fears, and different eyes that saw them.

We were nine, my wife Barbara, our son Cornelius, his cousin Peter, Cornelius' Dutch friends Marc and Monique, Jeroen, an unrelated young Dutchman who had joined us, our tour guide Bart, and Barbara's godchild Katrin. Barbara and I were the only "Old Ones": "Baphu" and "Mami" to the Tibetan crew. And everyone of these nine had

entirely different, but equally meaningful experiences - which only they know and could tell about. I only know a small part. When I listen to Barbara, for instance, it seems as if she had been on another planet.

Barbara suggests that I am jealous of some of the others who were overwhelmed by the power of this landscape and the interactions between all of us. She has a point. I have been living in Western Tibet since I first read Sven Hedin's three volumes of his expedition diaries when I was 13. - Only now did I find a set of Hedin's books in Kathmandu and read them again for the first time since 1945. - The colors and images that he had evoked had remained in my mind for fifty years.

By comparison to my colorful dreams reality had to pale. I knew the roads, the passes, every dusty village visible on the 1: 1 000 000-ONC-maps - Google-Earth did not exist then. Reality looked different on the ground. We drove over 2500 km (1600 miles) (Lhasa-Tsaparang: 1350 km, Tsaparang-Kathmandu: 1200 km) on unimaginably bad tracks in daily 5-15-hour quanta of often only 100 km. The monkey cages of our 10-year-old Landcruisers and the ups and downs between 3800 m (12500 ft) and 6000 m (19700 ft) proved more debilitating than I had expected. Only the euphoria to have finally reached the end of the rainbow, to see the farthest of my dreams, helped me to survive this ordeal. Yes, I was high for the first three weeks, altitude problems and two abysmal attacks of giardia notwithstanding.

The trip was poorly organized both by the Dutch travel agent, which I had contracted to arrange the logistics, and the Chinese operator (CITS). The actual job of improvising the next few hours, the next day became my preoccupation. With the help of the head driver and the cook - the only two people who knew anything of the route, the camp sites, the condition of the "road", the driving times and distances - I found myself in the role of the "magician" who conjured up, decided on, and directed the next act of this happening. But it also gave me a very special pleasure: across all differences in language and mentality, an unexpectedly close relationship developed with the Tibetans in our "support group", who numbered another 8 people.

I am not sure that I will ever be able to write the story that describes the interactions between the seventeen players in this drama and between us and the immense physical and psychic space we wandered in. At times I see pieces, images of such a text, but for the time being a simple chronological description of our adventures will have to suffice.

I added photos to this new 2011 edition. For more and larger pictures, detailed maps, a Google-Earth file, and a shorter text go to my website:

<http://rolfgross.dreamhosters.com/Kailas/Kailas.htm>

For an explanation of Tibetan and Sanskrit words see my glossary of [Buddhist terms](#) and an introduction to Tibetan imagery.



The Diary

Kathmandu

6 September

It began relatively civilized in colorful Kathmandu, where we all congregated at the venerable, long-familiar Kathmandu Guest House. Barbara, Cornelius, Peter, Katrin, and I flew in together from Bangkok.

The ride from the airport to Thamel and the Guest House reconciled me again with Kathmandu, which I had left in 1989 swearing never to return. Despite the changes, Kathmandu is still a truly original town, an incredible chaos of people, three-wheelers, twenty-year-old diesel buses, taxis, bicycles, rickshaws, cows that sleep for weeks on the same spot in the middle of the road, mutilated Indian beggars, children in rags or in school uniforms, ladies in elegant, immaculately clean saris in all colors of the rainbow, traders on foot trying to sell you anything from Tiger Balm and hashish to "genuine" Gurkha knives, refuse, piles of garbage, dilapidated ancient temples, red daubed Ganesha statues, and hundreds of tourists - but it is distinctly different from other towns on the subcontinent, it is alive, crazy maybe but alive. During the mad, frightening, twenty-minute taxi ride past the golden roofs of Pashupatinath, the sacred Hindu cremation ground, and the Royal Palace, we had three near misses with pedestrians and bicycles - but nothing ever happened, all escaped unscathed. The garden of the Guest House, well protected by an armed Gurkha, was an oasis in this seething place.

On that first night we got happily lost among the revelers of a religious procession, drums, singing, improvised shrines along the route, and hundreds of people in festive clothes jamming the narrow lanes. It took Peter's unerring sense of directions to guide us back to Thamel, passing along the way all the intimately illuminated scenes in the street-level shops in the dark houses, shoemakers, tailors, oil and combustibles, *thankas*, a few record shops bathed in bright neon light, small eateries, tired children, bright saris. . .

After a day of looking for her we discovered Marianne walking the streets in her measured step. Marianne is the only remaining and most faithful friend of my days in Göttingen. She is also an odd person. After retiring from a Ph.D. in physics, she has turned to the occult in her old days. She seriously believes that her psycho-physical health depends on her balancing her mysterious "Micro-Energetic System" by drinking copious quantities of un-filtered "spring water" - in Asia! - which she always carries with her in several bottles. Breathing heavily, she will also perform certain kinds of psycho-motoric gymnastics at unexpected moments, or ask a male friend to "lay hands on her" when she is out of synchrony with her deep-lying, Eastern European soul. This time she was in high spirits. She had already indulged in a week of exploring temples and ayurvedic healers.

During the days we stayed in Kathmandu together with her, she continued her single-minded wanderings on her own, and we saw her only at one of the local restaurants for the communal dinners at night. Normally she counts every penny, hunts for the cheapest exchange rates, but when it comes to eating in company, money is no object. Barbara and I were invited to dine with her at the Yak and Yeti Hotel, of which she had heard mythical tales. No arguing helped, it had to be there - and the slick tourist trap was, of course, a grand disappointment.

Despite her being an decidedly egocentric person, she truly craves the company of people. But she cannot "relate" to other women, and so she attached herself at once to Cornelius and Peter who bore her idiosyncrasies with a mixture of awe and amusement. She soon became the source of much mirth for our young friends. All foods had to be "checked out" by the use of a pendulum or complicated finger movements before she would eat them. If the dish was not to her wishes, she would give vague instructions to the waiter on how to improve it underlining her commands with imperious, dismissive hand movements. Fortunately the Nepali are exceptionally indulging and patient with their crazy European guests. But she is an exceptionally good-natured person who is impervious to any ridicule or making fun of her, always being the innocent, good friend, who can never understand, how she could possibly have hurt or embarrassed anybody.

And then there was Bart. We first met him when we disembarked from our plane from Bangkok. "I am, Bart Sarneels, your tour guide," he introduced himself. "I overheard your conversation on the flight and figured that you must be the Rolf-Gross-Group from California." A dreamy-eyed, laid-back, 29-years-young man with a slight beard, he had been asked by Chinawinkel, our Dutch travel agent, to fly from a trip in Vietnam directly to Kathmandu to guide us to Kailas and beyond. I could see at once that I would have no personal problems with him, he was not pushy enough for that. "I have been to Mount Kailas several years ago, hitchhiking on my own," he told me

with glowing eyes, "and I am longing to go there again. From what I hear, your proposed plan will be most interesting. I hope to learn a lot more about Tibet from you." It was not difficult to take him in as another participant in our journey. While we roamed the city, introducing Katrin and Peter to the wonders of the Kathmandu Valley, Bart had his hands full with problems on our behalf. Because of the fortieth anniversary in Lhasa during August-September celebrating the Chinese "liberation" of Tibet, severe restrictions on the travel of Western tourists had been imposed, suddenly we needed special authorizations by the Chinese embassy before we would be allowed to fly to Lhasa. I had reminded the Amsterdam office of Chinawinkel of that possibility, but they had waved my warnings aside. Now we and the group before us were stuck in Kathmandu. Poor Bart, he spent his week of vacations running back and forth between the embassy and a Nepali intermediary which Chinawinkel had hired on short notice, before the special visas could be obtained. We had to instill new courage and hope into him every night. But we had hired him to do this kind of work for us, and I refused to get involved.

10 September

The day of my sixty-fourth birthday. Celebrating my birthday as a "homeless Buddhist pilgrim" had been my great wish. How much I abhor the pomp and personality cult of celebrating even numbered birthdays or those with fives and zeros at the end! Cornelius and Peter had rediscovered the "Vienna Bakery", an incongruous place run by Austrian expatriates. They produced an authentic "Sacher Torte" on the night before, and we celebrated a wonderful breakfast in the garden of the Guest House early that day with candles and presents and a poetic letter from Bart accompanying a prayer wheel to be turned for good luck on our trip. I did not know then how desperately we would need it.

Barbara had hired a minivan-taxi in which we all - except for Bart - took off for Nagarkot in the eastern hills of the valley and a long-day's hike from there down to Sankhu. It was a sunny day, and the walk through little villages, woods, and a beautiful landscape left us all tired and happy.

Along the way Marianne found a deep, rushing brook in which she took an impromptu bath - after mysteriously slipping into a bathing suit without anybody having noticed. Soon all the children of the nearest village had assembled and with open mouths watched the big, white woman splashing in the water. A photo shows her after the bath followed by three naked urchins, who had spied on her transformation back to normal. On our way back to Kathmandu we had to use the overcrowded public bus. Hot and dizzy, coughing from diesel fumes, we reached town at sundown. Marianne needed two days to steady her system after this exposure.

11 September

In the afternoon of the day before our flight to Lhasa Marc, Monique, and Jeroen

arrived from Holland via Dhaka. It was an affectionate reunion, which we celebrated in the garden.



Kathmandu Guest House, Rolf, Marc, and Jeroen
discussing philosophy

Jeroen, 36-years old, turned out to be a good looking, serious man. He had traveled widely and dangerously in Africa and in the Islamic world. This was his first trip to Asia. Jeroen immediately involved me in a deeply searching discussion about God and religion, and during our travels he would continue to come back with spontaneous teleological questions, East and West, tearing me out of my half-exhausted, half-meditating remoteness. To Cornelius' amusement: "Papi as Guru!" But I owe Jeroen a debt for helping me to stay alive during this trip. Later we learned that he had grown up in a Rudolf-Steiner community in Holland.

Lhasa and Ganden

12 September

With seventeen pieces of luggage in two overburdened taxis we rode back to the airport to board the South-West-China Airlines flight! The day became Bart's Waterloo. We stood in line for two hours and then the Chinese lady at the counter declared Bart's tickets invalid. Instead of pushing his way through with the help of the Nepalese station master, he stood there with a hanging head, incapable of any action. Meanwhile a large German group followed by another one of forty Israelis lead by a highly competent, aggressive young Sabra girl went through customs and disappeared upstairs. We were still standing. I was in no mood to take this job off Bart's shoulders. It was then that Marianne sized up the desperate situation and charged forward with

all her weight. She pushed Bart aside, attacked the station master, and made him overrule the Chinese lady. We got the last seats on the plane fifteen minutes before departure.

Sitting on the right side of the plane - each window on the left was blocked by the heads of three German photographers - we saw nothing of the spectacular scenery below us, the entire chain of the Himalayan mountains around Everest.



Yamdruk Tso

Finally, as a consolation, the spectacular, turquoise waters of Lake Yamdrok Yum Tso surrounded by brown, bare mountains appeared like a precious jewel from the clouds on our side. And then we were already approaching Gongkar the airport of Lhasa. Flying very low over the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra valley, one could see the river forming fantastic sand banks and islands below us.



Tsangpo Valley near Samye

At an altitude of 3600 m (11750 ft) we climbed out of our plane into spectacular sunshine. After my months-long medical campaign everyone but Marianne had consented to take some Diamox to help us over the altitude shock. Marianne gasping for air, coughing and spitting frighteningly in the customs hall resorted to doing her funny calisthenics. "No, Rolf," she admonished me, "my problems have nothing to do with altitude. It is only the radar station over there and the American satellites overhead that confuse my micro-energies." I shrugged my shoulders, what could I do?



Lhasa Airport:

Barbara, Peter, Monique, Bart, Jeroen, Katrin, Pujung helping Marianne

The formalities went faster than at our arrival in Kathmandu, a bus was found and requisitioned by our local guide, and off we went on the two-hour ride to the Holy City.

We were lucky, Pujung our local guide and Chinese "liaison officer" turned out to be not Chinese, as we had feared, but Tibetan. He spoke English and Chinese fluently, had studied two years at the Institute of Nationalities in Beijing, and worked as a librarian at the Tibetan National Library in his regular life, an intelligent, personable man in his thirties. His deficiency was, as we quickly learned on our way up to Lhasa, that he had never been on a West-Tibetan tour. But he admitted that honestly. So who would know? We were now blessed with a headless Dutch guide and a bookworm as a local one, someone in addition to myself should know the way!

The road to Lhasa along the Khyushu valley was beautiful in the afternoon light and very smooth on a black-top road - put in only this summer to ease the ride from the airport for the Chinese potentates attending the 40-year anniversary celebrations.

Metropolitan Lhasa - three-quarters Chinese as it is - has become a Chinese city with all that this implies, bleak apartment houses, corrugated tin roofs, wide empty streets lined by sickly chinar-trees, a few incongruous, western-style buildings for officials or tourists, red banners lauding the 40-th anniversary, colorless, tasteless, and dusty. It

appears interchangeable with any other unimportant city in mainland China. The outskirts are sad, third-world, industrial trash piles: abandoned trucks, rusted pipes, fields strewn with empty beer bottles, buildings with smashed windows. There would be nothing holy about this place - if the Potala would not throne on its hill above the city, and nomad pilgrims in their ragged clothes would not circumambulate the Barkhor and prostrate themselves before the entrance to the Jokhang, the "cathedral" of Lhasa.

We were put up in the old, two-star Tibetan Banak Shöl Hotel in which Cornelius had stayed six years earlier. But now they have, besides the cheap rooms for the backpacking crowd, a new "Chinese" wing with twice-expensive rooms that have baths, which look dismal and run down but do have hot water for two hours in the evening. Marianne and Barbara and I are given one of these rooms, the others live in the old three-bed rooms on the third floor. I do feel the altitude (3700 m/ 12160 ft), and think twice before I climb the steep stairs to visit them or the restaurant on the roof.

Katrin is ill. She had arrived in Pacific Palisades with a head problem that had never been properly diagnosed and some kind of throat infection which she cannot shake. Her physician father had filled her with antibiotics, but "nature-close" as she is, she had discontinued the pills. Now she runs a medium high temperature and is too weak to get up. Barbara reads to her for an entire day and then decides to get help. An English speaking man from the hotel brings in a gnome of a Chinese doctor, wearing bottle-thick glasses. He looks her over and pulls an infusion bottle out of his bag. Katrin panics, and I am called to inspect the bottle - it turns out to be mainly a glucose and sodium chloride solution to which he adds some xx-sporin, even the needle is a single-use plastic-packed one. So I persuade her to let the strange character set her up on a drip. He also gives her some Chinese pills which Marianne later "checks out" and advises her to discard. After a few hours Katrin is much improved and can even eat with us.

Then it is Peter's turn, who is overcome by the runs. But he simply sleeps it off. Cornelius is slow but doing well. He visits relatives of a Tibetan friend from Yale, and looking for a rug for his birthday he makes the acquaintance of a very interesting Tibetan woman, who using an American passport and a local husband has set up a flourishing rug factory in the suburbs. Peter, Jeroen, Monique, and Marc even rent bicycles and pedal out to Drepung Gompa.



Roof of Jokhang

In the afternoon of the first day I find the strength to walk to the Jokhang, the main temple of Lhasa and Tibet, but I arrive too late, all the dozens of chapels are closed. Instead I walk around on the roof and then explore the crowded Barkhor in search of a genuine Tibetan hat. A day later Barbara - who is finally relieved of having to care for Katrin - Marianne, and I go on a visit to Drepung by bus and on foot.

15 September

This is Cornelius' thirtieth birthday and our last full day in Lhasa. We decide to take the pilgrims bus to Ganden Gumpa very early. Katrin remained at the hotel, not only because she was too weak, she adamantly refused to visit any religious Tibetan buildings. "I don't need that!" she declares with finality. It was still dark when we waited for the Ganden bus. When it came everybody rushed for the seats - and then suddenly Cornelius was missing. I only learned the full truth much later, he had been overtaken by his bowels, the poor wretch.

Ganden together with Drepung and Sera outside of Lhasa were the three monastic strongholds of the Gelugpa, the Yellow Hat Sect of the Dalai Lamas. During the uprisings of 1959 all three had been harboring the resistance and had suffered bad damage. Ganden at 4700m (15400 ft) high up in the mountains, an impenetrable stronghold, was completely destroyed by heavy Chinese bombing.



Ganden Gompa 1995

The bus slowly climbed up from the Khyushu valley into the clouds, our first true high-altitude experience. And there they were, the ruins of some twenty-five buildings in a shallow bowl with a magnificent view of the valley below and high snow-capped mountains in the distance. But since Cornelius' visit a few years ago more than a dozen buildings including the main meditation halls had been restored - presumably with Tibetan-Chinese money.

We had a breakfast of some mutton-noodle soup and our first experience of genuine Tibetan yak-butter-tea - a salty emulsion of butter, milk, and strong, black tea - because of the absence of refrigerators the butter is always rancid. Peter, Marc, and Jeroen refused to even try, Barbara and I overcame our aversion and finished our cups, and Monique later vomited it all up again.



The Khyushu Valley from Ganden Korlam

After this adventure we went on a hike around the Ganden *khorlam*, the circumambulation route that encircles all Tibetan sacred places. It led us around the outer periphery of the mountain in which the monastery nestles and gave us magnificent views of the wild river in the valley and the even wilder mountain ranges behind it. The sun slowly broke through the heavy overcast, and brightly illuminated sunspots wandered across the bare landscape. On the eastern side of the mountain, within what seemed an arm's length, a huge snow field slowly emerged from the morning fog, the sun rising behind it.

Half-way around the *khorlam* we came upon a heavily smoking fire at a distance below us, over which two huge vultures circled. Soon we could also make out the corpse that two men were cutting up with big knives: a "sky-burial". The body is cut up by select men in each community and the flesh fed to the vultures. Later they grind up the bones with stones, mix them with *tsampa* and likewise feed them to the birds. There is nothing left of the dead man. Because of the rocky and often frozen ground, interment is impossible; cremation is equally out of question, there is no wood to raise a pyre, so the majority of the dead are buried "in the sky". - Actually a beautiful idea.

Children, outcasts, and anyone who cannot afford the expense of a sky burial - all "proper" people belong to a sky-burial society - are "fed to the fish" in the rivers. Only "saints" and high lamas are cremated. Their ashes are then mixed with clay and formed into hundreds of *tsa-tsa*, conical miniature *chörten*. The bottoms of the *tsa-tsa* are stamped with an impression of a Buddha and finally enclosed in one of the *chörten* or stupas that rise around the sacred places of Tibet.

Tsetang and Samye

16 September

In the afternoon of the fourth day three run-down, ten-year-old Honda Landcruisers and a huge truck appeared at the hotel. Our expedition was finally about to get under way. Quite a pandemonium ensued loading the vehicles. Our camping gear went on the truck which would meet us only in Shigatse four days later. We and the remaining luggage were piled into the Landcruisers, three people to the back-seat. Cornelius checked the odometer and found that the cars had traveled some 500 000 km since birth! Katrin still weak was resting on half a back seat, she had not seen anything of Lhasa. Pujung took her for a short city tour while the remaining two vehicles followed Cornelius to the rug factory.

We were greeted by singing and the patter of wooden mallets with which some 40 girls tamped down the knots of their rugs on two dozen looms. When we appeared at the door of the light and airy work room the singing and tapping stopped and everybody broke out in giggles. I had a brief talk with the very articulate American-Tibetan owner before she disappeared with Cornelius and Barbara upstairs to settle the financial aspect. The design of the rugs, all done by this woman, followed very old,

Tibetan geometric patterns reminiscent of certain Central Asian nomad rugs and modern abstracts using Tibetan form elements. She avoids entirely the traditional peonies, tigers, phoenixes, and the crass colors of conventional, contemporary Tibetan rugs produced in the Nepalese and Indian refugee camps. She only uses Tibetan wool from the High Plateau and the subdued colors of natural dyes, - 80 percent of the production is sold overseas, mostly in Europe. Considering the modern "green" sentiment in the West it sounded like a very clever business scheme.

For four hours we drove down the beautiful road along the Khyushu and the Brahmaputra-Tsangpo to reach Tsethang late in the afternoon. If Lhasa is three-quarters Chinese but at least has some Tibetan patina, Tsethang is fully Chinese with no relief in sight. We turned in at a bare and functional Chinese hotel with no plumbing or water - but each room had a color TV, and the beds clean linens!



Restaurant Tsetang
Marc, Jeroen, Rolf, Barbara, Peter

Oh, what would we have done without Cornelius' command of Chinese. Our Tibetan crew had clearly been instructed not to eat with their guests or take us to a restaurant, this became Cornelius' job. He lead us into a dingy, unpretentious Sichuan eatery next door. We simply put all tables together, and the excited owner-couple, seeing really big business, produced a veritable feast for us, ten people for about 100 Yüan (13 dollars). It was wonderful food and to the delight of the couple we returned again on the next evening - to an even better meal.

We came back to our hotel in best spirits, never mind it was drab. Cornelius, happy to have rediscovered the power of his Chinese, and Jeroen were involved in a long giggling conversation by the two girls at the reception. Next day it became known that the girls had tried their best to persuade the two strapping foreigners to spend the night in their beds and "make babies"! Another first for China.

17 September

It had been my idea and Cornelius' wish to go to Samye. Samye Gompa is the oldest Tibetan monastery founded by the mythical magician and Buddhist missionary from the Swat, Padma Sambhava in the 8-th century. It lies in a green side-valley of the Tsangpo, a huge circular mandala, inside which each building stands at a mystically ordained point. During the terrible times after the Chinese occupation most of the buildings were destroyed and the remainder were converted into a commune. Cornelius had been there in 1988 and found that the reconstruction was in full progress. So there were only few old parts left.



Samye Ferry:

Cornelius in red pants. Peter left, Katrin with backpack, Marc next to old woman

It became the most beautiful excursion of our entire trip. We had enough time, a whole day and were mostly on foot. One has to cross the Tsangpo on a ferry to get there. The large, shallow ferry-prams have a tractor motor at their rear and take one-and-a-half hour to reach the other bank. I had never been able to understand why it should take that long, now we found out. The Tsangpo at this place is more like a lake than a confined river, full of shoals and treacherous streams. Our great helmsman tried four times before he found a navigable channel to get to midstream. It was a lot of fun, each time he ran onto another submerged sand bank, we had to move to the rear or to the front to unload the boat. Besides us there were three young nuns on board who were mortally afraid of this great ocean, splashing each other with water to scare each other, they huddled on the lowest bottom of the boat. The weather was gorgeous with billowing clouds sailing across a deep blue sky.

On the Samye side a truck waited to take the pilgrims to the monastery, which is an hour on foot up the valley. We had already been asked an exorbitant amount of money for the boat ride - about eight times of what the locals pay - now the haggling for the truck started in earnest. We staged a protest march towards the monastery on foot - all in vain, the driver knew that we would wait for him. So eventually Pujung

had to pay some still atrocious price, and we were soon lost in the center of the great mandala, an empty square in front of the main temple populated by three-dozen sleeping dogs and a few ragged pilgrims.



The mandala of Samye Gumpa from Hepo Ri

Cornelius and Peter - Katrin had once again declined to come along on this excursion - climbed Hepo Ri, the famous mountain of Padmasambhava, and Barbara and I explored the interior of the great Meditation Hall and all its numerous chapels. In one we found a young monk singing sutras, beating the punctuations on a big drum. He smiled and let us sit at his side for an unforgettable half hour of quiet listening.

A withered old women pilgrim walked from image to image. With the help of a young monk she poured butter-oil offerings from a plastic bottle into the lamps before each of the dusty, gilded sculptures glowing in the dark. In a dimly lit strong-room we came upon a frightening collection of fierce *cham*-masks hanging from the ceiling. They are used in the annual mystery (*cham*-) dances. An old monk eyed the intruders into his sacred domain from the shadows with unconcealed suspicion.

Later Pujung found us and very excitedly dragged us into a dark corridor where a monk lifted a curtain from an old mural of the Samye Mandala as it looked in the 15-th century. I knew this painting, it is famous, but by ourselves we would not have found it. Afterwards Pujung asked me for a donation for the monk, I offered 10 Yüan - about \$1.20 - and was told by Pujung that I better pull out another 10 Yüan. I regret not to have protested this heavy levy - a good dinner for two. I did not know Pujung well enough then.

When one finally emerges into the clear light on the roof of a Tibetan monastery one can walk among the gilded wheel of the *Dharma* and its accompanying two deer, and the drums that represent umbrellas and the protection of the Buddhist faith, it comes as a welcome relief after the dark gloom inside. A low sun was reflecting from the gilded sculptures and the barren hills threw long, blue shadows.

Yamdruk Tso to Sakya

18 September

The day of our first test of strength had arrived. I do fear the two high passes, Khampa La at 5200 m (17000 ft) and even higher Karo La at 5400 m (17700 ft) and for the first time take some slow-acting Nifedipin as a prophylactic to steady my pulse and a cough. But the worst turns out to be the road not the altitude. As soon as we leave the asphalt near the Tsangpo bridge at Chosul the shaking starts. In the beginning it is not too bad. The road climbs 2000 m (6500 ft) in little more than an hour. I feel a little dizzy and breathless but that is all.



Yamdruk Tso view from Kampa La
(photo Cornelius 1989)

A mast bedecked with hundreds of ragged-edged prayer flags at the top of the pass comes into sight. A few minutes further and at our feet, thousand meters below, spreads blue-green, many-armed Yamdrok Yum Tso, the "Crab Lake". All the colors of my dreams come true, it is a magnificent sight, except that the low hanging clouds hide the view of the snow-capped pyramid of Kula Kangri to the south.



Prayer papers and Juniper Smoke
Marianne, Cornelius, and Bart

Behind us on piles of scattered slate burns a fire. The smell of its dense, white smoke reveals it to be resinous juniper shrub, the incense of Tibet. And then we discover that the area around it is covered with thousands of white papers. It looks like the most dismal trash site. I pick up one of the little square leaves and discover that they are printed with an image of *lungta*, the "Wind Horse" carrying the Calachakra symbol and an invocation in Tibetan script! Suddenly a gust of wind fans the fire and trails its smoke and hundreds of leaflets through the air towards Lhasa.

The lake, drained by a Chinese-Austrian hydro-electric project, has sunk noticeably, so its banks are bare. But its ever-changing colors, bright green when one of the sun spots falls on it and gloomy like dark oil under the clouds, are as intriguing as I imagined. For hours we follow its bays and coves. At an especially beautiful spot we stop, and Cornelius strips completely and jumps in spraying water all around, crying, "It's so warm!". Then Marianne reefs up her skirts and wades in too making great gestures to the invisible high-altitude gods and everyone's amusement. In Nakartse we have lunch in a smoke filled truck stop full of strange characters.



Approach to Karo La

Karo La, lying among "real" snow mountains and their glaciers, about which I knew nothing, turns out to be even more magnificent than Khampa La. At its peak we stop on an alpine meadow only a kilometer away from an ice field that cascades down a steep mountain side. We are at once surrounded by the children of a couple of nomad tents among a large herd of yaks and sheep. The descending road levels out into a wide, grassy bowl crowded with hundreds of yak and sheep seen against an already low sun.

The road gets really bad. The pastoral scene abruptly changes into the mess of a Chinese prison camp where hundreds of people dig tunnels into a mountain under the supervision of Chinese PLA-soldiers. Trucks have plowed the road into a quagmire of ruts. We slowly ease our way through this primitive industrial landscape. Cornelius asks one of the Chinese PLA officers standing next to a jeep on the side of the road what this is all about and receives only arrogant laughs and shrugs as an answer.

It begins to rain heavily. We come upon an even more incongruous sight, a troop of cyclists on mountain bikes. Covered by plastic rain gear in all the pastel hues of California they struggle through the morass and tracks. We conclude that they must be from Palo Alto.

The mountains give out into the plain east of Gyangtse. For another two hours we stagger through an endless number of fanned out river beds filled with gurgling brown water from the hills. The rain does not want to stop. The shaking becomes ever worse.

In the end we reach the main street of a wind-swept, cold, forlorn looking Gyangtse. Bart aims at a guest house where he had stayed years ago. I inspect the rooms, they are grimy black holes with bed-linen that have not been washed for years. Deprived of our sleeping bags I refuse to stay there. Bart slumps again in despair, Pujung has no alternative suggestion. Finally Barbara grabs Katrin's Lonely Planet guide and takes the two headless guides by the arm. They are back in twenty minutes having found a half-way passable Chinese "hotel". The price for the doubles is twice that of the first,

Tibetan place, there are showers and toilets attached to every room, but the plumbing is dry. We are provided with a bucket of water per room. More dead than alive I sink into a fitful sleep still rattling along the road in my dreams.

But the Chinese food we find at night with Cornelius' help is once again exceptional and for a trifle we gorge ourselves without restraint. Marianne is back to coughing and breathlessness, this time accompanied by a headache. I tease her that no American satellites should bother her here, so far away from all other "electronic smog". But, of course, she has no humor left in her condition. Finally, after dinner, she demands that we stay in Gyantse for a two-day rest, so she can steady herself from the "gasoline poisoning" she suffered in the cars.



Marianne on the ferry to Samye

With great difficulty I hold on to myself and let Bart and Barbara do the talking. Of course, it is impossible to have such rest-stops on her behalf, either she pulls herself together or she quits the trip. Shigatse, tomorrow, is the last way-station from where she could return to Lhasa by public transportation. Bart stays with her after we leave the restaurant and convinces her to quit. This remains one of the great services Bart did for our group during the trip. Marianne would not have survived the rest of it. Next day, on the way to Shigatse. I have a somewhat guilt-ridden talk with her. After all I had invited her to come along - or better, I had been unable to talk her out of coming along when I met her in Poland in May. Then she would not listen to my vivid descriptions of the hardships of this tour. But, there is no trace of rancor in her voice, she laughs, the good comrade, gives me a hug and says, "My God, can't you see that

I am completely ravished by Tibet! Without your insistence, I would have never made up my mind to come here. Thank you for the expensive kick in the ass! I will stay here, visit the places I would like to see, and have a splendid time." And then she started to have another cough attack spitting her lungs out. I was as much relieved as I was worried about her condition. We abandoned her under hugs and tears in the best hotel in Shigatse a day later. She recklessly promised to meet us on 11 October in one of the places along the Friendship Highway to Kathmandu. I prayed that the Chinese authorities would prevent her from such a foolish plan. . .

On the day before our departure to Los Angeles we ran into her in Kathmandu. I had given her up for lost, but she is in better shape than we. She visited Shigatse, Gyantse, and Lhasa at her own pace, slept in the gompas, received the blessing of the 6-year-old *tulku* of Tsurphu, the Mecca of all German visitors to Tibet, and had an all-together splendid time - by herself. The authorities finally put her on a flight from Gongkar to Kathmandu. -

19 September

Pujung was much worried by Marianne's decision to stay behind. It would create endless bureaucratic problems for him to split her off the group, and in any case the police and the management of CITS would have to give their permission in Shigatse. He was pushing to reach Shigatse as early as possible. To facilitate the negotiations I foolishly offered him to sacrifice our visit to Shalu Gumpa, which had been my special wish to see. This time Bart saved the day, he was not ready to give up the agreed upon plan. Good for us. Fortunately Shigatse was only three hours by car, and all was possible in time.

Early in the morning we walked down to the great Gyantse monastic complex, the Kumbum and the Palkhor. Unfortunately this time my intestines were grumbling badly. A liberal helping of acidophilus temporarily quieted the grumbling, but did not remove the debilitating feeling of a huge hole in my middle. Barbara was also very weak with similar problems, which since days had refused to respond to a more potent treatment with Norfloxin. So we just barely dragged ourselves down main street to the monastery. I did not even feel like taking any photographs.

The Palkhor turned out to be the "usual" big *lakhang* or meditation hall, but the tall, white, eight-story *chörten* or stupa of the Kumbum was a revelation. On five of its eight levels are a diminishing number of chambers, accessible from circumambular walkways on the outside. All were painted in the 15-th century - quite obviously by Nepalese Newari artists - from top to bottom with murals depicting the various emanations of the five *thatâgata* Buddhas. A superb and unique picture gallery of the entire program of Tibetan tantric Buddhism in the 15-th century. Barbara's and my energies lasted only through the close inspection of the 36 chapels of the two lowest levels, where the manifestations appear in figures, frightening or benevolent, male and female. Marc and Monique climbed up to the fifth floor where they found four chambers each decorated with the mandala of one of the *thatâgata* Buddhas.

At the time my knowledge of Tibetan Tantras was too limited to identify any but the most prominent images, but at least it was easy to see that the artistic quality of these murals exceeded other Tibetan paintings that I had seen except for those in Alchi (11th century) in Ladakh.

The day's high point became Shalu Gumpa. We only spent an hour at this most lovely place in its green valley. One cannot see it from the Gyangtse-Shigatse road and has to drive for a few kilometers west through wet meadows and ford a brook several times to reach it. The complex is small compared to the huge Gelugpa cities around Lhasa, smaller even than Samye. Surrounded by meadows one has at once a feeling of tranquillity and great concentration. It used to be a unique Sakya study center. Here were taught the best students in the highest esoteric, tantric meditation practices, all those impossible things like *lung* -running, running-on-air at high speeds - remarkably also practiced by some North-American Indians - levitation, and melting snow by "psychic heat". But this enumeration deceives the Western mind, these are not "magic" practices, they are concentration exercises requiring years of practice. At Shalu they were complemented by scriptural exegeses of the Tantras taught by some of the most erudite teachers of Buddhism, like Bustön who made Shalu famous in the 14th century.

As it would fit such an eclectic place the walls of the main *lakhang* are covered with dozens of huge mandalas, and almost exclusively mandalas of the most advanced order used for the personal initiation of select students .

Because of the pressing time we never saw the murals by Nepalese Newari artists in the upstairs *khrolam*. Like those in Gyangtse they should be a reason for another visit. - Shalu reminded me of the Jesuits, who also combine exceptional learning with a thorough training in discipline. I came away electrified and curious.

Two days later, on 21 September, we would see Sakya Gumpa, the main stronghold of the Sakyapa, which reinforced this curiosity. Favored by the Mongol (Yüan) emperors of China the Sakyapa became immensely rich and powerful as the Chinese emperor's regents in Tibet in the 13th to 15th century. Sakya Gumpa is a fortified castle in some ways more impressive than the Potala. But Sakya also harbors one of the largest libraries in Tibet. I had known of the Sakyapa's power and influence in Tibet, but I had not been aware of their artistic and scholarly acumen.

Meanwhile we had reached Shigatse, Tibet's commercial boom-town, around noon and were unloaded at the comparatively tolerable Tibetan "Tenzin Hotel", which even boasts a kind of communal shower - provided one found the monkey wrench hidden in the toilet to open the faucet!

Marianne and our tour management disappeared in town from where they eventually returned with her separation papers. Marianne finally even extracted better accommodations from Bart in the fancy "Orchid Hotel" right across from Tashilhumpo Monastery, the seat of the Tashi Lamas. Bart paid five days in advance for her at this place.

Cornelius had located another promising Chinese restaurant where we ate our last

decent meal that night before our drive West. A huge round table was found and even candles - the electricity had long been turned off in town, and the only kerosene lamp in the room smoked so badly that even I could not stand it and had it turned off. The many dishes of Chinese food were excellent, and we talked until late at night. Then we had to face the way back to the hotel. The town was completely dark and asleep except for its dogs! Hundreds of dogs who sleep during the day and at night run wild in the streets snarling and barking at each other and us. We threw stones and pieces of hard trash at them, which drove off some but enraged the fiercer ones only more. Cornelius and Peter offered themselves to walk Marianne to her distant hotel. Worried about them I lay awake in my bed listening to the dogs' barking. The noise went around town like tidal-waves, waxing and waning all night. One lonely, hopelessly sore canine yelped for hours to himself. I visualized Cornelius and Peter being pursued and torn up by a pack of the crazy animals, but around midnight they returned safe and sound.

20 September

In the morning we walked to Tashilhumpo. We finally understood that we would be charged twice the normal entry if we came in cars in a group with our Tibetan guide. It is not far, but the walk was hard, the hole in my middle has grown beyond the help of acidophilus - if it does not stop by tomorrow I will attack it with Tinidazole!

After Shalu, Tashilhumpo is too large and too demonstrative. I am not enchanted by these enormous monastic cities of the Gelugpa - or is it only my miserable physical condition? I walk around distracted and finally follow the sounds of hammers on metal coming from a hidden interior courtyard, where I find five copper smiths working on several new statues. This is exciting. I stay with them for some time. The biggest sculpture is a *yab-yum*, "father-mother" pair sitting in a double-lotus in sexual embrace. It is almost finished. The highly intricate male has four arms holding various liturgical objects. His *dakini* winds her legs around his waist, with one arm she clasps her partner and in her free hand she holds a skull cup - alas without blood. The sculpture is about five feet tall. The complex figures consist of dozens of hollow metal forms fashioned from copper-sheet. The pieces are still not soldered together, and to the delight of the men I note their excellent fit. But the amazing thing is that the artisans are driving all these pieces free-hand with various hammers on a pitch bowl! They do not even use mandrels for the intricacies of the faces. The only measuring device are big wooden calipers with which they test the mutual fit of joining parts. A drawing does seem to exist but the three-dimensional forms are entirely in their heads and hands.

Outside the gate I find Pujung sitting on the curb waiting for us. We take a *thuk-thuk*-tricycle back to the hotel.

The truck has arrived with all our gear, six oil drums filled with gasoline - the fuel for the four vehicles and three weeks driving - bags of food, cabbages, onions, carrots, potatoes, apples rolling freely around from one broken bag, three lean sheep carcasses air dried, cooking utensils, three gasoline burners of the kind plumbers use,

two tripods, and more. The whole load reeks for gasoline.

We are ready to set out in earnest.



Sakya Gomba

As the sun goes down after three hours driving, we turn off the main road onto a rocky track and reach Sakya Gomba in its wild, empty valley. The surprise is that it lies on the flat bottom of this valley and not on a mountain as Gelugpa monasteries seem to in subsequent centuries. From the distance the monastery looks small and forlorn in this landscape, but when we get closer it's immensely thick, tapered walls turn out to tower 20 feet high. This bastion is painted a dull gray with a 4-foot-wide, tricolor horizontal stripe circling the entire wall. Four enormous gates lead to its inside. They have equally formidable "spirit" walls before them, that increase their defense capability as much as they ward off the evil spirits, which run only straight in China and cannot round corners. The entire structure is square, another mandala. The gilded roofs of the great *lakhang* at its center seem to float above the walls.

This time there are no alternatives to the dirty Tibetan guest house with its months-old unwashed bed sheets and spreads and the shit-hole behind one corner, where one can "rest" in full public view. For washing there is a faucet surrounded by a swamp in the middle of the court yard. But our sleeping bags and air mattresses let us sleep well, four to a room, male and female segregated. - We will soon drop that decorum, as well as washing in the mornings.

21 September

I wake up hanging over the "toilet" and decide to make an end to my misery by taking a second dose of Tinidazole. The younger crowd next door has long gone to explore the monastery, I drag myself after them an hour later.

The magnificent *lakhang* - the meditation hall - revives my spirits. It is an enormous

interior space, at least 30 feet high. The rich but restrained, painted ceiling is held up by huge columns hewn from single trees. God only knows where they hauled them from in this tree-less country. Walls and columns are bedecked with magnificent *thankas*. The long "altar" wall is occupied by only one Buddha and an unusually large number of gilded effigies of the famous abbots of the Sakya clan. Is this personality cult a consequence of the Sakyapa practice in which an abbot is always succeeded by his son or nephew? Celibacy among the lamas and succession by reincarnation of the Dalai Lamas was only invented in the 15-th century by Tsonkhapa, the reformer and founder of the Gelugpa order.



Sakya madalas on main Lhakhang seen from the roof
for size notice the two monks

A very excited Pujung appears through a wire-mesh door from behind this altar. "You must look in here," he says, "there is an enormous library of books hiding behind the altar!" When nobody watches me, I open the door and find myself in a pitch-black tunnel. My little flashlight is powerless in probing the very high space. All I can make out is that one wall is formed by a stack of dust-covered books, lying horizontally, in Tibetan fashion one on top of the other. The stack vanishes in the impenetrable darkness towards the 30-foot high ceiling. I feel my way along this 100-foot long bookshelf coughing and choking from the dust. - Suddenly I hear voices ahead of me, then I detect tiny lights floating like erratic glow-worms in the darkness. The spirits of the Sakya library? - I contemplate retreat, but the spook turns into the flashlights of Peter, Monique and Marc who, circumambulating the altar clockwise as the Tibetan custom demands, entered the tunnel from the other side of the altar. We have an inappropriately noisy reunion in the middle.

Later Pujung, the book lover, tells us with an undertone of deep hatred, that the Chinese authorities have forbidden all access and research in this storehouse of precious, old texts. "This is one of the richest treasures of our national inheritance." He spits. "These books belong to the Tibetan people. How dare they!" - Of course, before 1959 the books belonged to the Sakya clan and were not available to ordinary

Tibetans either: The idea of a "Tibetan People" is only a recent Marxist discovery. . .

We cast off at noon, have a miserable lunch in a wayside "restaurant" in Lhatse - while our Tibetan troops gorge themselves separated from us in a Chinese joint - and hurry to meet the Tsangpo ferry at three o'clock.

A long line of trucks is already waiting there next to the unfinished ruin of a large steel bridge. We sit in the dirt by the river and watch the ferry boat leisurely shuttle back and forth guided by its overhead cables until our turn comes.

We are finally on the way to Kailas, the Friendship Highway to Kathmandu and the populated urban areas of Tibet lie behind us. The road quickly worsens. Barbara and I ride with Bakhi the cook and Pa dru the head driver, who suffers from a bad tooth ache. Every time he gets out of the car to have a smoke he spits blood. I talk to him quietly and find that he had the bad tooth pulled in Shigatse and is now terribly worried by the blood he spits from the open wound. We dig up a Tylenol #3 and feed him one every four hours. The ache disappears and he is immensely thankful.

Bakhi the cook is a young, very bright man from Shigatse who speaks English quite fluently. We talk to him and learn that this is his fifteenth trip to Kailas, and Padru also has been on this road a dozen of times. Thank the Gods, we have finally found the two Wise Men "who know". I am greatly relieved. We begin to examine the stages of our route from memory while driving. Bakhi and Padru are easily impressed by my detailed knowledge. And then it comes out, most casually: "The drivers do not want to drive your planned route through the Chang Tang!" says Bakhi, "This Northern Route is very long and the road is badly rutted by the trucks that use it." And Padru, having found his quite serviceable English after being cured of his toothache, adds: "You see nothing there, no nice gompas, nothing. The Southern Route is prettier and more interesting!" "You decide," says Bakhi, "we will go where you wish."

I raise my eyebrows, and on the next smoke-and-pee-stop I get our map out. - On Pujung's orders the drivers have given up smoking in the car which we are immensely grateful for, so we now have a stop every hour or so. - With Padru's help I estimate the daily stages, we will camp here and there, and find that we would indeed save at least three days of hard driving. I know there is nothing important along the Northern road. I promise to discuss this proposal with the others in our group, but the longer I think about it the better the Southern route appears.

I discuss the matter with Marc first, who, the trained lawyer, immediately suspects the drivers of doing it for their own purpose, - which is obvious, of course. But then he reminds me of the strongest argument for the drivers' plan: Marc, Monique, and Jeroen are booked to leave Kathmandu for Amsterdam on 13 October, which, if we followed *our* plan, we would reach only on 12 October. What if a vehicle breaks down, or we are laid up for a day by bad weather? This decides the issue and all are quickly won over - except for Jeroen.

My good, philosophical Jeroen. He argues in circular spirals deeper and deeper into a hole of no return until he reaches a complete dead-end: "Chinawinkel sold me on a trip that includes the Chang Tang. I came to see all of Tibet not only the Southern Route. I insist that we pursue the planned route, or I want my money back." and so

on. Bart is once more in headless despair and stutters several times, "I think. . . I mean I think. . ." and then drops into absentminded silence. I smile at Jeroen and merciless point out to him that he is only one out of nine, and that he will simply be out-voted, which makes him still angrier. Now he complains that I am brutally terrorizing the minority. And I tell him that I designed this trip and not Chinawinkel, that I only inherited the Northern routing from them. . .

This argument goes on for a while until Padru calls from the car: "Bakmas!" and then again "Gehnma! Langsam, langsam!" I am baffled. "What are you saying?" I ask him, and he explains that this is what his last tourist group would always say, "They came from Austria." Now I understand it means 'pack'n mir's' - let's pile in - and 'Geh'n wir, langsam' - let's go, slowly - in the patois of Vienna. We have a good laugh and from then on Padru always calls for us in Viennese. Somehow Padru's and Bakhi's attitude towards Barbara and me is improving fast - because of my standing up for their wishes?

It is getting late, and Bakhi and Padru are looking for a suitable camp ground. Bakhi explains that it has to have some grass, be not too high in altitude, and most important there must be a stream of clear running water close by. If possible it should also have no mountains blocking the early morning sun from the east. "It will be cold tonight." he adds.

Such a place is soon found. Our first camp. We unpack our carefully planned camping gear, self-inflating mattresses for Barbara and me, thermal underwear, good four-season sleeping bags, down-filled overcoats. Barbara's and my things come stuffed in a big, plastic boat-sack which now turns out to have been a providential foresight, because everything has been more or less doused by gasoline spilled from a leaking drum on the truck.

Bart hands out the Dutch tents he has brought from Kathmandu. They look quite new and serviceable. But then he casually informs me that he will have to charge us \$35 rent for the tents. "No, each of you!" he explains to my surprised question. Nowhere in my correspondence with his Dutch employer had such a charge ever be mentioned. This time I nearly blow up at him. Barely holding back my anger, I explain to him calmly that this time I would refuse to pay these charges, and that I thought that his was simply extortion under the circumstances. "Yes," he says, "it's crazy." And he repeats, "I think - I mean - it's crazy, but that is what they told me by fax in Kathmandu." - I conclude once more that this guide, to say the least, is hopeless.

As Barbara and I unfold our tent Padru sidles up, grabs a stone and starts ramming the tent stakes into the ground. "Baphu, I will help you!" he says working like a whirlwind - and since that evening I am "Baphu" to him. I am truly moved.



Camp 1, the Dutch tents

Long before we are settled, Bakhi has unfolded his kitchen and lit two fantastic gasoline burners that roar like jet engines. Because the "roarers" blow their blue flames horizontally the tripods holding up the pots have a big, right-angle piece of water pipe welded to them that directs their flame up onto the bottom of the pot. An ingenious solution that reminds me of my days working in an automotive shop for the Russian army. The cook's helper carries big cans of water from the river and the Khampas set up a kitchen and a dining tent.

Twenty minutes after our arrival Bakhi calls for tea in the dining tent. There are cookies and marmalade, a bag of sugar, another of loose black tea, some chocolate, powdered milk, and two huge Chinese thermoses with piping hot water. We settle in the tent on some blankets on the ground and Bakhi is visibly pleased by our ahs and ohs. - How good, I think, that Marianne is not along. She would have made an imperial fuss that there are no chairs for us, a subject she had been fussing about already on our meeting in Masuria: "Of course, they will have chairs. My friend Helmut says they always do, and he has been to Tibet three times!" I could not convince her that this was not the AAAA trip her friend Helmut had taken. She did not listen. Dinner followed an hour later. The cook's helper put a bright gasoline lamp in the middle of the tent, we sat in a circle around it and then arrived many small dishes, Chinese style, cooked onions, a noodle soup, cabbage with excellent tasting slivers of meat from one of the three sheep, some cut up Spam, potatoes cooked with carrots in a broth, a pot of, alas, poor rice, a bowl of chopsticks and three spoons. Later followed two bowls of canned pears, the hard oriental variety. - This would become the nightly ritual fare for the next three weeks. After he saw how ravenously we ate his food with obvious delight, Bakhi outdid himself in preparing variations of his "five precious" ingredients, sometimes they came in an Indian inspired disguise, sometimes they posed as Western food. On very special occasions Bakhi prepared the fat Tibetan noodles - and once, much later we even had *momos*, Tibetan noodles filled with meat, on the special occasion when he had purchased a leg of lamb from a nomad woman.

On cold nights, when the wind blew across the plateau, we tied the entry flap tightly, on others the local nomads, who always found us in these apparently empty spaces, stood at our door and silently or giggling watched the foreigners eat. It was better than watching television. If we were not too dog tired from the daily driving routine, spirited conversations sprang up - like on this first night, when we argued for two hours with the still disgruntled Jeroen about the Northern-Southern route dilemma. I tried any number of philosophical approaches to win him over, Western appeals to group spirit and democratic decision-making and Oriental suggestions of patience and peace of mind - by keeping our drivers happy. It was all in vain, he would not voluntarily concede.

Finally my patience ran out, and I told him that I had previously seen this kind of block-headed insistence on the rights of a paying tourist only among older *Germans*! That ended his arguments, and he shut up in resignation. Later on our trip I would spend a good many hours trying to teach this intelligent friend flexibility, the deep enjoyment of unforeseen happenings, and the Zen of sitting, seemingly doing nothing, and then jumping into lightning-fast action when the time was right. - Something that I had to do a lot on this strenuous trip and even Barbara did not quite comprehend. She thought I was morose and contemplating to leave this world. . .

Relieved of the prospect of long driving-days our crew took to gambling at night. They played an age-old game using dice and cowry-shells(!) as money - Sven Hedin gave already a description of this game in his "Transhimalaya". - A leather beaker containing the dice is vigorously shaken and with a ferocious shout hit up-side-down onto a leather pad in the middle of the rug on which the players sit. Each player has a line of cowries and another one of old, Chinese coins with square holes in the middle before him, which change owner according to the count of the throw and some unfathomable rules. Sven Hedin and I were equally unable to learn any further details about the rules of this game: The tension and absorption of the players is so high that a cannon shot would not have distracted them from their game, - and apparently large sums of money changed hands. Henceforth their shouts and the thuds of leather hitting leather would punctuate our nights into the wee hours of the new day.

The Long Road to Mt. Kailas

22 September

In the morning Bart asked whether he could ride with Barbara and me. We sat three people to the rear seat and had decided to change cars freely if the mood changed or we wanted to continue a debate that had started at the last stop. Bart was worried and appeared cowed after my angry outbreak over the tent rental issue.

Barbara and I had discussed him several times. We agreed that he simply was not a "good" guide and escort. I considered him just not very bright, occasionally to the point of being "dense", badly prepared, and ignorant of just about anything. Barbara from her professional point of view - she had been a tour escorts for Germans in

California for several years -found his dreamy absentmindedness and the non-concern for his people inexcusable. But we both agreed that it was exactly this slowness and dreaming that had made him into an unobtrusive, endearing friend. His faithfulness with which he admired us was quite unquestionable. And now his faith in me had been badly shaken.

I spent an hour with Barbara's help trying to rebuild his confidence, assuring him that we liked him, and although I was often unhappy with his professional performance, that I was not at all angry with him personally. Barbara described what was expected of her as a tour guide: besides knowing the road and every viewpoint, pee-stop, and eatery along the way. She would tell her bus load of people local stories and American-Indian fairy-tales. She would prepare herself weeks in advance to know as much as possible about the history, economy, religion, and geology of the area she traveled through. Bart sighed embarrassed and then said that his Dutch employer expected nothing the like of him. In fact their philosophy was to interfere with and guide their tourists as little as possible, to give them the maximum freedom to do whatever they liked. All he was expected to do, was to keep their schedule straight, take them to their hotel or the train station, keep a detailed record of their "Reiskas", the communal tour kitty for incidental expenditures, and otherwise be as unobtrusive as possible.

I admitted that there was a certain appeal to this credo - and then asked him how much he was paid per day. Reluctantly he confessed that he received only \$30 a day. I loudly abused his employer - Barbara gets five times as much - but I guess the revelation of this poverty-pay as much as anything else was what made us bear his professional inadequacies with a shrug. From then on we directed our anger at Susan *in absentia*, the girl in Amsterdam who had done the planning for our trip. "Yes, I mean, I think they are crazy!" mumbled Bart. We accepted Bart as a paid guest of our family clan and from then on improvised together with him. Every one to his abilities.

It was on the same morning that Bart, quite disturbed, asked me whether it was true that Katrin had been kept for weeks in a dark room by her parents when she was a child. I could truthfully only tell him that I had never heard of such a thing, but what had Katrin told him? He then described how she had told Jeroen and him long stories about her disturbed childhood of which this was the most incredible one.

I cannot believe this girl. She has a very sharp analytical mind that she uses at will. It is true, that her beautiful smile hides some dark unknown secrets, which she is terrified to look at. She is neither able to identify these troubling emotions herself, nor will she let anybody else excavate them for her. This was one of the reasons why I had asked her to join us on this trip. I had hoped that this extreme experience would open up her shell to herself. And here she is fabricating defensive stories for no apparent reason at all, or are they spilled up fantasies of a truly troubled mind?

I reassure Bart and casually ask Katrin a couple of days later why she was telling strange stories to these innocent men. She smiles her brightest smile and says, "I like to fool gullible men. They are such bores." And to Barbara she confesses separately, "I feel over-manned," punning on the German "übermann", which means overwhelmed but also overcome by a man or men. It is true there are only three women against some fourteen men, and she is the youngest and the only unmarried one. Several

men are highly intrigued by her: apart from myself there is Jeroen - against whom that barb was directed - and especially flamboyant Agha whom she had to put into his place in more drastic ways several times.

At a place named Raga on the map, but where in fact there is nothing, not even a nomad camp, a rutted, narrow track turns off into the hills to the north, the connection to the "Northern Route". Our drivers come to a full stop and give me a inquisitive look: "Are we going the Northern or the Southern road?" asks Padru, "Which way shall we turn?" and Pujung adds: "This is your last chance!" We all sit down in a circle in the dirt and once more examine the consequences of this decision. I take a last vote, nothing has changed, eight for, one against the Southern Route. I tell Padru and Bakhi to continue straight ahead, and everybody relaxes.

Just then a local peasant comes along on a horse. Faced with the cars and people the horse spooks, and the rider gets off to lead the bucking animal past us, pulling and cussing it. Before anybody has noticed, the younger of our two Khampa has taken the horse by the bridle and swings himself into the saddle. The peasant lets go of his steed, and the Khampa races off into the plain in complete control of the animal. It is a beautiful sight, the man with his red shawl braided into his long hair and his horse in this vast land both of which he knows so well.



The empty spaces of the Plateau

We have finally reached the open spaces of Western Tibet. There will be no more large settlements, no trees, not even a brush, just stones, wild mountains, untamed rivers, and lakes like jewels in all shades of blue. Brown, gray, dust and more dust, under an endless, transparent, blue sky, white clouds scuttling towards the horizon. We are so high now that the mountains of the Transhimalaya Ranges to our right have been reduced to mere hills of a few thousand feet despite their altitude of more than 20 000 feet. Finally we will reach their crown, the seat of the gods, Mount Kailas or Rinpoche Kangri, the Precious Snow Mountain in Tibetan, the goal of every pilgrim wandering this road.

Kailas is its Sanskrit name and the Indians have venerated this mountain for more than 4000 years. It is mentioned in the Vedas: the great Lingam, the abode of Shiva, Mount Meru, the center of the world. At its feet are the two sacred lakes Manasarovar, the round Lapham Yum Tso, the "mother" lake of the Tibetans, the lake of the sun and its companion Raksas Tal or Langtang Tso, the half-moon lake to the west of it. Within a circle of fifty kilometer of the mountain are the sources of four of the great rivers of the India, the Brahmaputra, the Indus, the Sutlej, and the Karnali, the largest contributor to the Ganges. A numinous place and arguably the most sacred spot on earth, venerated by more than one-and-a-half-billion Hindu, Buddhists, and Jain in India, South-East Asia, China, Mongolia, Korea and Japan.

The Tibetans inherited the mountain together with Buddhism and wove their own mythology around it. Milarepa, the great 12th-century Tibetan minstrel, sage and saint lived in a cave on the Eastern side of Kailas for many years and by his songs "opened" or consecrated Kailas and its lakes as the foremost of Tibet's great *beyul* - a "Shangri-La" - an earthly paradise and last refuge for mankind in time of need. The powers of the country we now enter have been known to the Tibetans for centuries. An old Tibetan pilgrim's guide - there are several of these; besides Pausanias' "Pilgrim's Guide to Greece" they are the earliest guidebooks known - warns people that the *beyul* are protected by powerful local spirits: "If you are not careful, their protectors will create perilous happenings that will test your physical and spiritual strength. You may easily die there, overwhelmed by the forces living in these lands."

We are traveling through a long river valley between brown hills, occasionally a few snow-capped peaks appear in its side-valleys to the north. The road is very bad crossing deep, sandy river fords on several occasions.



Padru passing by the stuck Chinese Landcruiser

A brand-new Landcruiser is stuck up to its axles in mud at one ford, four people standing helplessly next to it. Our experienced drivers pass without trouble giving the stuck party hardly a glance. I ask, why they would not help them pull the car out. "They are Chinese officials," is Bakhi's lapidary answer, "we don't like Chinese!" But

after their driver comes over to beg us for help, a grim looking Padru wordlessly pulls their car out with a long steel rope.



The Himalaya in the distance

Then we cross a shallow pass - a mere 5440-m (17'800-ft) high - and very far to the south see the Great Himalayan chain for the first time. The Brahmaputra-Tsangpo valley between the Himalayas and the Transhimalaya Ranges is here almost a hundred miles wide. The giant, white 8000-m mountains west of Everest are dwarfed by the intervening space. On the Western side of the pass we descent into the Tsangpo plain and Saga town, a dirty village of a hundred wretched houses.

Bakhi and Padru are looking for a camp spot. After six hours of driving we are wrung out and besides the sun is going down again. But the place they have in mind has been turned into a trash site littered with the shards of thousands of broken beer bottles - thrown away by the local pilgrim on their way to Kailas. "Oh, well," says Bakhi, "this used to be a good place to camp for the Tibetan people, now the Chinese have messed it up."

So we continue across another pass and finally come to a rapid, broad river and a crossing with a ruin of an unfinished bridge. "This place is a little high," Bakhi says apologetically, "but at this hour we have no choice." Unloading and setting-up camp is by now a routine. The day ends with a spectacular sunset on a range of high snow peaks up the valley.



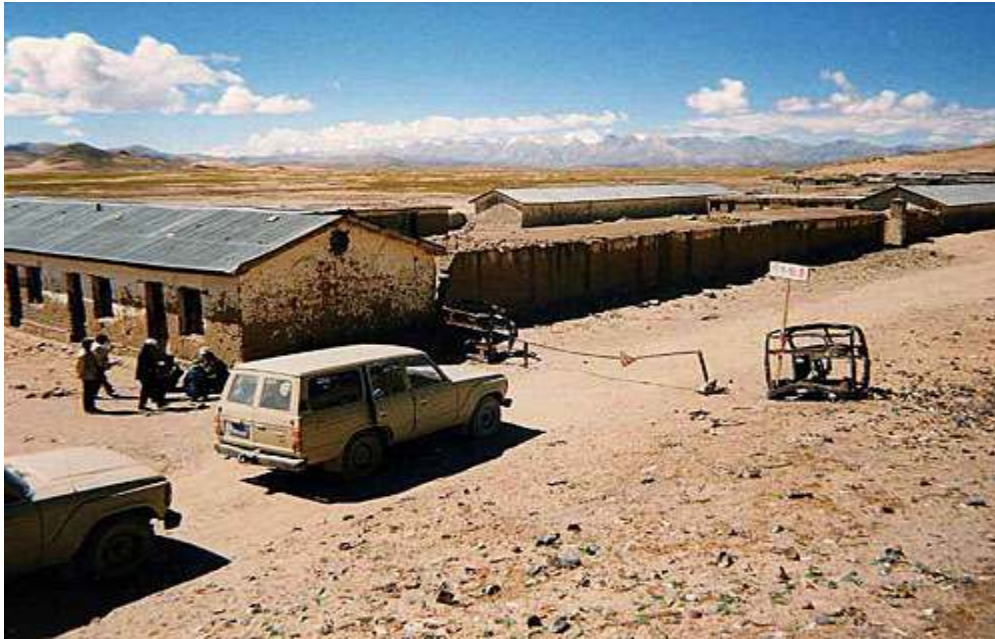
Camp 2 on the River, Zhongba Peak (5700m)

The stars! I have been many times in the Mojave desert at night, but this is a totally new experience. The intensity of the milky way is unbelievable. The sparkling canopy extends down to the horizon, there is no scattering in the atmosphere at this altitude and no light pollution from any cities. Around three in the morning I have urgently to go pee - we have to drink some 2-3 liters a day at this altitude. I hesitate for a long time to get out of my warm sleeping bag. When I scramble out, the tent and the grass are all thickly covered with ice but the stars make me forget the cold. The milky way has rotated and now all the familiar constellations have risen. I feel I could fly across the sky, effortless, in a big arc.

23 September

The morning is very cold, and we wait until the sun has reached our tents. It gets quite late by the watch before we have breakfast. - All clocks in Tibet are on Beijing time, which is more than 2 hours further east. So we get up only around eight or nine and close down between eight or ten at night.

The road is still dirt but it is quite good until Zhongba. We are driving at the unheard-of speed of almost 40 km/h for three hours. Zhongba comes into sight. There is a certain apprehension among our drivers, because near Zhongba is the Chinese check point for Western Tibet. It turns out to be a dismal place of corrugated tin roofs, abandoned trucks, rusted pieces of destroyed cars stripped to their bare bones, broken beer bottles and dust, lots of dust.



Chinese check point near Zhongba

The control station is symbolized by a drooping pole hanging across the road between two burnt-out truck cabs with a rope attached as gate. It is noon and hot and we sit in front of this gate for half an hour while our Tibetan crew squats in the dirt by the road having their personal papers and our travel permits examined by an aloof Chinese policeman in a sloppy brown uniform. As we drive on the rest of the bored Chinese detail, sitting with their girl friends on the hot tin roof of one house, wave at us and are dutifully ignored.

From a hill we overlook a sandy plain extending seemingly endless to some distant hills on the horizon. It is dotted with lakes and meandering rivers coming from the mountains to our right. All over the plain wander little black dots that later, on closer inspection, turn into yak herds. To the West the plain narrows until south of Kailas the Tsangpo valley will only be about 60-km wide. To the south stretch, visible to the far reaches around Gurla Mandhata, at least 300-km of the Great Himalayan chain, splendid in white with huge monsoon cloud-formations stacked along its edge.

We will be lost for a whole day in these vast sands. The track meanders hopeless through this maze of treacherous swamps searching for fords through its many rivers. But the camp site that night is beautiful on a shallow waterway that is warm enough to take a dip in. At night lightening flashes all along the Himalayas giving them an eerie, ghost-like appearance.

24 September

The night was unusually warm, and we wake up before sunrise. The sky is covered with a dense layer of low clouds that end in a sharp edge towards the south. And then the sun comes up and the Himalayas stand clear and bright under a turquoise sky in a narrow sun-lit band below the clouds. You can clearly distinguish every mighty peak, magnificent.



Morning at Camp 3
The Annapurna region in the distance

I sit before our tent and watch this slowly changing spectacle when an old woman, bent over by a late case of Bechterew comes crawling up to my tent on her walking stick. God only knows how long it must have taken her to come to our camp from her invisible tent. She begs, probably for a Dalai Lama picture. Thinking of my youngest, brother, a cripple like she, I am moved to tears. I never give to the myriad of Asian beggars, but I surprise myself by handing a sizable amount of money to her. She stands with folded hands for fifteen minutes before me and prays.

Further over by the kitchen tent sits our Khampa cross-legged in his large rectangular sheep-skin sleeping sack, holding one of the narrow holy books before him, and sings sutras with an unexpectedly beautiful voice. Everybody seems touched by this magic morning.

We grind along on an abysmal, bottomless track. Whenever the track appears a little firmer Padru tries to accelerate. Those are the times when you have to watch out, because as soon as the car reaches 20 km/h the hole of the day is sure to appear. First you will be thrown to the roof of the car - which is not too bad - then you will come crashing down onto the seat with such force that you hear your spine being cracked. The improvised seat-belts we brought along are completely useless in preventing these jarring crashes.

In the late morning we pass through Paryang - in a hurry. This Tibetan village is populated by vicious dogs. At the outskirts of the dismal place on a hillock south of the road rises a new gompa, dark red and bedecked with prayer flags.



Sand dunes in the distance the Tsangpo River and the Western-Nepal Himalya

The landscape is getting larger all the time. In the afternoon we drive through sand dunes that eventually reach over a hundred feet in height. They and the views between them of the distant mountains and the sea-like Tsangpo, now very close below us, are beautiful.

At a smoke stop, Padru squats next to me in the sand and asks about Barbara. Was she happy? Was he driving carefully enough? This was a very rough tour, would she hold up? I smile at him and tell him about her enormous will-power: "She has more strength than I, who will give in before her, but she may not survive as long as I. You see, she is like a Bodhisattva, she will give all of herself to the people she loves, that is her strength." Padru looks at me with eyes full of admiration and silently walks back to the car.

The dunes come to an end and very, very slowly we wind our way up a desolate rocky valley towards Maryum La, the last high pass before the Kailas plain. I had feared it because of rumors of the state of the road up to it. But in the end, if the top of the pass would not have been marked by a huge cairn and a mast with hundreds of colorful prayer flags attached to it, it would have gone almost unnoticed.



Maryum La, Agha with the horns of Yama

Everyone gets out of the cars and Padru suddenly produces a camera to have himself photographed before the cairn. But the show is stolen by his arch-rival Agha, the flamboyant driver of the second car. Agha has been an opera singer in one of his previous lives, he grabs an enormous pair of apotropaic yak horns from the cairn, holding them attached to his head and pulling an ox-like face, he transforms himself into an instant impersonation of Yama, the Tibetan god of death. Bakhi and Padru are not humored by this performance and a mock-fight ensues between Padru and Agha wrestling with each other in the dirt.

Going down from the pass Padru, bored with the endless turns and challenged by Agha whose dust cloud we see two turns below us, suddenly guns the car straight down the stony hillside in an attempt to cut off Agha. With held breath we grab our seats. Soon we are victorious and assume the lead again - and don't have to eat Agha's thick dust any longer.

Far in the distance a large lake appears in the late afternoon light. Very excitedly Cornelius and I start speculating whether this is Manasarovar or not. We do not have our map, Jeroen has borrowed it to search for an alternative to driving the same road twice on our way back, the poor idiot. Cornelius thinks that it is not, and I that it is the holy lake. In vain I try to reconcile the features of the far shore with my memory of Sven Hedin's drawings of the hills on the isthmus between Manasarovar and Rakas Tal. Nothing fits, and Bakhi finally decides the issue: it is only Kungchu Tso. The track gets worse, for a while we clamber across a stretch of bare rocks at only 10 km/h. We will need almost another five hours to reach Kailas. The lake is a silver sheet in the low sun. We need to find a camp soon.

Somehow my only memory of this camp is connected with another long discussion with Jeroen, who has taken our heavily doctored, 1: 1 000 000 aeronautical navigation map literally and discovered a thin road that leads East from Thöling through the Sutlej valley and south of Manasarovar parallel to the Southern Route back to

Paryang. "Why can't these people take this road back? It looks not only shorter but more interesting than this rut."

I have to disappoint him once more. The Sutlej between Thirtapuri and Thöling runs through a canyon that rivals Grand Canyon in size and complexity. The thin line is the old caravan route through this canyon. It took Sven Hedin and Lama Govinda almost three weeks to fight their way through the wilds of the Sutlej gorges, there is no driveable road there. The Chinese had to dynamite an entirely new road across the dizzying heights of the Ladakh Range to supply their garrisons near Thöling. It is not on my map. Jeroen resigns and his objections finally end two days later when we snake down from the cold passes of the Ladakh Range to Thöling on one of the more dangerous tracks of our trip.

Mt. Kailas and Thirtapuri

25 September

We start early, Padru's plan is to pass by Darchen and Kailas and drive straight to Tirthapuri today, go tomorrow to Thöling, spend a day in Tsaparang, and only then return to Darchen and the Kailas Khorlam. This suits me fine and has the advantage that we will be several more days at high altitude before attempting the strenuous hike around the mountain with its 5670-m (18 600-ft) high Drölma La pass. We will also arrive at the strange power spot of Tirthapuri, sacred to Yeshe Tsogyal the "Sky Dancer" and consort of Padmasambhava, early in the afternoon as I had wished.

Everyone's expectation is rising, somewhere soon the first view of Kailas must appear. And still, when it does come it turns into a surprise: up an insignificant pass, prayer flags in profusion, a black-blue sliver of water at the horizon, Manasarovar, suspended above a layer of clouds to the south-west the huge ice fields of mighty Gurla Mandhata, and almost as an apposition, hiding among a range of nearly-as-high, brown mountains the long visualized, snow-covered cap of Kailas.



First sight of Mt. Kailas (6620 m)
the tiny triangular peak in the distance

The devout of our crew pray, the Khampa prostrates himself full length and sings another sutra towards the mountain, and everybody collects some stones and heaps them onto the hundreds of little *törma* already covering, like pock marks the area around the cairn with its prayer flags. Padru and Agha take photos of each other and we too. In the end Cornelius comes over to me and gives me a hug and says, "Are you happy now, Pappi, we have finally arrived."

Was I? Yes, just then I was trying hard to see more of Manasarovar and the commanding bulk of Gurla Mandhata. Kailas is a strange mountain. Surely few other mountains invite so many symbolic interpretations, and like the Matterhorn you will never forget its shape. It is not its size or its position but its unusual shape that makes it remarkable. It is obviously the biggest *Lingam* on earth, and I can easily see the fascination to the Hindu pilgrims because of that. To the Buddhists, who have no such preoccupation with the procreation male member, it is a huge *chörten*, or the lama-hat of Padmasambhava. Westerners, not so surprisingly, are reminded of an enormous white lipstick, a blunt, frustrated pyramid sitting on a square base, its lotus-pad of dark hills. As we get closer, the white southern face shows a number of dark horizontal striations with a 5000-ft-long, vertical, stair-case-like scar in the center, all of which the faithful recognize as a sacred swastika. Yet closer, a smaller, terraced addition appears that makes the whole look like one of the French super-hotels in the Alps, - apartments of the Gods? The further you are from this mountain the better it looks.

As we scramble down from the pass - the track is atrocious - the vision of Manasarovar vanishes as Kailas gets larger. In Horchu, a collection of four dusty adobe huts, a local "gypsy" woman in full Tibetan regalia has her wares spread out on a rug on the ground trying to waylay innocent pilgrims. Agha examines a necklace of plum-sized turquoise. She hangs it around his neck, and delighted he prances around in various grand poses to finally reject the questionable baubles. Barbara, whatever

moves her, makes a gift of a collection of hundreds of colorful buttons she brought from Los Angeles to a nomad woman standing around. The numerous children are fighting over this treasure as we move on.

Temporarily the road improves. Far in the distance a group of people, like a mirage, walk across the expanse. They turn out to be pilgrims on foot. Another small lake appears to the left amid green pastures dotted with yaks, but the Sacred Lake has vanished behind a low earth mound left by a river. We will not see Manasarovar, alias Lapham Yum Tso again until we return from Tsaparang.



Lunch below Mt. Kailas
Jeroen, Bart, Barbara, Cornelius, Marc

Bakhi has planned the day famously. We have a copious lunch on a meadow at the banks of a fast river directly below Kailas. He has prepared six bowls filled with Indian-spiced cabbage and onions and serves them with *parathas* he has baked late on the previous night. With white Kailas as a background the array of dishes in their various colors of red and yellow on the green yak grass form for a splendid picture.

The ferocious spirits of the *great beyul* show themselves from their best side, they gave us a cloudless blue sky, even Gurla Mandhata has discarded its white morning cloud, and the ice fields on its broad back shimmer across the plain.



Highway to the end of the world

Before us lies, slightly rising, a flat expanse covered with stones that vanishes over the horizon. A straight line of telephone poles measures the distance. I count 150 before they become indistinguishable. Where do they lead? The "road" has fanned out into six parallel tracks, a freeway to infinity. The snow peak of a distant mountain peers just over the end of the world, promising the existence of other worlds beyond the horizon.

This insignificant bulge at the foot of Kailas has an illustrious geographical function, it separates the watershed of the Gulf of Bengal from that of the Arabian Sea on the western side of the Indian subcontinent. The Tsangpo-Brahmaputra, having its source in the mountains east of Manasarovar flows some 2000 km behind the Himalayan chain to the east before it breaks through the mountains in a stupendous gorge. The Indus on its western side which has its origin in the north of Kailas flows about as far again to the west, enters India in Ladakh, defines the northern most edge of the Himalayas, rounds Nanga Parbat, and empties in the Arabian Sea south of Karachi in Pakistan. Of the other two sacred rivers south of the two lakes the Karnali is one of the main sources of the Ganges and hence joins the Brahmaputra, and the Sutlej flows into the Indus.

Suddenly Agha trailing an enormous dust cloud races past us, rock music blaring from his open windows, his passengers gyrating in their seats to the music. He waves at us with a white-gloved hand. Padru says something in Tibetan between clenched teeth and presses his foot down, when he reaches 60 km/h I protest and make him slow down. There was little danger but I am not as young and my spine is not as flexible as those of Cornelius and Peter to whom Agha has become the "great hero". We don't see Agha and his followers again for over an hour when we finally discover them in Mensi, the next lousy village, playing pool at an incongruous table in the middle of main-street.

During one of the past nights Barbara had been really miserable, and I had gone out

to ask Bakhi for the oxygen bottle that we had been promised. We found the bottle on the truck, but alas it was empty. Not a good omen. Bakhi had been embarrassed and had been fantasizing ever since that we would refill our oxygen at the "hospital" in Mensi. It was not difficult to locate the place, all its "doctors" were squatting in a row along the adobe wall in front of their practice. Wearing white frocks and mouth masks to signify their status, they looked hilariously funny. They had, of course, no oxygen, the locals have no troubles with the altitude. Bored, they wave at us and get excited only when I take a picture of them.



Tirthapuri
strings of prayer flags, our tents, the nomads setting up their black tent

We reached Tirthapuri, a few miles south-east of Mensi, in the golden light of that late afternoon. Imagine entering, after hours of seeing only gray stones, a dark-green valley with a deep-blue river between red and white rock formations. Four long strings of prayer flags span the valley high above the river. A *khorlam* climbs the valley's rim on one side, and there are several *chörten* and the flags of a small gompa on the top of the hill. The river is the upper Sutlej. Here, before it vanishes into the gorges, one could still wade through it - though I find its water too frigid to try.

We raise our tents on its narrow banks and everybody goes on a circumambulation but I, who needs an hour of sleep first. Later I set out to search for a pool and a bath near the hot springs that ooze down from a slippery promontory, but cannot find anything suitable. Steam is rising from several vents surrounded by prayer flags and a barbed-wire fence. The colorful prayer flags reflect in innumerable alkaline pools, white mineral deposits cover the rocks like snow, a wonderful sight in the late light.



Tirthapuri hotsprings

On my way back I meet a small caravan of five yaks and three horses, pilgrims, looking for a camp site like we. They unload the yaks a distance down-stream and in no time a black tent is put up by the women. The only man takes care of the animals. He tethers the horses to stakes and chases the yaks into the cold river where, grunting and snorting, throwing water all over themselves, they take a bath. Like the nomads when we camp, I stand around with one finger in my nose and silently watch the proceedings until the man waves to me. I acknowledge his friendly gesture with a deep bow and folded hands.



The three nomad girls

Late at night, it is pitch black outside of our dining tent, we hear bells tinkling, but blinded by our gasoline lamp cannot see anything. For a while all is quiet until suddenly the mysterious bells start tinkling again very near followed by uncontrollable

giggles. The faces of three young girls appear in the opening of our tent flap. Cornelius waves at them Tibetan style, moving his hand from high to low towards himself. With a peal of laughter, bells ringing like at Christmas, the spook vanishes - only to approach again on tiptoes a few minutes later. This time we catch the boldest of them, a lovely sixteen-year old with the ruddy red cheeks of the nomads. She is bedecked with turquoise and coral silver necklaces. Her mother has braided innumerable silver coins into her hair and dozens of little bells adorn her long, woolly tresses. We offer them a bowl of our food and they vanish with it into the darkness.

Shortcut to Thöling

26 September

Long before we get up we hear the bells pass our tents again. This time the three are engaged in the serious business of prostrating themselves around the Tirthapuri *khoram*. Standing they fold their hands touch their forehead, throat, and chest, then kneel and finally stretch, full length onto the ground. They mark the spot with a pebble, get up, walk as far as the pebble and start over again. A heavy apron and a pair of leather mittens are their only protection.

When we are having breakfast at nine they are on their third circuit. They wave to us like old acquaintances and vanish towards their tent. Twenty minutes later the bold girl returns with our bowl and allows herself to be interviewed by Cornelius in a mixture of Tibetan, Chinese, and sign language. For a full month they travel to all the famous power places in the area, Kailas, Lapham Yum Tso, Tirthapuri, Burang, and a number of lesser gompas before returning to their "home", their black tent in the Chang Tang, the lonely High Plateau north of the Gangdise Range, to pass the long, arctic days and nights of winter there in the company of other nomads and animals.

The new road across the Ladakh Range to Thöling cannot be found on any map. I had asked Bakhi and Padru to describe it, but all they could tell me was that it crossed two high, no-name passes at 5900 m (19400 ft) the first and at 6000 m (19700 ft) the second, elevations two-thousand feet higher than any other place we would visit. But they assured me that the road was "pretty good". We left Tirthapuri in a mixture of excited curiosity and apprehension.

After we had returned to Mensi and joined the main high-road to Gartok and Ali-Qichuanhe we drive through desolate country for a good while: a shallow pass followed by salt encrusted high flats. Further west we travel along the Gar river a side-arm of the upper-Indus. We pass a lively nomad camp with many tents, where a woman is weaving tent cloth on a narrow loom fastened to her waist. We shall pay them a visit on our return journey. Then appears Sungsha a Chinese military camp with a prominent satellite dish at the bottom of the valley. Here we turn off the main road, cross the Gar and plow through a wide, rocky river ravine before we reach the beginning of the new road. It winds clear up the steep side of the ravine.

The sky is clouded. Snow is falling in the wildly eroded canyons of a high, obviously very old volcanic mountain to our left. The colors of the range changes from light to dark brown, red, and finally black. Half-way up to the ridge one has a spectacular view of the inner plug of the volcano through a deep gash in its outer ring wall. This geology is all so familiar from the California Sierra only much bigger.

Snow flurries greet us on the top of the ridge. On the south-western down-side of this first pass the road is badly washed out in several places, and we have to drive carefully. We have a very cold lunch on the side of the road in an abstract wild canyon-scape. Salt outcroppings cover the black rock like snow. A river roars south at its bottom. We cross the torrent on a bridge and soon climb again.

This time it is a longer, elaborate climb up a less steep mountainside. Most of the way we ride south. Finally we reach a slowly rising plateau which in the end levels out into a wavy landscape on top of the range. Several snow covered peaks can be seen very close. The high pass is in the end unimpressive, a broad double-humped feature, but the snow-line is only two hundred meters above us and breathing has become labored. So this is what standing at the dreaded, rarefied altitude of 6000 meters feels like!



Shortcut at the edge of the Sutlej Canyon

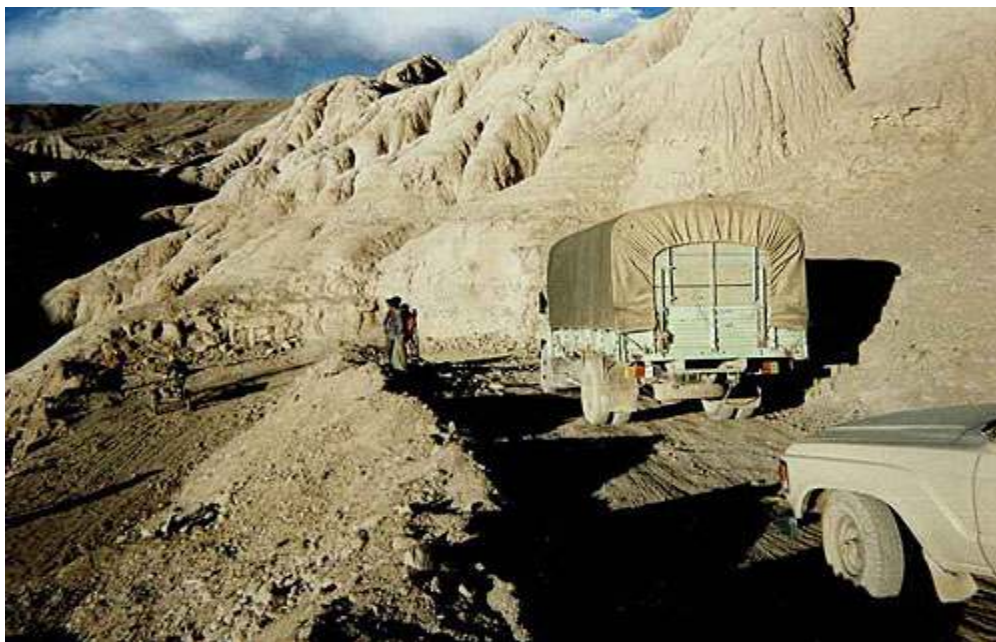
But there are still surprises, we cross the hump and are faced with a fantastic view. Another two-hundred miles of the western Himalayas fading into the haze of the far horizon, and between us and the white mountains the vast area of the deeply eroded scars of the Sutlej canyon. Somewhere down there hides Thöling.

For the next hour we pass along the monotonous southern shelf of the mountains cut by one canyon after an other. Every time we have to dive in, cross a bridge, and struggle back out again. But the road is not too bad.



Following the dust of the truck on the shortcut

Then it happens again, suddenly at an otherwise completely undistinguished point Padru veers off the road and points the car straight across a rubble strewn flat heading for the edge of the mesa we are on. "Now we go the short-cut!" he explains, and miraculously a track appears just as we are about to careen over the edge. For a while the track is not too bad. It crawls around corners and rifts, snakes down and levels out again, but it becomes softer all the time which is less reassuring. At one point we round a lone-standing rock and find ourselves at the edge of a deep canyon. Now it becomes scary. The road drops precipitously down the side of the soft loess wall, makes a sharp hair-pin turn and vanishes behind another free-standing column.



The shortcut interrupted by a landslide

All around us rise the most bizarre formations, castles, *chörten*, columns and most of the time we face empty space before us or next to us on at least one side of the car. A

detail of Chinese prisoners is shoveling in one steep turn. The truck in an attempt of avoiding this corner plows straight ahead and barely comes to a stop before a precipitous drop, a part of the road has simply slid into the canyon below. The driver backs the truck out and inches through the hairpin turn. How he managed to get that big vehicle down this canyon will remain an mystery to me.

After an hour-and-a-half we find ourselves at the bottom of the canyon. Surrounded by steep loess-walls, the sky reduced to an oddly-cut narrow strip above us, we snake along the winding dry riverbed. How about a minor flush-flood in this place? Eventually it opens into wider a canyon full of hard shrubs and huge boulders. There is a brook here and half the time we drive in its water to avoid the impassable banks.

When we exit the canyon we are exactly across from Thöling on the opposite shoulder of a now much wider, deeply eroded Sutlej valley. We have descended almost 2500 m or 8000 ft from the no-name pass in a few hours and that at an average altitude of 4500 m (14 700 ft)! Downhill this time, but we will have to make the same trip in reverse going up in two days!

We arrive in Thöling an hour later. The Tibetan guest house is full and Bakhi and Padru are forced to find us quarters at the Chinese military hotel, which is "dry" but not as filthy as the Tibetan place would have been. Thöling is a "big town" with a sizable Chinese garrison, still at night we cannot find anything to eat in the dark streets. At 10 PM Bakhi lights his roaring burners and cooks a supper for his dependents in the parking lot right in front of the hotel.

We are dead tired and fall into our beds - or so I thought. Next morning we find Jeroen limping in bad pain. Sarcastically I ask him where he had been in his dreams, and he tells me sheepishly that they had gone dancing after we went to bed, and that he had made a wrong move and sprained the muscle of his calf. I give him some Tylenol, and the officer in charge of the hotel presents him with a bamboo stick and from then on he hobbles on three legs.

Later Barbara elicits the rest of the tale of that night. They had first gone out in search of some adventures, but had found only a pool table in some dingy place. That was not enough, so they raised a party in their room. Was it the beer that they had organized or just an oxygen-high at this low altitude (3800 m /12 500 ft), they had started a mad dance. Cornelius drummed on a metal pot and sang salsa songs and everybody got quite crazy. - The poor guys definitely don't get enough exercise with all this driving day in day out. - Cornelius, Marc, and Peter play soccer against some locals in the backyard. Marc had bought a soccer ball as a self-help.

Everybody has developed some symptoms of his or her own caused by the strain of this journey. In fear of the sneaky problems that can be produced by racing up and down thousands of feet at the high-altitude we all watch each other: asocial behavior, coughing, vomiting, dizzy spells are all suspicious signs. This people-watch, by itself, often resembles schizoid paranoia: Barbara is deeply worried that I might die, but does not say so. I feel dead tired more often than excusable. Monique vomits her supper back up again every second day, but swears that she feels in excellent shape otherwise. Bart often stares so absentminded at infinity that we become concerned about him. I worry about Barbara who looks terribly drawn out, but as usual admits

nothing, and Katrin refuses to get up on this morning and drive with us to Tsaparang. Padru tries to persuade her to join us and describes the beauty of the place, but nothing will move her. She remains behind.

I feel that a hot bath would be the best prescription for all of us. - Not having been able to take a bath or wash our underwear for ten days, we stink like yaks. - A hot bath would even help Jeroen's sprained leg.

Tsaparang

27 September

Once upon a long time ago Thöling used to be much larger than today. It was next to Burang the most important trade center of Western Tibet, located as it were at the old caravan routes between India, Ladakh, and Lhasa. During the Yüan dynasty in the 13-th century it flourished and was the seat of the kings of Guge. Earlier, in the 11-th century it had played a decisive role in the "Second Dissemination of Buddhism" in Tibet. The great teacher Atisha and Rinchen Zangpo, architect and translator, stayed here before moving on to Ü and Tsang in central Tibet. Unfortunately we did not search for the remnants of Thöling Gumpa. Much was destroyed after 1960. From the Google-Earth map it can be seen that the buildings of this period are now being reconstructed. Tucci, in the thirties still saw some of the murals in Thöling Gumpa. During these early days Sakya had a strong presence in Thöling, politically and especially through the artists working there. In the 15-th century trade declined with the demise of the Yüan. The influence of the Sakya in West Tibet declined with them. The *pax mongolica* that had protected the Eurasian trade routes for almost three centuries disintegrated and Western Tibet became the haunt of brigands and robbers. Thöling proved indefensible, and the kings of Guge moved to the Rock of Tsaparang, where they were able to hold out until the 17-th century before their Ladakhi rivals captured that seemingly impenetrable fortress and destroyed it except for its temples.

Antonio de Andrade, a Portuguese Jesuit missionary who in 1624 made his way from Goa across Shipki La pass to Guge, lived in Tsaparang during those last, critical years and left us a uniquely insightful description of the life at the royal court. He was even encouraged by the queen to build a Christian chapel in Tsaparang, a seemingly incongruent event, until one learns that the king tried to use the Jesuits as a desperate shield against the increasing political power of the lamas who by then had fallen under the spell of the Gelugpa in Lhasa. So it happened that the Jesuits unwittingly contributed to the fall of Guge.

It was Andrade's report that "created" the mystery of Tsaparang in the West. The great explorers of Western Tibet all looked for it, but neither Schlagintweit in 1855 nor Sven Hedin in 1904 found the citadel and its temples. They only visited the small village that still exists today on the banks of the Sutlej. The ruins of the old Tsaparang are not visible from there, and the inhabitants of the village must have carefully

hidden their existence from the foreigners.

Tsaparang and its treasures remained lost until 1933/35 when Giuseppe Tucci rediscovered them. He wrote a most readable analysis of their art and purpose, which - what irony - because it was written in Italian and appeared in an series of Italian publications, remained virtually unread in the West until very recently. Later, in 1948/49, the German Lama Hofmann-Govinda spent a month in Tsaparang with his wife Li Gotami, photographing and copying the sculptures and murals. Typically he knew nothing of Tucci's work. Govinda, widely read in the seventies, was a religious romantic, whose memoirs are very emotional but answer few historical, stylistic, or interpretative questions. So to the real mystery of the lost city was added the virtual one of the unobtainable or obscure reports by its rare visitors.

When it became possible again to visit Western Tibet one of our friends made his way there: Kurt Meyer, an architect, brought back tantalizingly beautiful photographs, but could shed little light on the meaning of what he had seen. However, he really succeeded to stir my desire to see the tantric murals in the temples myself. Tsaparang and Manasarovar, much more so than Kailas, were my *raison d'être* to go on this crazy expedition to Tibet.

After Kurt's visit Jürgen Aschoff, a German medical professor visited Tsaparang two years in succession and published a series of beautiful color photographs of the murals. He exposed the destruction brought on by the Cultural Revolution . Since Govinda's visit all but a few of the sculptures in the temples had been destroyed by vandals looking for precious metals inside the hollow clay figures. The murals, however, seemed untouched, if one disregards extensive water damage to some temples through the leaking adobe roofs. After Aschoff's two books - so it appeared to Western observers - the jealous Chinese closed Tsaparang to all visitors and to Western experts in particular. Subsequently the Chinese published the voluminous documentation of an extensive, four-year survey of Tsaparang - in Chinese!

Now, as we ride through bizarre loess-formations along the Sutlej valley towards Tsaparang, Bakhi tells me that he has twice accompanied a German scholar of about my age to Tsaparang where he spent several weeks each time "writing in the temples". He also had his wife with him. Bakhi is full of admiration for this man. He believes that his name was Helmut, more he does not know. - This is, of course, a very interesting story. There is no question that this man would have been there only with Chinese permission. Who could it possibly be? Who has the connections to the Academia Sinica and is a Tibetologist, art historian, or archeologist? Because of the elusiveness of Tibet few people have specialized in this area during the past 40 years.

Padru misses the right turn-off and we make a long detour through fields and even trees in a beautiful green valley on the southern bank of the Sutlej. A short distance further downstream we come upon the dozen houses of the modern village of Tsaparang, which actually look quite pretty.

We rattle up a long stony wash, turn a corner, and there it is high up on a narrow spur, the Sky Castle. Just like Govinda had drawn it.

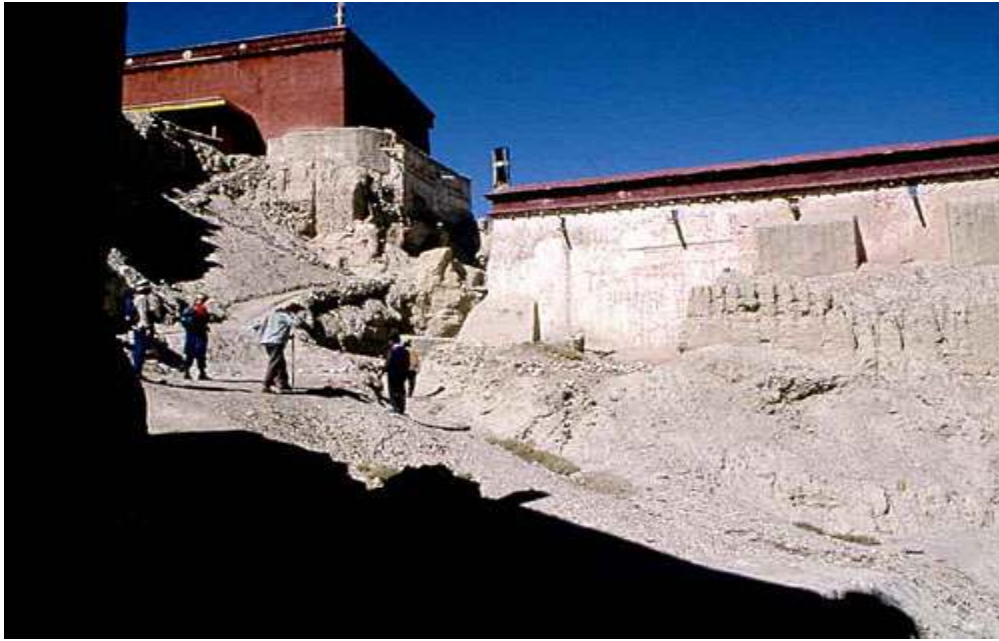
The first surprise is that the four temples, which prominently stand out among the

ruins of the town, have new, authentically Tibetan roofs and porches over the doors and look in excellent shape - and the gate in the wall that encloses the precinct is also new - and locked.



The renovated entrance to Tsaparang

Bakhi and Pujung disappear in the guardian's house and return fifteen minutes later with the man and very long faces. The guard has extorted a 460 Yüan entry fee per person for him! My mind shudders that is \$57.50! We do not pay it from our pocket money, all entry fees are included in the CITS bill, but still. Pujung is depressed for the whole day. "He didn't even want to give me a receipt! How will they reimburse me for this?" he complains. Much later I find out that the normal fee for foreigners in a group is 260 Yüan, which still is an exorbitant \$32.50, and that the remainder was a fine, because we somehow didn't have the proper travel permits for this visit. I console myself with the thought that the repairs and stabilization of Tsaparang's monuments was a most urgent need. Tucci had already in 1935 bemoaned the fact that in another ten years nothing would be left of the invaluable paintings in the temples. The destruction inflicted by the revolutionary vandals had almost achieved that. If tourism should have been the reason for the reconstruction so be it and why not help pay for it. Every green Western "ecologist" paints tourists to these remote areas as the despoiler of old cultures. Here they helped save invaluable cultural treasures.



Climbing between the renovated temples
Marc, Monique, Jeroen with cane, Pujung

As we climb up the steep track from temple to temple and have a closer look, I find that the destruction of the sculptures has had a benefit. They hid in many places the extraordinary wall-paintings, which we can now examine with our flashlights at very close range. And they are magnificent.



Mural in White Temple, 17th cent.

The only comparable Tibetan murals I have seen are in Alchi in Ladakh, and they were painted 500-years earlier (1065). As in Alchi a complete program of tantric Buddhism is displayed, but in Alchi the painters used exclusively benign manifestations of the Boddhisatva Shakyamuni and his female counterpart Prajnaparamita, the later images of Tsaparang belong to the more radical discipline of the *samvara* Tantra: as soon as one enters these sacred spaces one is overwhelmed by the large representations of many-armed, many-faced and more often than not fierce manifestations in sexual union or in wildly dynamic dance poses. They offer no harmless esthetic enjoyment to the Western visitor as in Alchi. Facing these murals we are still confronted with our fears and repressions, they are frightening - or in ignorance of their meaning more often repulsive - to this very day.

But between the large images lives a wealth of smaller figures that explain and define the "Buddha-family" of the large figure, and these small scenes are pure delight. In a *Jatakas* story of the life of the Buddha a monkey presents Shakyamuni with a vase and then commits suicide, or the five *naga-kings* - human upper body, their snake-tails rolled up behind them - pay homage to the Buddha. Or Shakyamuni's enlightenment under the boddhi tree on a white background, in deep repose calling the earth to testify his victory over the forces of Mara's wild daughters: he has become *the Buddha* now, the Earth is his witness..

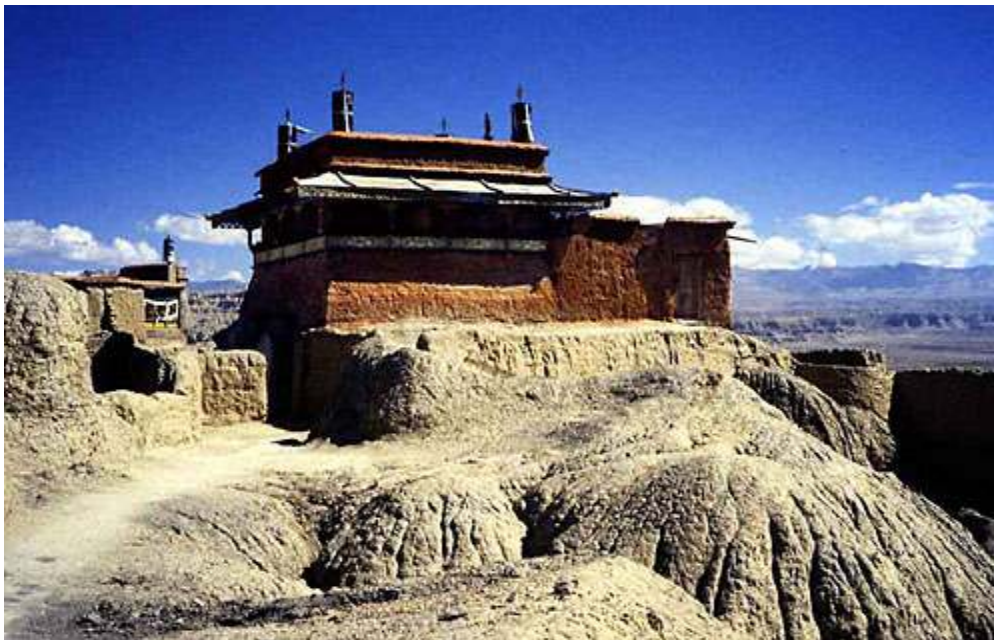
The wall space of Tsaparang's White Temple is probably four times as large as that of Alchi's Sumtsek, but like there these small illuminations cover the walls completely like a shimmering veil , there is no space uncovered. Their detail is as exquisite as in Alchi if slightly larger, but due to the highly psychic nature of the later Tantra the figures are much less static. The painters must have spent years on their job. It has always been obvious to me that this art has its roots in that of miniature book illuminations, which these men transferred to the temple walls. - And like all other book illuminations, Buddhist, Islamic, or Christian eventually goes back to the illustrators of the 9-th and 10-th century in the Manichean monasteries of the Turfan depression in Central Asia (Xinjiang or Chinese Turkestan), opening a host of geographical and historical questions as to the sources and flow of Buddhist art in Central Asia, Ladakh, and Tibet after the 10-th century. Now I find to my pleasure that Tucci comes to some of the same conclusions.

The White Temple is the artistic culmination of Tsaparang - and of our trip - the other three preserved temples in the lower town of Tsaparang are less precious, less refined and probably later. - However, spiritually all this is surpassed by the *Yidam* or *Demchog* Temple, a tiny, completely dark, windowless room high up in the citadel.



Barbara - the tiny blue coated person on the right - climbing towards the tunnel

I have to pull my last reserves together to climb the 180 meters or 600 feet high ridge. The path leads almost vertically up the steep rock to the citadel. It takes me an hour, and I have to sit down many times to recover, while a detail of young, Chinese PLA-soldiers run past me. Marc and Cornelius wave to me from the verandah of a new Tibetan building in the ruins of the palace that overlooks the extensive, eroded landscape of the Sutlej below. The path has been well secured now including the steep, "secret" tunnel that was the only access to the citadel.



Demchog Temple at the top of the citadel

The little Demchog temple, which had been a nearly melted-down adobe structure, also has a completely new roof with fringes all around and sacred umbrellas at its four corners. It is a miracle this rehabilitation, and considering that everything, especially

all wood had to be trucked in over 2000 miles from the borders of China, it must have been an expensive miracle too! *Demchog*, "Supreme Beatitude" - a frightful(!) emanation of Shakyamuni - is the *Yidam*, the tantric protector of Tsaparang and of the three great Tibetan *beyuls* Tsari, Lapchi, and Kailas. His Indian correspondence is *samvara*.

The little temple was the abode of this "god" well protected by the citadel. Here the king would turn in times of extreme need. But more interesting, it was also a place of initiation for students into the secrets of the *samvara Tantra*. Its center contained a rare three-dimensional mandala in which the student sat during the initiation rites to identify himself completely with the god. The god itself, in the form of Heruka with six heads and twelve arms, terrifying in nature, holding his *sakti* the *dakini* Vajrahavarahi, was probably not represented, only visualized by the student. Only the foundations of this square, wood and stucco mandala remain, but Tucci recovered four extraordinarily lithe, highly dramatic figures, one in *yab-yum* and three females, that were once parts of the *samvara* mandala.



Heruka with his dakini Vajrayogini in *yab-yum*

The walls were "read" from the bottom up and from left to right. To purify himself the student first meditated on the emptiness of earthly life: the lowest level depicts a series of the eight cemeteries of India with gruesome images of disjointed bodies, birds and animals eating corpses, etc. Visualizations of the Bardo, the region man passes through between death and rebirth.

On the next higher level is a band containing images of small, exquisitely painted dancing *Dakinis* representing the sixteen levels of naked wisdom (*prajna*), which like

the Greek Sophia is feminine. Above these appear the five *thatâgata* Buddhas each sitting in his mandorla. They appear in a tantric form, benign, in meditative repose a usual, but with six arms and three heads, that makes them hard to recognize at first except by their color. - Each has a little inscription tablet below to identify them - even to the original viewers. They are almost life-size, the truly commanding images of the sanctuary. Their center is the Buddha Akshobya, the Imperturbable, as the supreme possessor of the *vajra*, the Clear Light. They form the only quiet, central region in the room. The thirteen large ferocious, dancing couplings that cover the right and left walls are manifestations of Demchog as Heruka or Vajra-Bhairava, representations of Yama, death and Yamantaka, anti-death.

I recommend reading Tucci's fluent description of the images of this temple and the initiation rites connected with them. - I found an English translation of his "Tsaparang" in an Indian edition in Kathmandu. - There are few other art historians who knew the Tantras as well as he did - and certainly none whose mother-tongue is English.

The overwhelming impression with which one leaves this temple is, of course, confusion. If one then reads Tucci's description of the tantric initiations connected with these images one realizes that the teachers who taught these meditation cycles were incredibly courageous, highly experienced psychic practitioners, far beyond what psychotherapy attempts today: To use man's deepest fears of death to further his individuation - and sexual union to overcome these fears requires insights and practices that would have revolted Freud, and would probably still make our therapists fear the loss of their patients.

We had reached the farthest point of our journey, 1500 km or 1000 miles from Lhasa. As agreed we would return along the same route as far as Saga, then turn south, skirt lake Pelko Tso to reach the Friendship Highway, cross a last pass, 5400-m-high Yarle Shung La, go down from the plateau through the Nyalam gorge, and exit Tibet at Zhangmo/Kodari. After our return from the Kailas *Khorlam* we would make a side-trip to Burang and visit Chiyu Gompa on the isthmus and the two sacred lakes.

At the hotel in Thöling we collected a sleepy Katrin, packed the truck and took off late that afternoon. As soon as we were out of Thöling town Agha, in what seemed like one of his dust-raising attacks of racing fever, took off at break-neck speed. Padru cursed and fumed but could not catch up with him - and thus it happened that we "missed" the turn-off to the short-cut. As it would soon become apparent, Agha was fully aware of this, he was in no mood to expose himself to the cliff-hanging road once again and had sailed off on the much longer, but less dangerous "new road".

We met a smiling Agha sitting on a green meadow in a lovely side-canyon waiting for us. Padru stormed out of the car and soon the two rolled in the grass punching and wrestling each other. Then Agha grabbed a piece of yak dung and threw it at his opponent and within minutes a free-dung-fight-for-all was in full swing. After that the issue was settled without hard words or any real anger. We would be going along the new road tomorrow, and for the time being we camped right there.

28 September

Because of the two hours longer road Padru was pushing hard. Outside of a brief lunch we hurried on without the customary stops: we had seen it all and taken all the pictures. I must confess that I was getting weary of the daily shakings and did not protest the rush, let us get it over with now. The two high passes went by without any problems, and before we realized the day was over. We camped before the pass-of-the-bulge.

That night, the moon was full, I was awakened by running steps and shouts outside. When I stuck my head out I saw three dark shapes running like drunk in wild zigzags between our tents. Alarmed I grabbed a stone and threw it at the nearest figure, who cried out in Peter's voice, "Rolf, stop it! It is only us!" Photos taken by Cornelius revealed later that he, Peter, Jeroen, and Katrin had a "moonshine-party" with Agha, the cook's helper and the Khampa in the cold night. Katrin had woken up, and her "over-manned-ness" had suddenly evaporated. . . .

29 September



Cornelius and Jeroen in the black nomad tent

Early in the morning we pass by the nomad camp again and decide to pay them the postponed visit. It turns into a long escape from the road. Under Pujung's leadership Barbara, Cornelius, and Jeroen invade one of the tents. Their heads sticking through the smoke slot in roof of the tent Jeroen and Cornelius shout for a picture. The two clown and laugh themselves silly, they do look funny. Later Pujung shows me one of the typical Tibetan sacred texts of long sheaves bound between two beautifully

decorated wooden covers. He claims that it was a rare 16-th-century tantric text, "I bought it from the woman. I gave her my wristwatch and a co-payment of 70 Yüan," he explains, "it is their family treasure. Look at that paper this is old, handmade Tibetan paper, not that new Chinese stuff!"

Just before we leave the woman offers an air-dried leg of lamb to Bakhi for another 70 Yüan, and so it happens that we have real meat-*momos* that night.

Darchen is a large forlorn government camp between two pilgrims camps at the foot of Kailas. From here start the *khorlam* treks. The Indian pilgrims guest house is closed and we move on to the one for tourists. It is at least as bad and it is crowded. The horrible yak sties of blackened rooms have four beds, the sheets and covers of which have not been washed for a year. To console us Bakhi, who has set up his roarers in the room next to ours, prepares a sumptuous meal. Only the potatoes have become inedible, they taste for gasoline. Bakhi is embarrassed to learn that this is the true reason for our refusing to eat his precious potatoes.

Tomorrow the *khorlam* will start. Pujung orders six yaks that will carry all luggage, the tents, and Bakhi's kitchen. Bakhi and Pujung are going to accompany the pilgrims. After my exhausting experience in climbing the steep hill in Tsaparang I decide that I cannot keep up with the younger people on this trek, I am simply in no shape comparable to theirs. So in order not to impede the trek that we have been fantasizing about for a year, I decide that I will only come along, if yaks can be found for me and Barbara to ride on. Jeroen, still on three feet also needs a suitably equipped riding-yak.

Pujung, reluctantly agrees to find the animals. - He has just been slapped by the local *bönpo*, an aggressive Chinese half-breed, with another hefty fine of 1500 Yüan (\$ 188) for being unable to produce the appropriate permit for the group. His CITS travel funds are finished. I do not understand what CITS has been doing, don't they know their own rules? Or is it up to the local PSB (Public Security Bureau) "Bönpo" Lady to make up the rules, as it used to be in the long gone days? I can see that for her it is an excellent source of income. - And we are not the only ones gauged like that.

Late in the afternoon a Swiss Khorlam-party returns from their trek. The women look like they had been to the North Pole. Seriously exhausted they collapse in their room. They had revished by a bad snowstorm on Drölma La pass!

Darchen and the Kailas Khorlam

30 September

For us the gods smile benevolently: a blue sky and brilliant sunshine greet us in the morning. Eight yaks appear guided by a man and three young women. "These are your yak herders!" explains Pujung pointing at the maidens, who are covered like Moslem women with heavy shawls up to their eyes. In a confused commotion the girls tie our bags onto wooden crosses on the back of the restlessly grunting, prehistoric

animals. I search for the riding-yaks - and cannot find any. We cannot possibly be expected to ride bare-back on these huge animals?

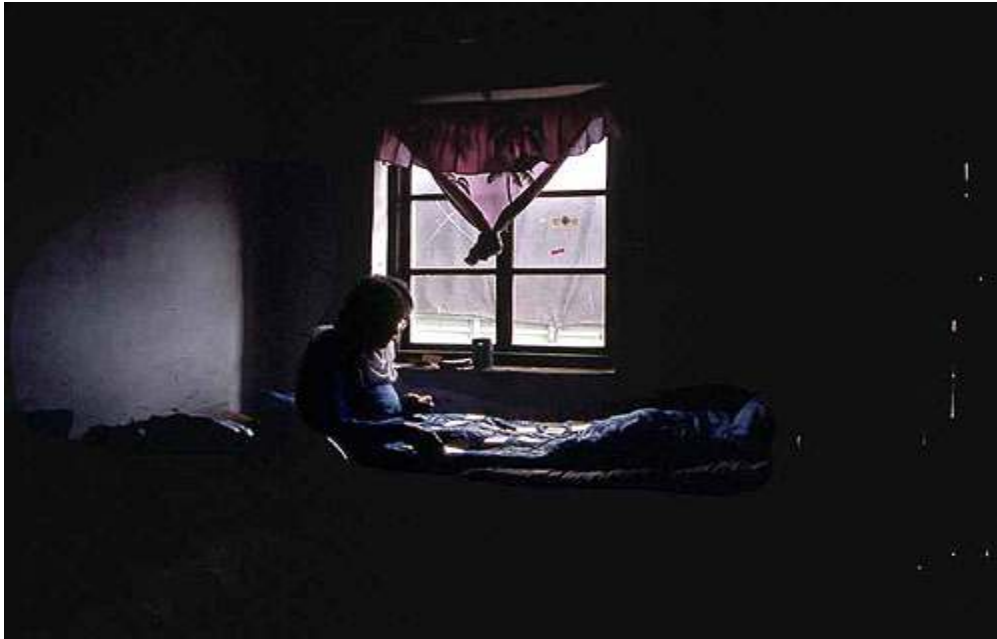


Yaks for the korlam being loaded by young girls

Everybody is ready to go, Pujung takes a photo of the party, the yaks march out of the yard. That is when I decide that the "Superior Man" has to act and blocking the way of the dangerously looking beasts, I demand the riding-yaks I had paid for. When finally my words have been translated to the owner, who cannot understand what the excited foreigner wants, he looks at me and pronounces me too heavy for the animals, - despite my loss of my belly. No pleading helps, and I decide on the spot that I shall stay behind. Barbara in tears, declares that then she will also stay. Pujung, very disturbed by his party breaking apart, tells me that I would have to pay for the two nights myself, he has no more money.

Barbara and my luggage is finally taken off the yaks again. Everybody hugs us and they all vanish in a hurry.

And so it came that we stayed behind, and I returned with my crying wife to our unspeakably dirty yak-sty. - Much later, in Kathmandu, when Bart presents me with the final reckoning. I find that we were charged \$50 for each of the two nights in that black hole!



Barbara playing *patience* in our room

After two hours of exhausted and disappointed crying Barbara digs out her grandmother's deck of playing cards that she had taken along and lays *patience* for another two hours. I have no time to cry, there is no food in the place, and I have to find something to eat for us. I collect all our emergency rations and the gasoline burner and pressure cooker we had carried along in the foresight, it now seems, of this very day and cook us a soup.



Rolf preparing our last soup

The two days and nights are depressing. On the evening of the first day appear two bearded, older characters who turn out to come from Munich and from Schwaben. When they hear our sad story they present us with a pot of "boiled potatoes with salt", and eventually with half a glass of the best Southern-German honey to console us, the dear men. They also keep us company that evening to make us forget our sorrows.

1 October

I try to find a way to escape down to Manasarovar, but I am told that we cannot leave the guest house, that we were effectively put under house arrest by the PSB Bönpo lady, because we had separated from our travel group.

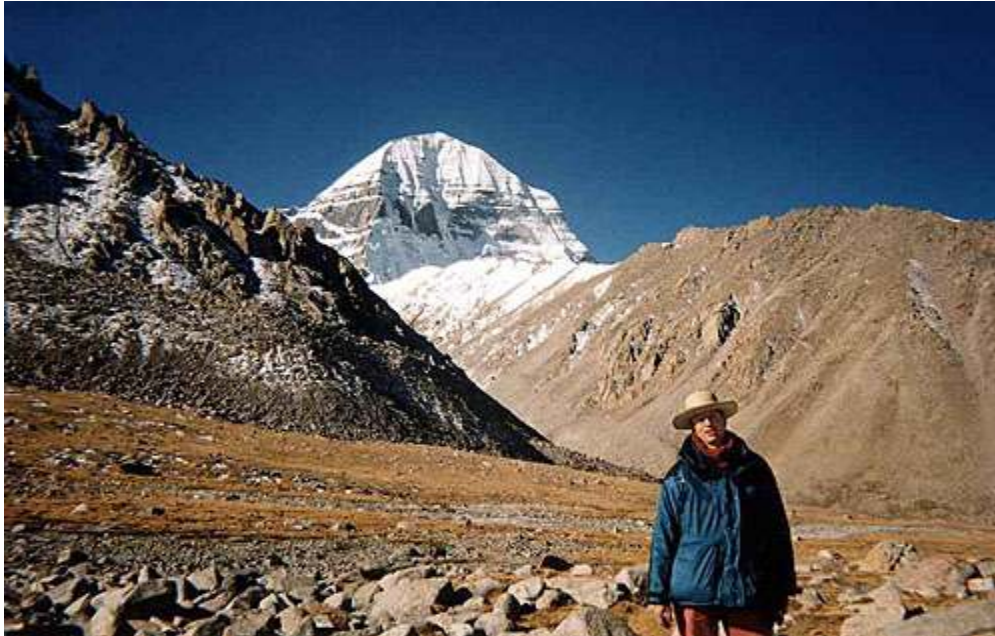


View of Darchen, the plain and Mt. Gurla Mandata (7690 m).
The large rectangular yard was the caravanserai in Hedin's days
where we stay now

Eventually, in the afternoon we sneak out anyway and climb the nearest hill at least to look at the beautiful lake and Gurla Mandhata in the distance. The weather is still splendid. For a while I sleep in the wind shade of a cairn and its prayer flags on the way to the "*inner khorlam*" and dream of the high pass the others must now be climbing. A snorting yak, grazing uphill, wakes me. Barbara, who had climbed further and had missed me in my hiding place coming down, waves with both arms from way below. When I catch up with her she tells me that our German friends had been evacuated in a hurry to Chiyu Gompa by someone from their group - the others had gone to Thöling - because "the police was after them".

What was going on in this place? - Re-reading Sven Hedin much later, I find that nearly the same happened to him in 1904 in Barga, the next village a few kilometers downhill which then was the seat of the local *bönpo*: Chiyu was extraterritorial, it belonged to the Kagyüpa lamas of Bhutan. It is still that way!

The Kailas Khorlam, 31 September - 2 October



Cornelius and the North Face of Kailas

I did not circumambulate Mount Kailas, the obligation of all pilgrims to this hallowed *beyul*. However, Buddhism offers an alternative, a devout man can gain all merits of this walk, if he seriously endeavors to perform it in his mind. I did that during those three days and later retold the story of the eight pilgrims with the help of Cornelius's and Peter's pictures. You find them on my website

<http://rolfgross.dreamhosters.com/Kailas/KailasKorlam.htm>

2 October

Long before noon Barbara walks east along the *khorlam'* to wait for our pilgrims like a medieval woman expecting the return of the crusaders from the Holy Land. The first are Pujung, Bakhi, Marc, Monique, and the three-legged Jeroen, who had fallen off his yak after two hours and had preferred the pain of limping across the pass to a sore derriere and the temperamental yak. Cornelius, Peter, and Katrin were still on an exploration of one of the Milarepa caves where the holy ascetic had meditated living only of nettles - until he turned green - the mysterious color he has on our Milarepa *thanka* in Los Angeles. They arrived an hour later. Everyone, though exhausted, was in the best of moods. I asked Cornelius to write a description of their *khorlam* trek, but he is not interested.

Bakhi prepared another fabulous lunch, and then we packed up and left the dismal place for Chiyu Gompa and the longed-for sight of Lake Manasarovar.



Manasarovar and Mt. Gurla Mandata

We camp, surrounded by pilgrims, on a rock strewn flat right below the gompa with a splendid view of the lake and the setting sun. - There we meet our two German friends again. They are the "personal guests" of the abbot of Chiyu and are still waiting for the return of their group from Tsaparang. Had our guides only been better informed, they could have spared us our prison sentence and given us two beautiful days - not to mention the horrible expense. . .



Karyü monks from Chiyu Gompa collecting money

Two colorful Kargyü monks arrive from Chiyu in the evening to collect our camping fee. At night Katrin cries herself to sleep in her lonely tent. We attribute it to the exhaustion of the trek and leave her alone. The horrific powers of the local spirits don't even enter my mind.

Lake Manasarova and Burang

3 October



Chiyu Hotsprings - the only warm bath in 5 weeks

I had known of them and Padru had advertised them for the last few days, the hot-springs of Chiyu. Padru drives us there, they are behind the hill of the gompa at the bank of the Ganga-river that mysterious, off-again-on-again connection between the two lakes over the existence of which the explorers of the last century fought battles of life and death. The Ganga has some water this year and the hot spring has a marvelous, three-meter-long stone trough. In no time at all Marc, Jeroen, Cornelius, and I sit like children playing train in the hot water. It is an indescribable delight, and I even shave off the two-week old stubble on my face.

A group of giggling girls walks by and watch the four hairy, white men with uninhibited interest: their men don't have any hair on their chests. But they are more puzzled by our taking a bath than by our nakedness. That is nothing special, but a bath? They only take one once a year at Buddha's birthday, when everybody runs stark naked into the rivers.

Barbara and Katrin arrive on foot, but are too modest to join and go home dry. Padru spends ten minutes cleaning the soapy water from the trough after we get out. Have

we polluted the sacred spring? But no, he undresses too and notwithstanding the presence of the ladies climbs in himself. We feel much honored.

Our time at the lake is much too short. We have hardly seen it and had no time to explore it when Pujung and Bakhi press for our departure for Burang. Why did I not convince them to stay a day longer? Was I getting morose myself? How silly to have come so far and then not take advantage of it? But there was a very gloomy atmosphere among our crew that morning. There are many things that happen among our Tibetan friends, of which we know nothing, but the mood of everybody is palpably effected. I decide to ask Bakhi when he is off guard.

As we ride across the isthmus towards Lake Raksas Tal Bakhi tells me what has happened. It is a sad story. Pujung had left a satchel with all his identity papers and the permits for the group with the drivers. They had thrown it on the truck and when Pujung came back yesterday nobody could find it. I try to laugh the matter off by saying that it was like a *terma*, one of the "hidden" texts of Tibetan Buddhism that Padmasambhava had buried in dozens of places for his successors to find when the time was right. All it needed was an appropriate *tertön*, an empowered individual to find the documents. Nothing on this trip had ever completely disappeared, not the maps or books that loosely fly around the cars, no valuables, not a single pack. But Bakhi remains serious and shaking his head intones "You don't understand. It's very bad, it's very bad." And cuts the conversation short.

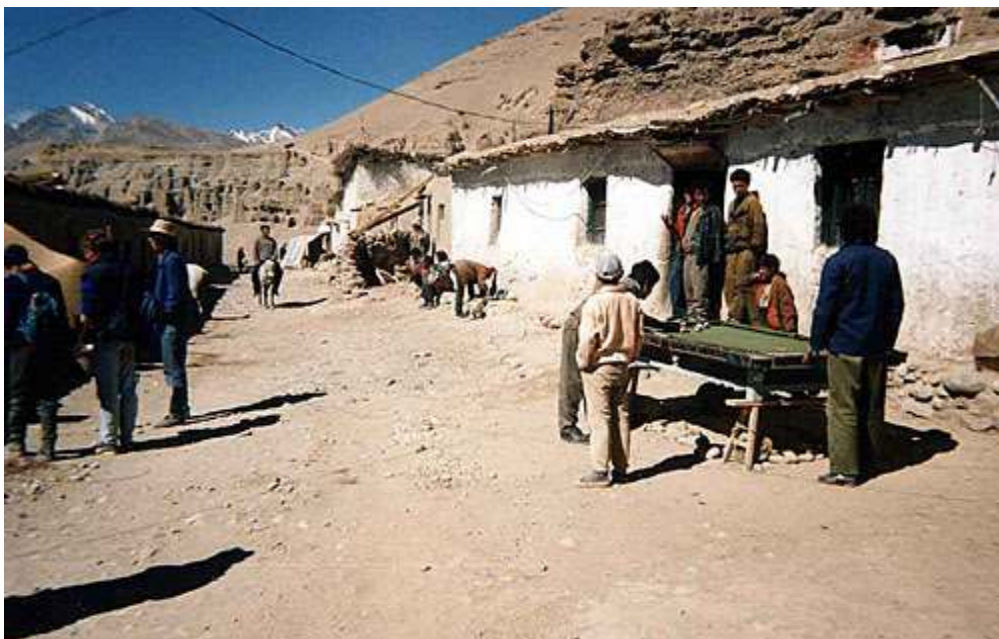
High above Lake Raksas Tal, after driving for 50 minutes across rocks on the lake's shore, we have a flat. I have hardly time to take a look at the beautiful, strange lake devoid of anything living before the tire is exchanged. Raksas Tal has two islands, many bays that remind me of Greece and the best views of Kailas and Gurla Mandhata, but why it is shunned by men? The rationalization that it is "poisonous" is obvious nonsense, its waters are as sweet as that of Manasarovar which feeds it subsurface. One arm of the Sutlej drains it. It must be the monster that is supposed to live in it.

Gurla La, on the western shoulder of Gurla Mandhata, which I had imagined to offer a beautiful view of both lakes and Kailas shows nothing like that, it's a really dull pass. Then come several murderous stretches across stony washes descending from the mountain, whose ice fields reach almost down to the road. Eventually we drive into an alpine valley surrounded by high, snow covered mountains at the end of which lies Burang-Thaklakot.



The bridge at Burang

From photos I had expected a dull Chinese trading center, but it is an exceptionally beautiful Tibetan town with prosperous houses. Like Thöling it was a trading center on the routes to Nepal and India. Lipu Lekh La just south of it is the pass across which the Indian Kailas pilgrims walk in the summer months. But unlike Thöling, Burang is still a trading center. On our way into town we meet a herd of sheep, each of the animals carries two woolen sacks filled with Tibetan salt from the lakes of the Chang Tang. On their way back they will carry grain for the nomads like in Sven Hedin's times and probably long before him. One part of Burang is a flourishing market where huge balls of Tibetan wool are traded against Western trinkets from Nepal that are unavailable in Tibet. The houses there are still roofed with tent tarpaulins because an English decree from 1857 forbade the traders to establish permanent houses in Burang.



Old Burang, Main Street

the trading stalls where the wool from the Changtang is being sold to the Nepalese in

the background

We unload at the Indian guest house, after Darchen a civilized place. Later Cornelius digs up an equally reasonable Tibetan restaurant. Bakhi does not have to cook.

Pujung seeks me out and tells me the rest of the story about the lost satchel with our permits. "The permits have not been found." says he. I tell him that I was sure they would soon turn up: "Just wait a little, nothing has ever been lost on this trip." He shakes his head. "But why not? Was there any money in it?" I ask. "No," he says "I have all the money that is left," and continues with a hanging head. "You remember we played mahjong every night on the way West. I lost a great amount of money to the drivers and had to borrow 1000 Yüan from Sushin. That is why I think the bag has vanished."

Sushin is the quietest, restrained, and most careful of the four drivers, which is why Katrin loves to ride with him. I raise my eyebrows, it is an entirely different story, Sushin under suspicion of having swiped the bag, a terrible suspicion indeed. "What will you do?" I ask Pujung. He shrugs his shoulders in silence. "You know," he continues after a while, "I am worried how we will get you down to Zhangmu without permits. The road is heavily controlled by the Chinese police. Not even I can go there without a permit." Yes indeed, his is a serious worry. I am honored that he comes to discuss these potentially explosive news with me and tell him so.

Later Bakhi comes into our room and spontaneously falls around my neck and kisses me. I am almost shocked by this display of emotions. Bakhi only says, "Thank you for your understanding and help to Pujung." - I am moved.

The papers do not turn up and the issue remains unresolved and hangs like a black cloud over them and us. Only Katrin's sudden collapse temporarily covers these problems. Eventually we are lucky, the Chinese are asleep at the control stations, and we slip through un-accosted. In Zhangmu Bakhi makes a Chinese-style, breast-beating knee fall before the border official. The aloof officer looks down at him and silently waves us on. I don't know whether Pujung got into trouble when he returned to Lhasa, but the chances are high.

4 October

Everybody leaves to explore Burang except I and Katrin. I feel worn out and sleep most of the day and Katrin sits outside in the sun and is miserable and depressed. She is suddenly and violently in love - with Tibet! "I don't want to go home!" she says unhappily.

Strange girl. When I first had suggested to her to come with us to Tibet about a year earlier, she had been very reluctant and defensive. When I asked why, she could not explain it. Later she thought that she was afraid of going there. At Christmas, which she spent with us, I tried to fathom this fear, was it the fear of the high altitude? A little but not really. The vast land? Maybe. I gave her a book by a young Australian girl who had walked from Kailas to Lhasa by herself. She actually read it and told me, "It

is good you gave me this book. I have lost my apprehension of this land. I think I too could do what this girl did."

But her fears do not recede. Years ago she biked with her German mother through Southern France. Afterwards it turned out that she had refused to visit any of the many, lovely churches along their way. So I asked her, "Are you afraid of the dark and woolly Tibetan monasteries I want so much to see? You know, you do not have to go inside them. That will be perfectly alright." She looked through me in silence. - When we got here she adamantly refused to get even close to any of the many gompas we visited - save Shalu. There we had stopped right in the middle of the monastery's courtyard and there was nothing else to do. I took her by the arm on that day and tried to explain to her what we saw together. It did not kindle any interest in Tibetan religion in her. Her father is a forsworn atheist who deeply distrusts emotions and any spirituality. Rationally she follows his example, but somewhere deep down, she is a deeply and passionately emotional woman - a region that she has never allowed to get out of control - I think. Oh, if you have a lucid, critical mind, what a problem that can be! -

She had finally decided to join us on her own free will. And now something or someone has broken down the dams that hold back her passions - and she is miserable. . .

We smile at each other, and thinking of Barbara's fierce defense of Katrin's privacy, I leave her alone with her book, not asking any further questions. - Now I think that this may have been a mistake of mine. Who will ever know?

In the afternoon Cornelius made a last attempt - as it would turn out - of getting a visa extensions for Peter, Katrin, and himself to sneak into the Rongshar valley and go to Lapchi at the end of our trip. The bureaucrats only shake their heads, they don't have the proper rubber stamp to extend visas.

It had long been Cornelius' wish to do something else besides ride with his parents. After many ideas had been examined and discarded as impractical, Lapchi had evolved as the favored escape. Lapchi is a gompa at the very border to Nepal, north of Nepal's Rowaling district, very close to and west of Everest. One gets there from Dingri on the Friendship Highway by walking south and then turning west at the foot of Cho Oyu and the fabled Nangpa La to enter the Rongshar, the Valley of the Roses. The trek ends in the Nyalam valley just north of Zhangmu. After Kailas and Tsari it is the third greatest *beyul* of Tibet. Beloved Milarepa lived and died there, and the valley must be very beautiful. There was only one problem, the area, being close to the Nepali border, is highly sensitive and closed to foreigners, a fact which only heated Cornelius' imagination. I had even inverted Victor Chan's trek description to read from west to east to avoid the Chinese authorities on the eastern end of the valley.

After this defeat Cornelius considered to ride to Shigatse with the empty cars and try his luck there. This was one more reason not to curb the drivers' wish to get us to Zhangmu early, Cornelius would have had to reach Shigatse at the latest on 10 October. - In the end all of these plans were preempted by Katrin's collapse. We returned to Kathmandu together, and Cornelius and Peter went on a trek from

Pokhara to Dhorpâtan in Nepal after we flew home.

Once again the gods of Tibet protected us, had they gone into the Rongshar they would most likely have been stranded there if not worse by an unexpected, heavy snow storm that ravished the area in November!

Disaster Strikes on the Return

5 October

Bakhi and Padru press for an early departure and we leave Burang at sun rise. All the famous places pass again, Raksas Tal, Manasarovar, Chiyu, Kailas, only Gurla Mandhata follows us into the horrible passes behind Horchu. After a brief lunch near Horchu, Padru pushes on. I have to concentrate completely on keeping my brain together, my bones seem to have already fallen apart. Nine hours with hardly a stop! Ten hours, we are climbing across Maryum La again. The sun is very low. Where are they going? I ask Bakhi and he answers, "to Paryang!" But this is ridiculous, it is six o'clock and Paryang is at least four hours further! So I put a stop to this maddening drive, and we raise the camp in a hurry on an open meadow on the eastern side of Maryum La.

It is a good camp ground but it is at least 5000-m (16400-ft) high and a cutting wind blows across the open spaces. Everybody complains about the fierce cold. We quickly eat our usual fare, Bakhi even produces new, un-polluted potatoes which he has bought in Burang. We creep into our sleeping bags together with our water bottles full of piping hot drinking water - an idea that had occurred to me one cold night many nights ago. It is a really a splendid night, the moon is full and the air glass clear.

In the middle of this cold Tibetan night Katrin has a fierce attack of vomiting. She is moaning in her tent next to ours but waves my questions off, "I am only bringing up my dinner." When a bad cough overcomes her in addition Barbara gets out and creeps into her tent. Vomiting is nothing unusual but vomiting together with a deep bellowing cough is something new.

I remain in my bag, thinking that it was another of her slightly hysterical attacks. But then Barbara calls for help, and I too creep into Katrin's tent. She groans shaken by stomach cramps. Her coughing had stopped and never recurred. A little impatient with her, she has slumped completely, I shake her and try to make her sit up. The space is very crowded with three people. But her condition deteriorates rapidly, we can barely hold her up together. Cornelius appears at the entry and offers to bring his large sleeping bag. Eventually we stuff her and Barbara into his bag, and I climb out of the tent to make room for Cornelius, who is gentler than I with her. I need to think the situation over.

I sit cross-legged on the meadow in the streaming moonlight. It must be well below freezing but the wind has stopped. Was this after all HACE, the feared high altitude

cerebral edema, a deadly swelling of the brain? I had read the best available literature about high-altitude illness and this was the only one that I did not want to have to diagnose or use the only medicine dexamethasone, which no doctor would have prescribed for me in the USA. I console myself with the idea that HACE is rare, but for an emergency I had obliged Bart to buy some dexamethasone in Kathmandu, hoping that we would never have to use it, or if then be able to diagnose the case together.

Then Barbara called again. She was unable to keep Katrin from passing out. She had lost all her motor functions, could not speak any longer and had developed a pain and high sensitivity in her neck and the back of her head. She had been reduced to a pitiful bag of flour.

At first I became very angry with myself. As I had feared the responsibility to make this decision had landed squarely on my shoulders. But there was no time, Katrin's condition was rapidly deteriorating. We had to give her the dexamethasone at once or risk having her die in our arms. I woke Bart and asked him to search for the medicine. He was up in a minute and found the tablets together with a Dutch manual that defined the symptoms of the last stages of HACE as vomiting, total loss of motor control, paralysis, loss of speech, and coma preceding death. We had no difficulty in agreeing on the need for very rapid action. We determined the initial doses and Cornelius counted off 14 tiny tablets, each containing 0.5 mg of dexamethasone. I cursed at the smallness of the tablets until we tried to feed them to Katrin, her tongue was completely paralyzed. But she could still swallow, and Cornelius very seriously called her and spilled the tablets down her throat with equally tiny amounts of water. - Thanks God, she held the medication down.

All of us knew that the only and foremost remedy for any serious case of high-altitude illness is descent, get the victim down, down, and down below 3000 meters in case of HACE. And you have to continue to give regular dexamethasone doses until you reached that altitude, or you risked a recurrence of the problem. Cornelius counted the tablets in our possession: at the minimum dose (5 mg four-times a day) our supply would last for two days.

What to do? The nearest place below 3000 m was Zhangmu, 600 km or 400 miles away on these abysmal roads. And in between there was no place below 4500 m (14 700 ft). Nepal, to which all medical advice is tailored, is different, there it is easy to descend a few thousand feet almost everywhere, but not here on the Tibetan plateau! And there were at least five passes above 5000 m (16 500 ft) between us and Zhangmu, that meant we had to ascend her several times a day. It appeared almost hopeless to get her out alive.

Bart had alarmed the drivers and Pujung. It was 2:00 AM. Padru and I calculated the hours it would take to get to Zhangmu. We estimated 30 hours of sheer driving. He thought that if we were truly lucky and drove as fast as possible we could reach Zhangmu late tomorrow night. "Ok," he finally said, " let's go and try."

In an hour the entire camp was packed in the moonshine, in itself a minor miracle. By 3:15 AM the cars were warming up. We bedded Katrin on the back-seat of Sushin's car. Barbara and Cornelius, who had without discussion taken on the job of keeping

her awake at any price, sat with her. We knew that if she slipped into a coma, she would not return to the living. Then we drove off into the cold night following Sushin's dust cloud.



Kung Chü Tso in full moonshine

For four hours we meandered through the maze of tracks and river crossings in the sand flats west of Paryang. I have no idea of how Sushin and Padru found their way in the night, they erred only once and had to back-track. At sunrise we made a pause of a few minutes in Paryang. Everybody but I stood around Katrin's window trying to encourage her. She had become Sushin's personal responsibility. I could not get rid of the thought that he was silently working off his guilt of the disappeared papers. Soon we plowed on again as fast as the track would let us.

In the first ten hours Katrin drifted in and out of her comatose condition, losing her ability to form words every time, until the dexamethasone caught on. Cornelius and Barbara talked to her the entire time, shook her until she regained some measure of speech control and answered their questions. It was a cruel treatment, but her saving.

The gate in Zhongba was open, we slipped through without being stopped by the Chinese. Then the road got better for a while. Towards sunset - fifteen hours after we had broken camp, fifteen hours of relentless driving - we reached Saga. By now Katrin's condition was stable, so that we could allow the drivers, ourselves, and her a night of sleep in the local guest house without the immediate fear of losing her. Barbara checked her every two hours during that night.

Lake Pelko Tso, a Landslide, and Kathmandu

7 October

She had slept peacefully and we already rejoiced that we had won the fight when she slipped back again, with all the feared symptoms after breakfast. This time a group of geologist from Oxford and MIT on a VIP tour of Tibet came to our help. We met them waiting for the Tsangpo ferry south of Saga. I approach them and without much formality ask for oxygen. Soon we have a big air-cushion, which Padru had suddenly produced from our truck, full of the life-saving gas, enough for six hours. With it we cross another three high passes during the day. Above lake Pelko Tso we have lunch for the last time, and Barbara distributes our tips and special little presents for everybody. Pujung gets Cornelius' precious copy of Victor Chan's "Tibet Handbook", Sushin three Disneyland sweatshirts for his boys, etc. They are visibly moved and pleased with their generous tips.



Pelko Tso, Barbara distributing farewell presents to the crew

After another three hours we reach the Friendship Highway just north of the last pass which I had feared most, 5400 m (17 700 ft) high. The sun is going down and illuminates a vast panorama of the Himalayas with Shishibangma very close in the west. Cornelius deposits his last prayer shawl at its cairn, and I take my last photographs in Tibet. Finally on the much improved road we dive into Nyalam canyon which leads through the high mountains down to Zhangmu and Nepal.



Our last pass, Yarle Chung La (5400 m)

But the gods demand one more test of faith from us. In Nyalam we learn that the road is blocked by a landslide. We are still above 4000 m (13 000 ft), we cannot stop here, and I press on.

We reach the landslide by 10:00 PM. There was definitely no way to cross it by car. It had become pitch dark. In less than a minute we are surrounded by fifty pygmy-sized people who all want to carry our luggage across the slide. They create an indescribable pandemonium in the darkness, shouting and grabbing for anything loose. Somewhere, way down in the canyon one could barely make out the two lights of a truck that was waiting to ferry any late travelers the rest of the way.

Pujung begins to select the strongest of the "coolies", as he calls them, by taking their red work permits away while we search the cars and the truck for our luggage and any loose possessions. Nothing was missing in the end, I have no idea how! We pile the sixteen odd pack-bags between two cars and start distributing the loads. Right then the unfortunate who had not been hired start a minor riot. They are trying to reach the pile of our possessions. Something had to be done. I grab one urchin who had crawled under the truck and with a solid kick into his behind send him scrambling, that helped, laughter all around. - Then I find a police whistle in my pocket - it had the effect of an atomic bomb. Everybody runs for cover, and I feel like a giant in Lilliput, but we are rid of the plague.

All except Barbara, Katrin, and myself go down to the truck with the porters. Cornelius and Peter promise to return and take Katrin across the slide. It finally becomes very quiet. The moon has just begun to rise across the mountains and slowly illuminates the slide on the other side of the canyon - there is a bridge across its wild river in a hair-pin curve between me and the slide. Slowly, very slowly the mountain's shadow creeps across the devastated area. And then with a loud rumble another avalanche of rocks comes down the slide. My heart stops, the slide is alive! In this darkness!

I sit down on the ground in the position of the Buddha holding my right hand to the earth as witness and plead, earth, please hold still, please let us get across this monstrous obstacle alive.

After what seemed like an endlessly long time I see the tiny flashlights of Peter and Cornelius winging erratically across the slide. They are coming back.

I get up and find our Khampa sitting a few meters away on the ground in the same position. He rises and comes over to give me a hug and a kiss murmuring again and again "Ok! Ok!" The only English he knows.

This was my farewell from Tibet.

Taking Katrin between themselves, Peter and Cornelius guide her and Barbara safely through the huge rock boulders and ankle-deep mud, only I fall into a knee-deep hole full of brown water. Peter afraid that I would skid down the steep, slippery slope pulls me out. From then on I look like a gold digger covered with brown mud up to and over my Tibetan hat. But I only suffered a couple of nicks in my chins, a badly broken nail, and a sprained thumb. I even found my glasses again - on my nose!

We climb into the back of the truck, Katrin and Peter sit in the cab, and off we go to Zhangmu. It took us another full hour, an absolutely unforgettable hour, a ride better than any in underground Disneyland.

Clinging to a vertical rock wall in the moon's shadow the track, barely six-feet wide, scrambles from the arid plateau into the tropical valley. The first trees appear, bare trunks and ghostly branches, silhouetted black against the opposite moon-lit canyon wall. Hanging plants grab for us. A waterfall pours over us from above. Every now and then a narrow side valley opens suddenly casting us into moonlight. Dimly glisten snow fields high above. Water everywhere in rivulets and streams cascading from the high mountains, dripping on our heads. "Watch out!" Cornelius cries, "Around the corner are the ghosts waiting to get you!" He is hanging overboard on the right side of the truck enjoying himself immensely. "But you should look down here!" he continues without mercy, "You would get dizzy!" There, a mere two hands from the rear wheels of the truck, the mountain drops vertically down a thousand feet into the roaring river. No railing, no markers only the crumbling edge of the road. . . And that in the middle of the night!

We arrive in Disneyland proper shortly before midnight. Zhangmu, a vertical village clinging to a mountain side some four-hundred feet high, is lit like a Christmas tree: expensive tourist traps, bars, discos, music blaring, eateries, open shops stuffed with goods from all over the world, men with the latest Bangkok haircuts. . . and all decorated with lights, color-strings, rotating crystal balls, the grand kitsch, a Chinese fantasy of Hollywood. Only the pigs in the gutters, the urchins in their rags, and the women remind us that we have not reached home yet.

The CITS hotel is full to the last room. They had expected us only on Wednesday, this is Sunday morning. They put us into the bar, free of charge. In a wink four little girls appear with futons and bedcovers and turn the dance floor into a mass-bed.



Zhangmu at midnight, Rolf after the landslide

Barbara and the guys are hungry and disappear into town to find something to eat. I have no more needs but sleep and stay behind with Katrin. She is stable and sleeps quietly with her oxygen cushion. I find the fuse and disarm the colored flood-lights and drift off into the deepest sleep since weeks.

We have made it, miraculously Katrin is alive!

To this very day we do not know what really happened to Katrin. She is in excellent shape now, and does not want to hear the story of her misfortunes any longer. The doctors she consulted in Kathmandu and at Stanford all agree that it cannot have been HACE. One doctor finally volunteered the laconic comment, that if it had been HACE, she would not be sitting in his office. . . The waxing and waning of her comatose condition is also very unlike this illness. She had another attack in the morning in Zhangmu at only 2000 m before we crossed the border.

A week after her collapse she still was not able to walk longer than 10 minutes without Barbara's help, and she found her sharp intellect only a full week later in Pacific Palisades, when one morning she cut me down with an unexpected, razor-sharp argument. At first I reeled, but then realized in a flash that we had truly won the fight for her full recovery.

The last doctor who saw her, could not find anything wrong with her, he suggested that it was "a little hysteria" combined with food poisoning. . . Katrin did not contest his diagnosis. Maybe some day she will understand what happened to her in the Great

Beyul of Rinpoche Kangri.

7 October

The end of our Odyssey was a long day into the night in which Bart showed his best talents. Between the two frontier posts, some ten kilometers, he hired one of the trucks that were waiting in Zhangmu for people like us. The confused and disorganized Nepalese border formalities took two hours, during which Bart found a privat minibus for us to Kathmandu. We watched the overcrowded public buses with horror, a dozen people on their roofs. It became a hot 10-hour ride. Katrin went incoherent one more time in the heat. By 10 pm we stood on Kanthipath in Kathmandu. Bart suggested the Pilgrims Guesthouse. While Barbara and Cornelius took Katrin to CIWEC, the best, Belgian-American medical service in town, I went with the others and all our luggage to the guesthouse. A lovely garden, friendly and competent people, - and a huge bathtub in every bathroom convinced me of Bart's choice.

Two hours later Barbara appeared. They had taken Katrin to an hospital emergency, where a Nepalese doctor had compared her two eye pupils and confirmed traces of an HACE episode, put her on a drip with a good dosis of dexamethasone and gave her a bed while he did some further tests. Se would be able to stay with us. Cornelius had remained with her, watching that the technicians did not mix up the blood tests - which they did! Barbara and I returned there around midnight and picked her up.

We stayed almost week, teaching Katrin to walk again. Dr. Shim at CIWEC organized a seat for her on our flight to Los Angeles. She had wanted to stay longer with Cornelius and Peter. Mark, Monique, and Jeroen flew home first. Bart left for another assignment, and Peter and Cornelius went on a self-guided trek after we had left. Our flight home with Katrin was long and weary but without any problems. Rarely have we enjoyed our house as much as this time.

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