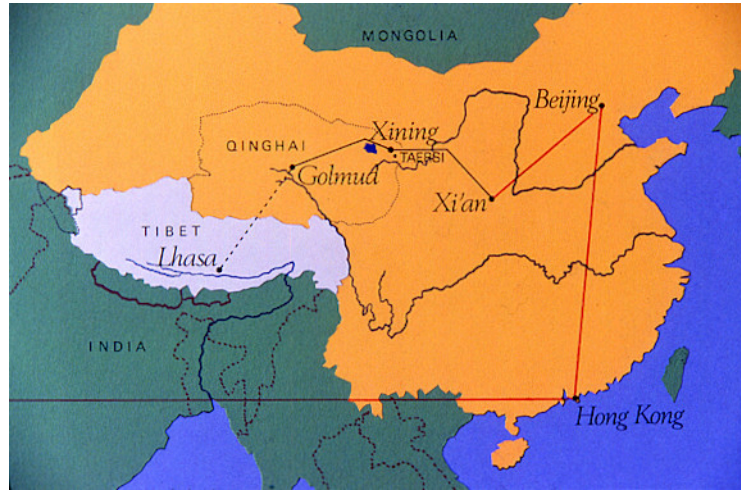


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FROM GOLMUD TO LHASA



We are now starting a journey that would have taken pilgrims months to complete – especially if they had taken the slowest and most pious means of locomotion to reach Lhasa: full prostration across this vast and almost roadless region, in all weathers and conditions. We now travel in the relative comfort of an old creaking bus. The road will take us south from Golmud, passing through the centre of what was Amdo province (now Qinghai), and over a couple of mountain passes. The whole venture is a gamble, as these old buses are known to break down in the middle of nowhere. We have two drivers: a middle-aged man who does nearly all the donkey work, and a younger relief driver who does almost nothing.

Leaving Golmud behind, we drive through a wild landscape. Here it is like Ladakh, though on a much larger scale. The road twists around, winding uphill and downhill, and we race past dramatic eroded gorges and rock caves. Around us are extraordinary brown mountains and, now and then, a range of snowy peaks; above us stretches a dark blue cloudless sky. This is the type of scenery that I had mentally associated with Tibet. I am in my element. The Tibetans at the back of the bus sing even louder.

On and on the bus roars, at top speed. In general the asphalted road is excellent, but occasionally it disintegrates where it is being repaired. At such points in our journey we continue along a rough track until it is possible to rejoin the road. Later in the day the bus almost gets stuck in mud on one of these tracks, but the driver skilfully extricates it.

As it does not seem likely that we will stop for lunch, we fill in the time by nibbling biscuits and bread, and drinking from our water bottles. Hence, we are quite astounded when, having driven into a wide valley with a range of beautiful snow-kissed mountains to our left, the bus stops and the driver hollers, '*chi fan!*' ('eating'). We stumble out of the bone-shaker and walk towards a small whitewashed building that is indescribably dirty inside. Food, of questionable quality, is being prepared in a rough kitchen. I decide that I can do without this and so go for a gentle stroll instead. Once away from the people, the bus and the restaurant, I am surrounded by

mountains and engulfed in a profound and wonderful silence. I walk slowly and carefully in the heat towards a hill, at the base of which is a nomad's felt *yurt* or tent. We had seen some of these yesterday when on the train. The only ugly modern intrusions here are lines of telegraph poles marching across the landscape and lorries on the roads.



*Mountains in Qinghai*

As I walk, large insects with white wings rise up in alarm, emitting dry clicking sounds. Because of the intense sun, I only walk a short distance. I retrace my steps and, as the people had still not been served their food, I wander off in the opposite direction towards the snow-topped mountains, which are so bright that I have to put on my sunglasses. Although I am free to admire the beauty of this relatively unspoilt empty region, others are not, for Qinghai was the place in which many of the Chinese labour camps were situated; nowadays, I am told, they are all gone. When, during the appalling Cultural Revolution, people were branded 'capitalist' or 'bourgeois', or showed any reluctance to follow the Party line, this is where they may have been sent. Many people died in these dreadful places, where they were beaten, tortured, underfed, and undoubtedly worked to death. This is one of the many dark, chilling aspects of Communist China. However, what strikes me forcibly is the cheerful resilience of the Tibetan people, despite what they had been through and the way they are now treated by their Chinese overlords; the group at the back of the bus, for example, could not have been in higher spirits.

Our lunch break is quite long and I pass the time strolling around, for I know that I will be sitting in the bus for the rest of the day and night. Back on board I take a window seat so that I can have a better view of the extraordinary scenery. The only disadvantage of where I am sitting is the lack of leg-room. As there is no proper luggage rack, our bags have to go under the seats on the dirty floor; because of the violent shaking and bumping of the bus, the bags move around and get in the way of one's legs and feet. As the journey progresses and as the scenery often becomes bleak and empty, it gets increasingly more uncomfortable.



*Scene in Qinghai*

We stop occasionally to answer calls of nature (the Tibetans are completely uninhibited in this regard) and, later in the evening, when it is beginning to get dark, we stop once again for food. As I am hungry, I decide to try some soup and bread. The bread is hot and tasty, but the soup is too spicy for my liking.



*Mountains in Qinghai*

Now comes the worst part of the journey: the non-stop drive through the night. Fortunately the seat beside me is free and I am able to curl up as best I can. None the less, it is still dreadfully uncomfortable. By now I am beginning to feel unwell: my stomach is troubling me and I feel that I am catching a cold. I pile on all my warm clothing; after a while I feel too hot and undo my jacket. Just as I fear, I am unable to

fall asleep and so spend the night tossing and turning, trying to make myself comfortable, though I probably do manage to doze for just a short while.

At some time during the night I learn that the driver had begun to doze off at one point. When one of the Europeans, who was a smoker, offered him a cigarette, he noticed that he was almost slumped over the steering wheel. He roused the driver, who accepted the cigarette and lit up. What might have happened if he had fallen fast asleep does not bear thinking about – we might have careered off the road and overturned. So much for the lazy relief driver! Readers may be relieved to learn that they can now travel to Lhasa in a comfortable high-speed bullet train.

Gradually dawn breaks and slowly – but only very slowly – it begins to get a little warmer. By now I feel like death warmed up. Somebody (a Tibetan, I think) sits beside me and only then, after I had taken a little medication, do I begin to feel drowsy. I begin to fall asleep at regular intervals, dreaming deliriously. At some ungodly hour we stop at the tiny town of Amdo, marking the border with Tibet proper, and then drive into more verdant surroundings, where the weather is dull and cloudy. This area is reminiscent of the Himalayan landscapes of India and Bhutan, though here we cross huge open stretches of grassland. Occasionally we pass a ruined monastery with prayer flags fluttering in the breeze. This region is certainly Buddhist, though evidence of destruction by the Chinese is clearly visible. It is a landscape that I had long yearned to see, but I am now too groggy to assimilate it or take photographs – all I want to do is sleep. Daniel and the other Europeans are seemingly aware of my condition and offer me water from their flasks. Undoubtedly I am suffering from a combination of dehydration, altitude sickness, exhaustion due to lack of sleep, and an oncoming cold.

In this part of Tibet there are more signs of life: scruffy little villages, people with horses and yaks, and the remains of monasteries here and there. We pass roaring rivers and icy peaks peeping above green mountains.

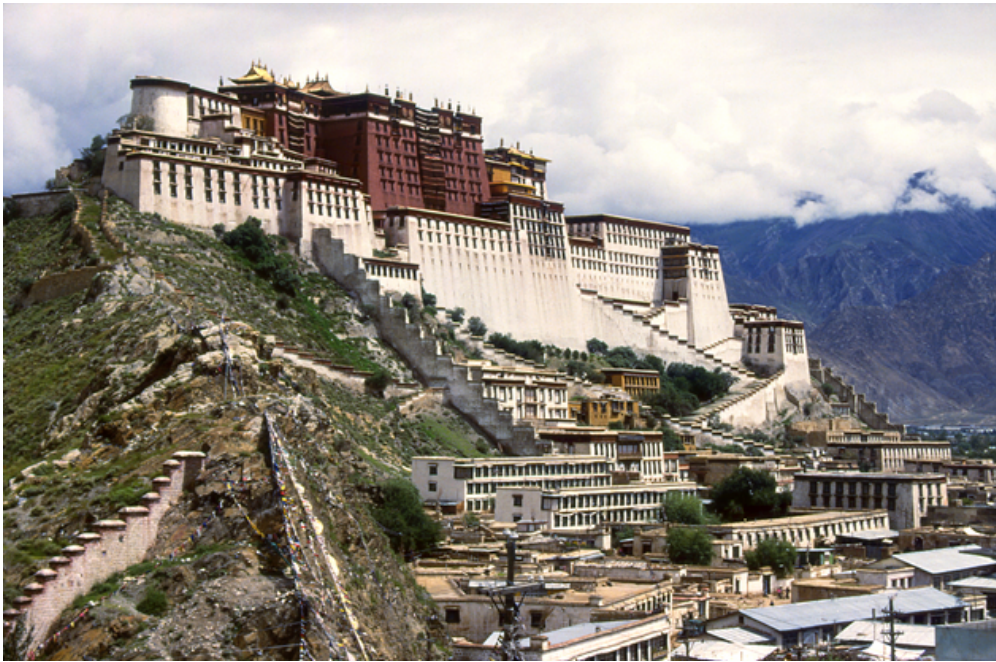
At around midday we stop for lunch. Somehow I manage to stumble out of the bus. Although it is good to stand up again, I feel quite dizzy. I do not go near the restaurant but instead eat the remainder of our biscuits. A kind English girl offers me a slice of water melon, which is very refreshing. I then eat some tinned pineapple and enjoy drinking the juice from the tin. By the time I have eaten a little and walked around in the fresh air, I feel better when we board the bus. By now we have lost a colourful passenger: a great burly but boyish Tibetan who had joined us earlier. He had grinned at everybody and had gladly accepted cigarettes that were offered to him.

It turns out that we have another three or four hours to go. Once again I doze as we drive through a region that becomes increasingly more fertile, and the sun begins to shine from a sky dotted with puffy white clouds. We stop briefly at a place where a Chinese soldier in a green uniform boards the bus, glances around and leaves: a reminder, no doubt, that the Chinese are firmly in control here.

We now approach an ugly industrial area in a wide valley. Somebody points ahead. In the distance, towering above everything, is the Potala Palace. We have finally reached Lhasa! Suddenly I become alert and start taking in my surroundings. Beside the Potala, on another hill, is a radio mast. Because of the lack of sunshine, the



golden roofs of the Potala do not shine in greeting, as they had for former travellers, which is disappointing.



*The Potala Palace, Lhasa*

We drive through the nasty Chinese suburbs, get stuck in a street that is under construction and finally swing around the huge Potala. The suburbs are dusty, filled with low buildings, trucks, buses and people on bicycles. At last we pull into the bus station. I expect a burst of applause, but there is no display of emotion as everybody is too exhausted after the long journey – and no doubt disappointed by our present surroundings. We painfully extract ourselves from the bus and retrieve our luggage.



*The old quarter, Lhasa*

We consult our guide books in order to find the best place to stay, and most of us decide to try the budget Banak Shöl Hotel, which is not run by the Chinese but by Tibetans.

We ask directions and set off on foot. I am expecting a long walk but almost immediately we find ourselves in the old quarter. Mercifully it looks as though it has been left relatively untouched by the Chinese, for the streets are muddy and the old Tibetan buildings are wonderfully run down. The area is predictably filthy but there is a friendly feel about it. Although there are a few Chinese here, most of the people are Tibetans with dark, grimy faces and colourful clothes. We pass a small temple and, at the end of the narrow street, turn left on to a main road. Here the traffic is a little heavier, but the architecture is still Tibetan. We see many Westerners and pass several restaurants with hilariously funny names and menus written in faulty English. Stalls along the street sell canned drinks, sweets and tinned fruit. The place certainly caters for tourists and, by the looks of it, is thriving on that custom.



*Restaurant sign, Lhasa*

We soon arrive at the Banak Shöl Hotel, a large but typically Tibetan building which, like every other one in town, looks rather run down. The girls at the reception area are dressed in bright Tibetan clothing, are good humoured, and speak English. We check in, pay up, and Daniel and I are brought to a twin-bedded room, which is off a balcony that overlooks a central courtyard. The hotel is full of Westerners, most of whom are washing clothes and hanging them on lines that stretch across the garden in the courtyard below. Everything seems to be delightfully informal, and the place has a friendly and carefree atmosphere. Although many of the guests look like hippies, I immediately feel at home.

We dump everything in our tiny room and relax over a cup of tea. I take a long, leisurely shower (the water is ever so slightly heated by solar energy), and wash some clothes at the taps outside. While I do this, I reflect on the fact that up to the



1940s there had been no hotels or restaurants in Lhasa; if visitors or pilgrims wanted shelter or food, they were offered hospitality by the local residents, who were happy to receive them.



*Inside the Banak Shöl Hotel, Lhasa*

Afterwards, when we feel refreshed, Daniel, the Danish couple and I set off in search of food. At first we think about eating at the Kirey Hotel restaurant, which looks very clean, but some of us change our minds and we set off again. Eventually we arrive at a place that satisfies everybody, and go inside. As I had been feeling so queasy on the bus, I decide to stick to something plain and safe: rice and vegetables. The others are more adventurous. Having realized that I am suffering from a mild dose of giardiasis, I had taken a tablet earlier as I did not want any more trouble.



*The Barkhor, Lhasa*



*The Jokhang, in the Barkhor, Lhasa*

After our meal, we wander into the old quarter and join the throngs of Tibetans circumambulating the Jokhang (the holiest of holies in Lhasa), located in the centre of the Barkhor or inner circle, in a clockwise direction. I notice a Chinese soldier deliberately walking in the opposite direction. The area is full of stalls, at which Tibetans are selling every conceivable thing. I am amazed at how much of this old centre has actually survived and am relieved to see so many pilgrims twirling prayer wheels and muttering prayers as they walk around and around. This is, as far as I can see, an encouraging remnant of the old Tibet, which seems to be alive and throbbing far more than I ever thought possible. By now it is dusk and there are few tourists about. At the main entrance of the Jokhang temple, scores of grimy Tibetans are prostrating themselves in the dirt in the direction of the doors. Among them are several young girls, which surprises me.

After this pleasant interlude, we walk back to our hotel, where I consider writing my diary, but instead tumble into bed. Soon I am in the land of dreams.