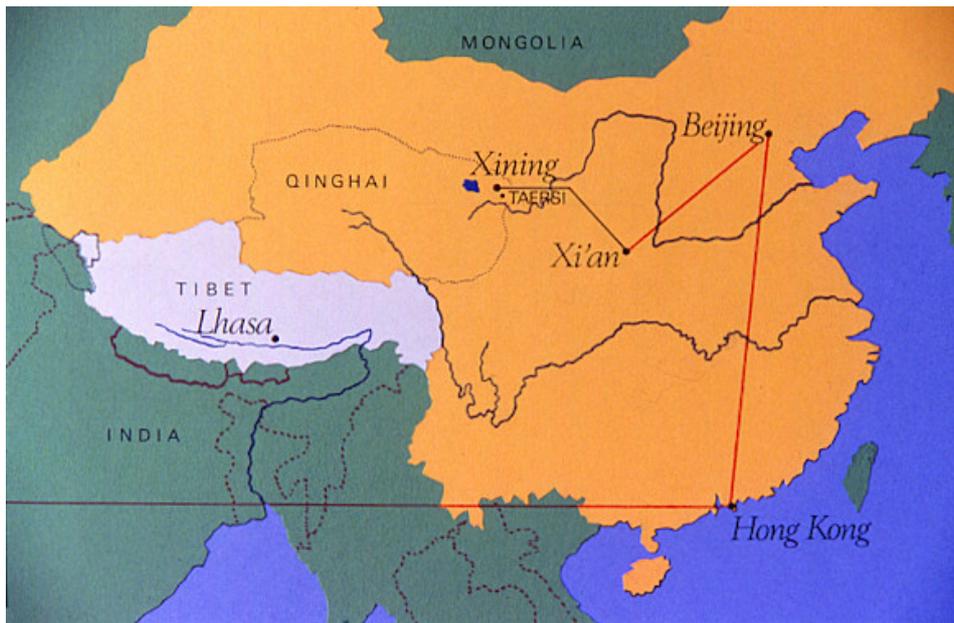


PART THREE

TIBET

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1
JOURNEY TO LHASA

For many years I had been toying with the idea of seeing Tibet – or at least, what was left of it following the Chinese invasion in 1949–50. I was fully aware of the amount of monasteries that had been destroyed and the cruelty meted out to the monks and people during the brutal years of Chairman Mao’s regime – a period when not only Tibetans but everyone in China had suffered. Although I had read Heinrich Harrer’s *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Tibet* by Thubten Jigme Norbu and Colin Turnbull, both of which painted a bleak picture of this troubled land, I was still curious to see the place for myself – especially as I had learned that it was now open to individual travellers, that some of the monasteries were being restored, and that a few monks were being allowed to use them, if only as a token showpiece for tourists. It would not be until the early 1990s when I would read Harrer’s *Return to Tibet* (in which he described his experiences and sense of disappointment during a brief visit to Lhasa in 1982), and the disturbing reports recorded by Vanya Kewley in her heart-stopping account, *Tibet: Behind the Ice Curtain* (1990). Because of my limited knowledge of what was really happening behind the scenes in the mid 1980s, the following description of my time in Tibet may appear rather naïve to many readers. However, rather than interpose anachronistic comments gleaned from literature written at a later period, I have based this account on my diary entries and the information available to me at the time so that the reader may share my sense of excitement and discovery. I have added a short postscript in order to explain what *had* been happening behind the scenes, and to bring the reader up to date.

It was my chance meeting with Veronica in Bhutan that provided the stimulation I needed to undertake a journey to Tibet. For this journey I have decided to dispense with the services of a travel agent and, instead, to find my own way there. I had studied a little of the Chinese language, had toured China in 1977, and was determined to see what the country would be like ten years later. Thus it makes perfect sense to go there in 1987, the year after I visited Bhutan. My plan is to fly from Beijing to Xi’an, travel overland to Lhasa and then, after a ten-day stay there, fly back to Beijing via Chengdu, where I will join members of the Irish Chinese Cultural Society for an ‘official’ guided tour of China.

I arrive in Beijing airport on an evening in August, and book an internal flight to Xi’an for the following day. I enquire about accommodation in Beijing and take a taxi to a hotel somewhere south of Tiananmen Square – a journey that costs me 55 yuan (about ten Irish pounds). On arrival, I discover that there are no beds available either for me or an Italian couple who have just arrived. A phone call is made and we are whisked off in another taxi to the rather seedy Jinghua hotel.

I am back in the airport the following morning. As it is too early to check in and as I am a little hungry, I decide to have a ‘snack’ (as a notice describes it) in the restaurant. For just one yuan (20 pence) I am able to enjoy a plastic carton containing boiled rice and tofu. For an extra 30 fen (less than 7 pence), I get a bowl

of soup. If this is the price of a basic meal in an airport restaurant, it is obvious that the taxi drivers are making good money out of us foreigners.

At last I board the plane and set off for Xi'an ('Western Peace'). In the past, this city had been a very cosmopolitan capital of China; at the time it had been known as Changan ('Long Peace'). During the short flight we are given presents: a fan, a wallet, then drinks and peanuts. We arrive in the extremely hot and dusty city during the afternoon, and I am invited to hitch a lift on a minibus into the city centre by the guide in charge of an Irish group of tourists. I leave them at the Western Gate and, following instructions that I had been given, catch a bus to the train station. I squeeze into the packed bone-shaker, pay a trifling sum for a ticket, and stand squashed by the door until I find a seat beside the driver. He smiles at me and compliments me on my poor Chinese. It is good enough to get by with – the problem is trying to understand what people are saying to me.

We finally reach the large and very crowded train station, parts of which are under construction. Inside, the heat and noise are overwhelming. After a good deal of searching, I eventually find the foreigners' ticket office, which I have to elbow my way into. A German couple help me retain my place in what can only be described as a scrum, and a lively Australian girl, who suddenly appears from nowhere, ticks off some Chinese men who are trying to get ahead of me. Surprised, they meekly step back. At last I reach the counter and enquire about a train to Xining; I am told that there will be one tomorrow. Acting on the Australian girl's advice, I book a 'hard' sleeper. For such a long overnight journey, the 50 yuan I have to pay is astonishingly cheap – less than my taxi journeys in Beijing. As I am obliged to pay in Foreign Exchange Certificates (FECs), it is obvious that I am being charged more than the native Chinese.

After Sally, the Australian girl, has bought a ticket for herself, we set off together. Earlier I had asked her about cheap accommodation and she had volunteered to take me to where she was staying (a hotel for Chinese people), and try to get me a bed there. She had been in China for six months already, teaching English. Although her Chinese seems to be not much better than mine, she is able to understand the language much better than I am.

We arrive at the uninspiring hotel a short while later. As I am so exhausted from carrying my heavy luggage in the heat, Sally does all the talking. She needs all her powers of persuasion to get the woman behind the desk to allow me to stay in the hotel. Declaring that the hotel is only for *Zhongguo ren* (Chinese people), the woman refuses to budge. The fact that Sally herself is not a *Zhongguo ren* does not make any impression on the woman. A man appears and directs me to another hotel, which is far away from the town centre. Sally pleads with them both, saying that I am tired, that I have only just arrived and do not know my way around, that I will only be staying for one night, that I will be going to Xining tomorrow, and that I do not want to sleep in the same room or even on the same floor as her. However, it is all to no avail. I say nothing and Sally continues to converse with the man, giving him more information about me. When finally he is convinced that I pose no threat to him or the hotel, he begins to reason with the woman, who still will not allow me to stay. Just as we are about to give up, the manager unexpectedly appears and, after a short consultation, I am handed a booking form and there are smiles all round. We then get down to the complicated business of filling in the form, which is printed in

Chinese. When I am given another form, which is also printed in English (which is strange, as the establishment purports to accommodate only *Zhongguo ren*), I finally manage to fill in all my details. I pay a small amount of money for my night's accommodation and am given a key. At this point Sally leaves for her room, mission accomplished.

Because the staff in the hotel is so concerned about the safety of my luggage, I have to extract what I need and place my bag in a special room. Any money that I do not need has to be handed over, counted carefully, and put into a safe. The counting takes a long time, as it has to be repeated again and again by a very fussy woman, much to the amusement of other members of the hotel staff.

Finally I am free to go to my room. In fact, it turns out to be a small dormitory, the door of which is carefully locked, then unlocked for me. As the girls at the desk on this floor need a ticket that I have been given, I have to retrieve it from the bag that has been locked away.

After a welcome wash in the communal shower, where other naked men stare at the *da bizi* ('big nose' as we Westerners are nicknamed), I rejoin Sally for an evening meal. We travel on a bus to the city centre, but instead of finding a restaurant, we come across some people who have gathered around a group of traditional musicians. When we appear, we become the centre of attention until Sally urges the musicians to play. As soon as they do, a bowl is pushed under our noses for money. A man begins to sing, and a blind two-stringed fiddle player joins in, singing in a falsetto voice. Another man, with his trouser legs rolled up, rises to his feet, roars out something that makes everyone laugh, sits down again, and fans himself vigorously.

We finally find somewhere to eat. We stop at a tiny shop that serves spicy dumplings in soup. We are invited inside and given stools – the locals have to make do with sitting on the pavement. After we have shared a bowl of dumplings, we amble across the road and find some fairly decent-looking food. Here we dine on bowls of rice and a dish of meat and vegetables, finish with soup, and drink a bottle of beer, which we share. Full, we return to our cheerless hotel, say goodnight and retire to our respective rooms.

With plenty of time to spare the following morning, I find my way to a local market in a narrow side street or *hutong*, where I buy something to drink and some apples for the journey ahead. In another *hutong* I peep into houses and courtyards, observing people in their homes, and look into shops and restaurants. Here and there I see babies with slits in their pants – a sensible alternative to nappies. I find quite a number of Muslims; the men are bearded and wear white cloth caps. Many of the signs for shops and businesses in this area are written in a modified form of the Arabic script. Everything looks run down, dusty and dirty. However, the buildings here, although crude, have more character than the ugly 'modern' ones on the main road. In another *hutong* nearby I find a public toilet, where I squat over a hole in the ground. After I have washed my hands, I go in search of something to eat. I finally decide on a large dumpling, made of pastry and filled with tasty vegetables, which I eat at the corner of the street. I then spy bunches of bananas for sale; I buy one and eat it on the spot. Somewhat refreshed, I foot it back to the dreadful hotel, where I collect my luggage. When I check out and return the key, the girl at the desk says

something to me in rapid Chinese. Because I cannot understand what she has said, she attempts to translate it into English by saying, 'Go away!' This I do, only to be called back again to receive the two yuan that I had had to pay on receiving the key.

Struggling once again with my heavy bag, I walk to the nearest bus stop and board a bus bound for the train station. As I arrive far too early, I find my way to a relatively quiet waiting room with soft seats, and relax. Later I get something to drink and, on the way back, meet a tearful Dutch girl who explains that her ticket has been stolen and that she does not know what to do or to whom she should speak. I bring her and her boyfriend to the foreigners' ticket office, which will open later, in the hope that somebody there may be able to help. No wonder they had been so careful about my luggage and money at the hotel!

Back in the waiting room I join a tall Canadian fellow named Daniel, also bound for Lhasa, and have a meal with him. Like me, he is travelling to Xining so that he can see the famous Kumbum Buddhist monastery, known by the Chinese as Taersi. Although we decide to stick together, we will not be in the same carriage on the train. He has opted for the more luxurious 'soft' class and has paid double the amount that I have.

While we are talking, a lady appears and asks us to follow a couple of Chinese lads out to the train. I present my ticket to a girl at the door and am given a little plastic label with 中 7 printed on it. This means that I will be sleeping in the middle bunk bed of row 7. I soon find my spot and sit down to write my diary while the dark and scruffy carriage fills up. I am joined by a large number of Chinese people who hang their face-cloths and towels on a line by the windows. Among them is an extraordinary-looking girl with a very long face and strange protruding eyes. I later discover that she is Japanese. She has been living here for one year, studying the language.

When the train finally leaves the station, the people begin to relax and talk to one another. Everyone is very curious about me, for I am the only Westerner in the carriage. All sorts of questions are fired at me, many of which I cannot understand. When in difficulty, I consult my phrase book. When I tell the people that I am from *Aierlan*, I have to draw a map to explain where Ireland is. Most of them know where *Yingguo* (England) is, but nobody has heard of *Aierlan* before. As the Japanese girl is also going to Xining, information and advice about our destination are kindly given to us. When an impromptu picnic starts, I produce my mug and request some *kai shui* (boiling water). Guessing what I probably really want, somebody fills it with tea and gives me a crumbly white biscuit. Later, a man pours some soft drink into his mug and gives it to me. At once I feel at ease among these friendly and well-meaning people, so anxious to make the Big Nose feel at home. A lady who is married to a very pleasant soldier has a darling little boy who is chatty, funny and extremely articulate for his tender years. A man, who talks to the Japanese girl and me quite a lot, has a lovely-looking daughter aged eighteen, although she looks only thirteen or fourteen.

Later I retire to my middle bunk and chat to Kato, the Japanese girl, who has the middle bunk opposite me. We talk about Japan and she tries a few words of English. It is good to have people to communicate with, for the scenery outside is rather uninspiring. Occasionally we have music and announcements from the loudspeakers, which fortunately are not too annoying.

At about seven in the evening I ask Kato where the restaurant car is. She comes with me and we sit down, joining Daniel and a French lad whom he has befriended. We order what is available: five different dishes, rice and soup. It is an excellent meal, and there is far too much food for us. We pay eleven yuan – expensive by Chinese standards, but cheap by ours (£2.20). Back in our carriage, the Chinese people study the bill and have a good laugh at it. They think we are mad to have paid so much for our meal and, as far as I can make out, poor Kato gets ticked off because of this perceived extravagance.

I then get into conversation with a Chinese fellow who speaks excellent English; his friends watch and listen, fascinated. From time to time he explains to them what we are talking about. Now that I have a willing and competent interpreter, I am able to understand questions that are put to me and answer accordingly.

After my new Chinese friend has wished me good night, I settle down to write my diary, but the lights are switched off at half past eleven. I climb up to my bunk bed and, after a little tossing and turning, fall asleep.

A comfortless, jolting and swaying train is hardly the ideal place for a good night's sleep: shortly afterwards I am wide awake and I spend the rest of the night in an uncomfortable, slumberless state. The train frequently stops in the middle of nowhere, presumably to let another go by. In the stations, which are deserted, disembodied voices thunder from loudspeakers, delivering announcements to which nobody pays any attention. At six o'clock, when it is still dark, people begin to stir in the carriage. I finally get up at eight, when it has become quite noisy; I wash and go to the restaurant car. As there is no sign of breakfast, I return and speak to Kato, who tells me that breakfast is supposed to be served from seven. She accompanies me on my return to the restaurant car. I am told to sit down; I learn that the delay has been caused by the imminent arrival of a tourist group. Daniel arrives and joins me but, as he does not have a ticket (I bought one the previous evening), he decides to leave, having been ticked off by one of the waiters. The meal is most unusual: morsels of toast coated in cheese, fried eggs, a glass of sweet, hot but watery milk, a glass of coffee and a glass of Chinese tea. The tourists, German and French, are not at all impressed.

Breakfast over, I return to the carriage and take some photographs of the mountainous scenery through the window. It is quite pleasant here: fields of wheat harvested by brightly-dressed locals, shady groves of poplars, and brown mud-brick dwellings that look vaguely Tibetan. The Chinese people in the carriage show great interest in my photographic gear and ask me how much it has cost. I manage to work out an approximate figure in yuan.

At last the train comes to a stop just before noon in Xining, a large dusty industrial town known by the Tibetans as Ziling. When I meet up with Daniel, we are approached by a Chinese lad who speaks good English and offers to buy us train tickets to Golmud and arrange transport to Lhasa by bus, all at normal Chinese prices (as against double the normal for foreigners). At first we think that this is too good to be true, but when he produces a name card advertising himself as a tourist official, we decide to avail of his services. The train ticket, he explains, will cost 25 yuan compared to the foreigners' 50 yuan FEC, but he will make a little money for himself by asking us to pay in FEC rather than the ordinary currency, the *ren min bi* (RMB).

He promises to buy the bus ticket shortly. He now directs us to a small restaurant, where he asks us to wait while he goes off to buy our train tickets. He tells us that we can leave unnecessary luggage in the station, for we have decided to go to Kumbum monastery today, stay overnight there and return tomorrow evening in readiness for our journey the following day.

As the purchasing of the train tickets takes a lot longer than expected, we decide to eat in the restaurant as the food is both excellent and cheap. Our Chinese friend appears briefly during the afternoon to apologize for the long delay and to say that he is having great difficulty in procuring tickets. Before I have time to say anything, he disappears. We while away the time sitting outside in order to escape the loud pop music being played in the restaurant. About half an hour later, our friend appears again and offers more apologies. He suggests that we set off now for Kumbum monastery; he will get us tickets in the meantime and have them for us by early evening on the following day.

Shouldering our heavy luggage, Daniel, the Chinese fellow and I catch a local bus to the central bus station. Our friend buys the tickets and wishes us goodbye for the present, and we scramble aboard a bus full of dark-skinned Tibetans dressed in blue cotton 'Mao' suits and caps. Some of them are quite old and weatherbeaten.

Off we go bumping along the chaotic roads of Xining. It is a ghastly place: the city is large, filthy and architecturally depressing. However, we soon leave and find ourselves passing fields, trees and mountains. The bus is hot and I begin to doze, despite the warning that we have been given: don't fall asleep as the locals will steal your money and possessions. This turns out to be a typical manifestation of many Chinese people's distrust of minority ethnic people such as Tibetans.

The journey takes a little over an hour. During the time the bus has been driving uphill, which means that we are gaining altitude – an excellent preparation for our time in Tibet. We pass a lake with pavilions and pleasure boats and finally arrive in the main square of a dull, dusty town named Huangzhong. We start the walk towards Kumbum monastery along a main street lined with souvenir shops and stalls. I curse the Chinese for building such a ghastly place on the doorstep of such an important monastery. As we walk, we are joined by a Chinese fellow who speaks to us in English as best as he can. Every sentence he utters is in the past tense.

The approach to the monastery is most unimpressive and it appears to be very small at first sight. I am disappointed to discover this, as it I know that it once had three thousand buildings and housed some four thousand monks. However, we have at last arrived at this most important gompa, founded in 1583 to mark the birthplace of Tsong Khapa, the great reformer of Tibetan Buddhism and founder of the Gelugpa sect. As the complex is in the historical region of Amdo (then part of Tibet, now Qinghai province), I regard this as being in Tibet and therefore the first stop on our Tibetan adventure.