

THE PLACES WE'VE BEEN:

Field Reports from Travelers Under 35

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THE PLACES WE'VE BEEN BOOKS
Chicago

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LIVING ON THE EDGE OF CHANGE

CHINA

SIERRA ROSS GLADFELTER

THE RAIN, WHICH has been falling all day in the lower villages, crystallizes and coats the ground with a thick sheet of ice. Glacial mountains morph in and out of the gloom behind shagged yaks that nuzzle through the snow to graze on the remains of late autumn stubble. In the valleys below, herders' tents are pitched. A whisper of dung smoke rises on the damp air as the only evidence of their presence. As our bus descends into the valley where Taktsang Lhamo is cupped in a yoke of snow-encrusted mountains, the rest of China raises its flags in honor of the National Holiday.

This week, the Chinese pay homage to the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.), glorifying Mao and other Communist revolutionaries. It is ironic that as the rest of the nation celebrates, my boyfriend, Eben, and I are fleeing the city to find peace on the Tibetan plateau. We have heard that more than a thousand nomads still herd yaks on the plains above Taktsang Lhamo and live in tents for three seasons of the year. We imagine that if any place has escaped the thrust of China's development, it is here.

This village is not like the city where we live and teach. In Mianyang, a city swollen with more than five million people, the skyline is dominated more by cranes than by the ragged teeth of finished skyscrapers. The sound of steel being cut announces each dawn, and lakes of poured concrete harden every day across Sichuan Province. Whole cities have risen overnight, like slumbering giants standing up and stretching toward the sun. Still, this region has only recently become China's "heartland," as the government summons settlers into the country's core. For centuries it was fringe, the margin on which the Han people traditionally lived.

We are searching for this limit, as the motor of our bus strains against the incline. Our hope this week is to reach the borderland between the Sichuan and Gansu Provinces, and then descend back to our city through a circuitous string of Tibetan villages tucked into the eaves of mountains.

The towns in our guidebook are listed in both Chinese and Tibetan: Xia He, *Labrung*; Langmusi, *Taktsang Lhamo*. Here, there are almost no P.R.C. flags flying, and many residents would never identify themselves as Chinese. The people who live, and have lived here for centuries, are Tibetans. Their country, which once included the territories of Kham, Utsang, and Amdo, is now politically fractured between the borders of Nepal, Bhutan, the Tibetan Autonomous Region (T.A.R.), and other less-restricted western provinces of China.

The Tibetans in Sichuan and Gansu, though not from Tibet as the Chinese define it, are for the most part, less constrained; this is due to their incorporation into China's heartland and their lack of "rebellious" status as an autonomous region. In fact, in several temples across the region we find pictures of the Dalai Lama tucked away into quiet chambers where the Chinese soldiers will not come looking.

On the outskirts of Taktsang Lhamo, hotels have risen along with the Chinese middle class. They provide accommodation for the Chinese

tourists that have begun to roll into town during the last few years with their digital cameras and designer wilderness gear.

Alongside the rising hotels is another form of construction—or, perhaps more accurately, a rebuilding of the past. High on the hills at either end of the village are the fortress-like temples of two monasteries. Their gold and silver roofs gleam in the afternoon light, and as we walk around the grounds, the air burns with the smell of fresh paint.

Although their footprints are ancient, these monasteries, like most of China's religious structures, were razed during the Cultural Revolution. Only in the 1980s and 1990s did the people of Taktsang Lhamo summon the necessary freedom and funds to start rebuilding their most sacred temples. The hillsides are trampled with mud from constant construction, as structure by structure, ancient scenes are brought back to life.

In the vicious afternoon sun and gentle breeze, prayer flags undulate overhead as we wander up the packed, red-dirt alleys through the monastic quarters. Huge, curtains painted with the bowed heads of deer billow in the falling air. The sun is out and flashing off the snowy mountains and gilded eaves of the monastery. A monk, moved by the fact that we remove our shoes before ducking into his temple, leads us through the shrines. Before we leave, he has us pose before a vibrant fresco for a photo on his iPhone.

It is here in Taktsang Lhamo that we find the front on which the ancient and modern meet.

Tired of the crowds of tourists, we stumble across a sign—WIND HORSE TREKKING—painted on the wall of a shop stall. Three minutes after we dial the number, a Tibetan man comes to meet us on his motorcycle and escorts us back to his office to work out the details. Within an hour, we have made plans for a two-day horse trek into nomad country around Taktsang Lhamo.

The next morning, we are delivered to our horses and young guide, Tendor, whom we are told nothing about except for the fact that he does

not know a word of English. His face, despite the raw red lick of sun and cold, shows the youth of a teenager.

Once on horseback, we follow Tendor out of town, weaving upstream along the White Dragon River. He is dressed in a *chupa* (the traditional Tibetan fleece-lined robe) and a black mask that makes him look like a pirate as he rides ahead, slumped over on his steed. Later, when he grows warm and sheds his sleeves, we discover that beneath his traditional garb he is wearing a Phoenix Suns basketball jersey.

Tendor is constantly bowed forward, talking into his cell phone, which blasts back static. I imagine he is talking with his sweetheart back in the village. Occasionally, he lifts his gaze to assess our progress or to catch the attention of his dog, Japo, who limps at our side.

We stop for lunch at the neck of the valley where spring water gushes from limestone formations. This is the source of the White Dragon River. White *katak* scarves have been knotted around the stones, and tattered flags trail into the stream. There are two herders' tents pitched in a meadow, sides painted with never-ending, blue Tibetan knots. A lone man brings noodle soup and tea to us, as we draw bright yellow plastic chairs up to a little table. The cook has a solar panel hooked to a battery and a stereo, blasting Chinese rap music. We assume this is more for the two Chinese tourists who hiked up the valley this morning, than it is for us. With so many tourists to cook for, we wonder how much herding this man does.

From the herder's tent, we turn cross-country and ride through hills that roll like green waves into the distance. Our destination is a pass, high above the soggy meadows where blue trumpet flowers bloom.

In the afternoon, Tendor hangs up his phone. Even though he cannot speak English or understand much of Eben's Tibetan (Tendor speaks Amdo dialect, and Eben speaks Lhasa dialect), he makes an effort to interact with us. Tendor drops from his horse to fetch us boughs from a shrubby bush, which is covered in leathery, orange berries. He motions for us to pluck them off and pop the sour, half-fermented capsules into

our mouths. The prickly twigs cut our faces as we try to imitate Tendor, who removes the berries with his lips.

We communicate to Tendor the English word "slowly" when he attempts to comment on Eben's old horse dragging in the rear. Promptly, Tendor switches from singing his lilting herding songs in Tibetan to adapting the phrase "slowly, slowly, SLOW-LEEE!" for the tune. Later he serenades us, proud of his repertoire of English songs, which includes Justin Bieber's "Baby" and The Alphabet Song. We laugh heartily and even join in with only yaks to judge to our singing.

On the other side of the pass, the landscape opens up to wide, uplifted plains of auburn grass. Mountains rise like tables in the distance, and an alpine stream carves a deep ribbon into the black earth. The valley is swollen with animals feeding. Black bodies of bowed yaks are sprinkled across the fields into the horizon. I cannot help but think that this is what bison must have once looked like, grazing on the plains of Montana, before the American West was settled and hunted bare.

The bruised sky threatens to storm as we weave among the yaks. Some are shy and snort, startled by our horses. Others stare, perturbed by our intrusion into their mountain solitude. It starts to hail. Ice pellets bounce off our saddles and into the dense wool of the yaks' shoulders.

Lowering our heads, we cross to the first nomad camp. As we approach, large dogs roped to stakes begin barking and we skirt the margins of their claim.

Tendor's tent is last in the cluster. It is raining by the time we dismount and unsaddle the horses. Tendor motions for us to enter the flap door to his tent. I notice that the poles supporting his home are held together at their joints by the vertebrae of perished yaks.

Inside, an iron stove occupies the center of the space. At the far end, a few wooden planks have been arranged on wads of sod to create a kitchen. The bed is made from sheets of earth that have been piled up, more at one end to compensate for the incline. A padded tarp has been laid down on top. All that is missing is a sign: HOME, SWEET HOME.

We are invited to sit as Tendor scoops a shovelful of dried yak dung from a massive pile and starts a fire in the stove. He places a large teakettle on top to hold in heat. Occasionally, when the flames begin to die, he shovels more manure in with his bare hands.

The dung heap has quite a presence, consuming at least a quarter of the tent and serving not only as a readily accessible source of fuel, but also a counter upon which clothing, phones, and large bricks of yak butter wrapped in cloths are stored. I notice that Tendor's solar panel propped outside the tent is attached to a battery, and that he even has a satellite dish and small flat-screen TV.

Passing us two empty jam jars, he pours us tea when the water is ready.

Not long after we arrive, a woman kicks up the door flap and ducks into the tent. It is Tendor's young wife. She is beautiful and wears a full chupa, silver-studded belt, and chunky coral earrings. Her long black braids are bound together at the tips. She bears a bag of assorted biscuits, grapes, and a two-liter bottle of Pepsi that she has brought from town. They insist on pouring out our tea and replacing it with Pepsi. I cannot help but wonder if this is what they drink themselves or if it is a kind gesture to the assumed taste of two Americans. Perhaps this was all decided over cell phone conversations earlier in the day.

After a snack, Tendor and his wife duck out of the tent to collect and secure the yaks before dusk. The herd has already gathered where the grass is burned with urine, but each calf and cow must be tethered to a long line running between wooden pegs planted in the hillside. A few of the yak calves prove difficult to catch, and we chase them through their mothers' legs until someone can grab hold of the calves' fleecy necks and fasten their toggles to the line.

Tendor's wife cooks us dinner when we return to the tent. Replacing the teapot with a wok, she fries cabbage, scallions, and noodles, which are served over rice.

As night sets in, Eben and I try to bridge the language gap by fumbling with the few words of Chinese and Tibetan we know to ask about our

hosts and their lives. We discover that Tendor is only nineteen, and his wife is twenty—and five months pregnant. Already humbled by the intensity of their demanding lifestyle, we are moved by our hosts' youth. Only twenty-two ourselves, and still "kids" by American standards, Eben and I find ourselves struggling to fall asleep as the two of them and the two of us lay on opposite sides of the woodstove. Despite our proximity in the tiny tent, the difference between our lives and theirs cannot feel vaster.

The dogs bark all night as frost glazes their fur.

Tendor and his wife rise at 6:30 a.m. and put away the bedding. It is time for milking.

This is a job for Tendor's wife, who has fifty to sixty animals to tend to. Her method is to unclip one calf and let it run to its mother, until its suckling causes the cow's udder to descend. Then, she yanks the calf away and pegs it to the half-frozen ground a meter away. Squatting by the cow's shaggy belly, she grabs the udder—squeezing a stream of thick milk into a metal pail. As Tendor's wife works her way up the string of yaks, we watch with numb fingers and stamp our feet against the cold.

Still steaming in the bucket, Tendor's wife brings the milk inside to separate later with a hand-cranked strainer. Grabbing headphones and an iPod, which she tucks inside her chupa, she shoulders a basket that is attached to a strap around her collar. The basket is for collecting dung to dry and store for fuel, that the animals have dropped overnight. She slings manure over her shoulder with a pitchfork, and it lands each time with a heavy smack as her pregnant frame buckles briefly under the impact.

Meanwhile, her husband is up on the hillside counting sheep. He and another man are running the herd across the hillside, counting as the animals run through the bottleneck between them.

When he has finished, Tendor warms us bowls of fresh yak milk over the dung stove. He prepares bowls for *tsampa*, a Tibetan staple meal. First, Tendor brings out a wooden box divided into two chambers: one with the powdered barley flour and the other with yak butter. Using a wooden scraper we shave ribbons of the pungent fat into our bowls and then sprinkle in dried yak cheese from a bag sewn out of goat hide. The hair is still imbedded in the leather. We mix this with warm milk and knead the flour into a dense paste.

Our kneading does not meet Tendor's standard, so he takes our bowls and digs into them with dung-rimmed fingernails. In the end, he forms a potato-sized wad of dough that we bite into like an apple between slurps of yak milk. Neither Eben nor I can finish, so we are given the blue baggie that the biscuits came in, while Tendor's wife saddles the horses outside.

After saying farewell to Tendor's wife, we ride down the valley to the highway that leads into town. It is hard not to feel disappointed leaving the mountains. From the shoulder of the road trucks and buses roar by, and carloads of tourists nearly cause accidents as they hang out of their windows to take pictures of us. Two Americans and a Tibetan on horseback seem as much of an attraction as the magnificent landscape. We try to leave the road, but are blocked by fences where the pastureland has been divided among villages by the Chinese government. We return to the road. It is our only way back.

Gold-toothed Tibetan men with thick, black hair licking their ears and dense chupas belted around their hips fly by on motorcycles. Many nomads, we learn, have taken to herding their yaks on motorbike rather than horse for the same reasons we find ourselves on the road. With an expanding highway system, swelling traffic, and land fragmentation, riding a motorcycle is increasingly safer and more convenient than a horse.

Finally, we reach Taktsang Lhamo by cutting across the mountain behind the village sky burial grounds. The ridge is covered with tattered prayer flags and the shreds of souls.

At the end of our journey, we return to the monastery. The paint has not yet dried. As we walk *kora* around its base, I think of Tendor and his wife and all the things we were unable to ask them. I wonder what their hopes and dreams may be. Although they grew up in tents, following their families' herds up and down the valleys, I wonder what their own son or daughter, born this winter, will grow up to choose. Will the child continue to find sustenance in the mountain pastures, or move to a city like Mianyang where life is kinder?

Knowing that this question can be asked of millions across China, I thrust my weight into spinning the heavy, prayer wheels pressed from tin. It is hard not to feel the weight of time spinning along with our weightless prayers that drift over the Plateau.