TIBET

Teacher’s Guide

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# Tibet Teacher's Guide

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Tibet

Tibet has been called “The roof of the world.” It’s also been called “the land of snows” and “a Shangrila of the spirit.” Tibet’s highways pass through some of the highest and most remote places on earth. A driver might not see a gas station for days at a time. On mountain roads, there can be a drop of more than 3000 feet.

Tibet has changed more in the last 60 years than in the previous 600. It’s a Buddhist nation whose economy is based upon the herding of sheep, yaks and goats and the growing of barley and millet. Lately, Tibet has been changing into a land of motorbikes, blue jeans and yak enchiladas.

Still, Tibet is a wonderful place. It used to occupy only the dreams of adventurers and explorers. But today, dreams of Tibet are more universal. People have always wanted to visit this remote part of the world. At the present time, more and more are getting their chance.

The country of Tibet stretches for two thousand miles along the border of India. From Tibet’s southern border, we can see four of the five highest mountains in the world, each higher than twenty-six thousand feet. Tibet’s mountain range is called “the Himalayas.” Himalaya is a Sanskrit word meaning “home of snow.” The nation’s high plateau affects global jet streams and the Indian monsoon as well. Tibet’s radio reception has been called “the greatest on earth.”

Visitors often travel to Tibet from one of two places. One is Chengdu, China, a brightly lit city of eleven million people. A second is Kathmandu, Nepal, a city full of markets, temples and tourists. The three day trip from Kathmandu to Lhasa along the Friendship Highway is a long and difficult journey.

Tibet has its share of attractions. Mount Everest in southern Tibet, at 29,000 feet, is the world’s highest mountain. Just south of Mount Everest is Zhangmu, a beautiful border town that has become a magnet for businessmen traveling between Nepal and China. Lake Nam Tso in central Tibet is an important religious site. Pilgrims travel to Lake Nam Tso from all parts of Tibet. And finally, Tibet’s capital, Lhasa: the city is a mix of old and new. Lhasa can be warm in the summertime, but the city is usually quite cool due to its high elevation.

Shigatse

Tibet’s second largest city is called Shigatse. It’s full of lively storefronts and outdoor markets. The city’s wide streets have very few cars but they have plenty of farm tractors. Shigatse has a Chinese section where things are changing rapidly. In the city’s Tibetan section, however, time almost seems to be standing still.

While Shigatse is not an unusual place, it does offer a wonderful introduction to Tibetan life—from the nomads to the pool shooting, from the monasteries hugging the clouds, to the holy pilgrims that visit these monasteries, circling endlessly in a clockwise direction. They believe that they are storing up merit for the next lifetime and beyond.
Tibet has a rural feeling about it and this is true even in a city like Shigatse. The country is, after all, still a land of herdsmen and barley farmers. People’s lives revolve around annual agricultural cycles. The distances from place to place might be enormous, but Tibetans have learned how to adjust to difficult living conditions. They have shaped their culture to be in perfect harmony with their environment.

**Lake Nam Tso**

Six hours north of Lhasa we find the holy site of Lake Nam Tso. Forty miles long and twenty miles wide, the turquoise lake attracts pilgrims from all parts of Tibet. The lake’s rock formations are unusual to say the least. All day long a large group of pilgrims circles a holy mountain in a clockwise fashion. The journey takes about two hours. The marchers pass ancient rock paintings, prayer flags and sacred sites. Pilgrims can be seen swinging prayer wheels, rubbing holy rocks and tossing thin white scarves toward the mountaintop as a blessing.

On one part of the journey, three or four pilgrims squeeze in and out of a very tight opening in the mountain. It’s believed that this is a way of detecting sins.

Hiking at such elevations is far from easy. But Tibetans have become conditioned to high altitude. Their blood carries more hemoglobin than those who live at lower altitudes. This allows more oxygen to be taken from the air.

At one end of Lake Nam Tso we find a village called Tashi Dor. Nomads set up yak-haired tents and burn yak dung fires to keep warm. Many live in groups of twenty families or more. They keep a home base for the winter, then travel the rest of the year in search of pasture. Others pursue the salt business, trading bricks of salt for barley grain. The weather in this part of Tibet can be unpredictable. Blizzards sometimes strike in the middle of summer.

As night falls, the pilgrims are still walking. Their devotion is a sight to behold. Many will probably walk all night.

**Lhasa**

Tibet’s capital, Lhasa, has an elevation of twelve thousand feet. The city is located at the same latitude as New Orleans, Louisiana and Cairo, Egypt. An exciting city, Lhasa is also a shopper’s paradise. Street vendors sell everything from fur hats to fried potatoes, from holy scarves to handcuffs.

Lhasa has two amazing temples. One, in the center of town, is called the Jokhang. Inside the temple, pilgrims spend hours visiting holy shrines. Many light butter lamps and carry flickering candles. In one part of the temple, visitors try to hear the beating wings of a great mythical bird believed to live deep within the temple’s walls. The streets outside the Jokhang are one of the most exciting areas in all of Tibet. Tibetan culture is still alive and well in Lhasa.
Only ten blocks away from the Jokhang, we find the impressive Potala. Thirteen stories high and filled with over 1000 chambers, the Potala is one of the most exceptional buildings in all of Asia. More than a quarter of a mile long, the temple has been called one of the wonders of the world.

Today, the Potala is more like a museum than a temple. Electric lights have been installed and the temple’s rooftop has been brightly painted. Admission fees are high and pilgrims are allowed to enter only on certain days. Still, Tibetans feel that the Potala is a source of divine power. They have been visiting this wonderful site for more than 300 years. It looks like they might continue for another 300.

Lhasa is surely changing. Tibetan architecture, which feels like something out of Hansel and Gretel, is widely being torn down. The expansion of modern shops, clothing stores and restaurants in Lhasa is almost endless. At the same time, Lhasa still has its originality and charm. Tibetans and their culture seem determined to survive.

Mount Everest

Mount Everest is located partly in Tibet and partly in Nepal. Tibetans call the mountain Mount Chomolungma, which means “Mother Goddess of the Earth.” Over half of the world’s population lives downstream from Tibet. The Mount Everest region is the source of many of Asia’s great rivers.

The Mount Everest Base Camp is located 17,000 feet above sea level. Home to a teahouse, a monastery and the highest post office in the world, the base camp can be difficult to adjust to due to its high elevation. Mount Everest seems to be so close that you could touch it. But the peak of the mountain is still 12 miles away.

Zhangmu

Thirteen thousand feet below the Everest Base Camp we find the pretty border town of Zhangmu. The city has only one narrow street. It’s so small that it’s almost impossible for two cars to pass each other at the same time. The town, however, is a busy one. Zhangmu’s residents often work unloading trucks filled with goods from China, Nepal and other parts of Asia. This includes women as well as men. The money used in Zhangmu ranges from Chinese yuan to rupees from Nepal. The city’s restaurants serve more Indian food than Tibetan. Chicken curry is the local favorite. Zhangmu is a beautiful town. Waking up in the morning and looking out at the mountains that border Nepal and Tibet is a pure delight.

Monasteries

Monasteries have long played an important role in Tibetan culture. Some used to be so large that they were more like small cities than religious sites and were home to as many as 10,000 monks. In years past monks were involved in government affairs and held economic power as well. At the
present time monasteries contain everything from nunneries to burial sites, from guesthouses to meditation centers. Some even have their own printing presses.

Monasteries also serve an educational purpose. In Lhasa today monks can be seen debating each other in open courtyards. The discussions sometimes last as long as two weeks. Topics range from philosophy to Buddhism, from medicine to math.

Tibet is still home to more than 2000 monasteries, many of which are being rebuilt. While their importance may have declined they remain popular with tourists and continue providing services to small towns.

**Nepal**

Just south of Tibet we find another mountainous country, Nepal. One-twelfth the size of Tibet, Nepal is more commercialized than its northern neighbor. Each year, the country’s capital, Kathmandu, attracts thousands of visitors from all parts of the world.

Kathmandu is home to many Tibetans. The Tibetan community in Nepal is one of the world’s largest. Similar communities can be found in western China, Burma, India and even New York. Tibetans living abroad are often influenced by their host country. In Kathmandu, for example, many Tibetans speak Nepali. But for the Tibetan people, national customs and ceremonies are just as important in Nepal as they are in Tibet.

This large temple is called a chorten or a stupa. It serves as a backdrop for an important ceremony honoring the Buddha. As many as fifty-thousand candles are lit by hand in only one hour.

**Conclusion**

The Tibet of the future may feel quite a bit different than the Tibet of today. Each year, more and more Han Chinese enter Tibet from western China where the economy is poor. In cities like Lhasa, we often see more Chinese than we do Tibetans. Modern train service from eastern China to Tibet is only speeding up the rate of change. Thousands of tourists, many from other parts of China, are now getting their first look at Tibet. Tourism, technology and economics will continue to put pressure on Tibet and its culture.

Tibet has captured the world’s imagination. It has attracted explorers, writers and photographers. It has made its own contributions to world culture and it highlights the importance of preserving culture itself. Tibet and its future progress will surely hold our attention. Tibetans will continue trying to preserve the qualities that have made them so unique in the first place.
Glossary

Divine - godlike

Handcuffs - locks to keep hands together

Hemoglobin - iron molecules in the blood that is used to carry oxygen

Nomads - people who move from place to place during a year usually to stay with herd animals

Nunnery - a place for religious women

Turquoise - a blue green color, or a semi-precious stone of that color

Universal - belonging to all

Yak - an oxen like animal that can live in the high altitudes of Tibet

Pedestrian - a person walking or a place for such walkers

Plantain - a kind of banana

Recreational - for use in a fun way

Species - a group of living things that is so different from others that they can not mate
Location

Tibet is an autonomous region in the southwest of China that borders Nepal, Bhutan, Burma and India. It is the size of Spain and France combined, or the size of South Africa or Colombia, or twice the size of Texas.

Map of Tibet
Source: http://www.cosmicevolution.org/tibet-map-large.gif
Capital and Major Cities of Tibet

Lhasa (capital) 590,000, Shigatse 92,000, Chamdo 86,000, Gyantse 60,000

Tibet Tour Map
Source: http://www.itourbeijing.com/china-travel/the-tibet-guide/map.jpg
Geography

Tibet lies on the Tibetan Plateau, which averages 15,000 feet above sea level. The southern rim is bounded by the Himalayan mountain range, which ranges from 19,000 to the 29,050 feet tall Qomolangma (Mt Everest), the tallest mountain in the world. The western part of the plateau is dotted with many lakes, and the inhabitants here were traditionally nomads. The precipitation lessens towards the west with as little as five inches a year in the extreme west. The eastern part of the plateau is cut by many river valleys which are mostly frost-free and able to support agriculture.

Relief Map of Tibet

Highlands are shown in brown, the rest of the plateau is in white

Many of the major rivers of Asia originate on the Tibetan plateau, where they are fed by the glaciers. These include the Yarlung (Brahmaputra), the Indus, the Ganges whose headwaters are on the Indian side of the border, the Yellow, the Yangtze, the Mekong and the Salween.
Major Rivers with Sources in the Tibetan Plateau
Source: climatesecurity.blogspot.com

The land use map below shows the increasing dryness of the land the farther west one goes. The northwest corner is barren; moving east there is scrubland, followed by grasslands and in the southeast are forests.

Land Use Map
Source: http://remotesensing.spiedigitallibrary.org/
The road network map of Tibet shows its limited extent. There are many areas of the region with no paved roads. There is a single rail line that connects Lhasa to Golmud, 700 miles to the north in Qinghai province.

Map of Road Network
Source: http://www.tibettravel.org
Climate

The Tibetan plateau lies within the temperate latitudes. The area around Lhasa may get 15-30 inches per year; farther west it may get 7-15, while the extreme west will get as little as 5 inches. The altitude of most of the plateau of over 9,000 feet makes it much colder.
People

The majority of the population lives in the valleys of the eastern plateau where there is a limited amount of arable land. It is one of the most sparsely populated regions in the world. Tibet has a youthful population of 3 million with a median age of 25. As a minority people they are not subject to the one child policy in the rest of China. Large numbers of Han Chinese have moved to Tibet to take advantage of the growing economic opportunities in trade and tourism.

The high illiteracy rate, approximately 50%, means that most Tibetans can’t integrate into the modern economy. Many people still raise livestock on the plateau. Their remote homesteads make it difficult for some students to attend school.

Map of Population Density in China

Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/china_pop_1971.jpg
**Economy**

Tibet’s traditional economy was based on subsistence agriculture. The environment is difficult, the ecology is fragile, and the distances very large. Today there is some mining and light manufacturing. Because of the aforementioned difficulties, it is believed that central government subsidies will be necessary for a long time.

The opening of the railroad in 2006 has greatly increased the numbers of tourists. In 2012, Tibet attracted over ten million visitors. This may be a sustainable path for development.

**History**

People have lived in Tibet for over twenty thousand years. During the Neolithic Age, about five thousand years ago, there was a large influx of people from northern China. Today most Tibetans trace their ancestry to these people. The region was warmer and wetter 1,500 BCE than today.

In the third century BCE, a Tibetan king arose who gained control over the many small kingdoms in the area. In the seventh century, the Tibetans established an empire that vied with the Tang Chinese for power in western China. In the seventh century Buddhism was introduced to Tibet from both India and China. By the eighth century it became the official religion. In the thirteenth century, the Mongols invaded and Tibetans accepted their rule. Tibetan Buddhism also became the court religion of the Mongols.

![Map of Tibetan Empire at its Greatest Extent](source: Wikipedia)

Traditional Tibetan life was based upon the dominance of noble clans over the many hereditary serfs. These serfs tended the fields, herded animals and served in the households of the nobles. Monks were usually drawn from the tax-paying class of landowners and the second sons of the aristocratic class.
In the eighteenth century, the Qing dynasty intervened in a period of turmoil to establish a garrison and suzerainty. This ended with the demise of the dynasty in 1911. The short-lived independent Tibet fell to the Chinese Communist armies in 1949. Many people rebelled against land reform. In 1959, the Dalai Lama later renounced his government’s agreement with the People’s Republic and fled the country to India.

A short-lived rebellion was quashed. Many monasteries which were centers of resistance were destroyed. Later, all the turmoil that the Cultural Revolution visited on China was repeated in Tibet. More monasteries were destroyed; monks and nuns were forced to leave. Resistance was met with imprisonment and death.

It is difficult to ascertain the actual situation in Tibet today. Foreign journalists are not allowed in. There is a heavy security presence in the area. The government claims that while it has made mistakes, it has improved the lives of the common people, increased educational opportunities, and introduced modern communication and transportation. The Tibetan exile community claims that the period since the Chinese occupation has been characterized by the destruction of the traditional order, the influx of Han Chinese, mismanagement of the environment and marginalization of the Tibetan people in their homeland.
Multiple Choice Questions

1. What is the capital and the largest city of Tibet?
   A. Lhasa    B. Shigatse    C. Zhangmu

2. What is the tallest mountain in the world?
   A. Qomolangma (Everest)    B. K-2    C. McKinley

3. Which river does not originate in Tibet?
   A. Ganges    B. Amur    C. Yangtze

4. Which of these countries is not a neighbor of Tibet?
   A. Thailand    B. India    C. Nepal

5. What is the major language of Tibet?
   A. Burmese    B. Nepalese    C. Tibetan

6. What is the major religion of Tibet?
   A. Buddhism    B. Islam    C. Christianity

7. Which is the largest ethnic group in Tibet?
   A. Tibetans    B. Indians    C. Neaplese

8. Tibet has a history of
   A. 1000 years    B. 2000 years    C. 3000 years
Answers to Multiple Choice Questions

1. What is the capital and the largest city of Tibet?
   B. Lhasa

2. What is the tallest mountain in the world?
   B. Qomolangma (Everest)

3. Which river does not originate in Tibet?
   B. Amur

4. Which of these countries is not a neighbor of Tibet?
   A. Thailand

5. What is the major language of Tibet?
   C. Tibetan

6. What is the major religion of Tibet?
   A. Buddhism

7. Which is the largest ethnic group in Tibet?
   A. Tibetans

8. Tibet has a history of
   B. 2000 years
True or False Questions

1. T  F  Lhasa has an elevation of 20,000 feet.
2. T  F  In the 17th century, the Tibetans established an empire that vied with the Tang Chinese for power in western China.
3. T  F  Lhasa is located at the same latitude as New Orleans, Louisiana.
4. T  F  It snows a lot over all parts of Tibet.
5. T  F  In the seventh century Buddhism was introduced to Tibet from both India and China.
6. T  F  Today most Tibetans trace their ancestry to people who came from northern China about 5000 years ago.
7. T  F  Tibet’s traditional economy was based on intensive agriculture.
8. T  F  The blood of most Tibetans carries more hemoglobin than those who live at lower altitudes.
9. T  F  There are more than 30,000,000 Tibetans living in Tibet and surrounding areas.
10. T  F  Qomolangma (Mt. Everest) is more than 29,000 feet tall.
11. T  F  The first railroad to connect Lhasa to China opened in 2006.
Answers to True or False Questions

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**Teacher Resources**

Tibet: Culture on the Edge [Hardcover] Phil Borges (Author)

Tibet: A History [Hardcover] Sam van Schaik (Author)