TIBET

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Tibet At a Glance

ORDERED ON THREE SIDES by some of the world’s highest mountain ranges – the Himalayas, the Karakoram, and the Kulun – Tibet has remained in relative isolation. Sheltered first by its inaccessibility and then, in the age of air travel, by Chinese occupation, the “Roof of the World” has only recently opened to foreign visitors. Its one major city, Lhasa, retains its spiritual core: the Jokhang; the venerable palace of the Dalai Lamas, the Potala; and great monasteries such as Drepung and Sera. Wherever you go, Tibet offers panoramic vistas of high-altitude desert fringed by peaks, but the turquoise depths of Lake Namtso and the sky-scraping peaks of Mount Everest are particularly worth visiting.

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< The snow-blown majesty of Mount Everest, known as Chomolungma to the Tibetans
INTRODUCING TIBET

The Potala Palace seen from the rooftop of the Jokhang, Lhasa’s holiest temple

GETTING THERE

Lhasa is well served by air with visitors arriving from Chengdu, Sichuan, or Kathmandu, Nepal. An overland route also connects Kathmandu and Lhasa, but visitors must be part of a tour group. The other bus route is from Golmud, Qinghai, where the China International Travel Service (CITS) will arrange the journey. Whatever the means of entry, a permit from the Tibetan Tourism Bureau (TTB) – (0086) 0891 633 1174 – is required. Once in Tibet, travel may be limited, as permits are required for most areas. The best option is to arrange a tour with an agency in Lhasa, who will also handle permits.

SEE ALSO

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Since the introduction of Buddhism in the 7th century, the religion has permeated all aspects of Tibetan life, with monasteries acting as palaces, administrative centers, and schools. Ruled by priests, Tibet was feudal in outlook and resisted all modernization. The country thus entered the modern world without an army, lay education, or roads, and with few technologies more sophisticated than the prayer wheel.

Buddhism was introduced in Tibet by Songsten Gampo (AD 608–50). A remarkable ruler who also unified the country, Songsten Gampo, was converted to Buddhism by his Chinese and Nepalese wives. The next religious king, Trisong Detsen (742–803) consolidated the Buddhist faith, inviting the Indian teacher Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) to Tibet and founding Samye Monastery. A revival of the native Bon religion in the 8th century led to Buddhist persecution, and though the religion re-emerged later, the kingdom disintegrated into several principalities.

In the 13th century, Tibet submitted to the all-conquering Mongols, and in 1247 the head lama of Sakya Monastery visited their court and was appointed Tibet’s ruler. Subsequently, Tsongkapa (1357–1419) established the Gelugpa or Yellow Hat sect. His disciples became the Dalai Lamas, rulers of Tibet for 500 years. Each new Dalai Lama is seen as a reincarnation of the previous one.
In 1950, the Chinese took advantage of a tenuous claim to the territory and invaded, calling it “liberation.” In the uprising that followed in 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama (b.1935) fled to India, where he still heads the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. By 1970 more than a million Tibetans had died either directly at the hands of the Chinese or through famine caused by incompetent agricultural policies. Tibet’s cultural heritage was razed, and over 6,000 monasteries destroyed.

Conditions have improved today, and there are signs of religious revival. Many monasteries that were ravaged during the Cultural Revolution are now being repaired and returned to their former roles, but creating or owning an image of the Dalai Lama is still illegal.

The ancient city of Lhasa is the heart of Tibet, though Han Chinese immigrants now outnumber ethnic Tibetans. However, the old quarter, home of the Potala Palace and the Jokhang Temple, illustrates the determination with which Tibetans have held onto their cultural traditions. A common sight here are the pious and cheerful pilgrims, swinging prayer wheels and performing energetic prostrations as they make kora – holy circuits – around the temple.

Most of Tibet is desert and the average altitude is over 13,000 ft (4,000 m) with temperatures well below freezing in winter. Many customs arose as response to life in this harsh environment. Sky burials, for example, in which the dead are left in the open for vultures, are practical in a land where firewood is scarce and the earth too hard to dig. Polyandry (the practice of having more than one husband at a time) and celibacy of the clergy were necessary forms of population control.

Farming this largely barren land is difficult and the only crop that grows easily is barley. Moreover, almost a quarter of the people are nomads, keeping herds of dzo (a cross between a yak and a cow) and living in tents. Their livestock provide products vital for everyday Tibetan life – yak butter is used in the ubiquitous bitter butter tea and burnt in smoky chapel lamps.

Tibet’s roads are few, and journeys are always time consuming. The busiest route is the Friendship Highway between Lhasa and the Nepalese border, which passes through Shigatse, Gyantse, and the dramatic Sakya Monastery. It is a long, bumpy but rewarding diversion from here to the Everest base camp, which offers great views of the forbidding peak. Lhasa, too, can be a good base for exploring some of the other isolated destinations. The monasteries of Drepung, Sera, Ganden, and Tsurphu are easily accessible, while Lake Namtso and Samye are farther away.

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Tibetan Buddhism

The Mahayana school of Buddhism, which emphasizes compassion and self-sacrifice, came to Tibet from India in the 7th century. As it spread it took on many aspects of the native, shamanistic Bon religion, incorporating Bon rituals and deities. Like most Buddhists, Tibetans believe in re-incarnation – consecutive lives that are better or worse depending on the karma, or merit, accrued in the previous life. For many Tibetans, Buddhism suffuses daily life so completely that the concept of a religion separate from day to day occurrences, is completely foreign – there is no word for religion in Tibetan.

Monks and Monasteries
At the height of monastic power there were some 2,700 monasteries in Tibet, and numerous Buddhist sects. Most families sent a son to become a monk and live a life of celibacy and meditation.

Bon – Tibet’s Pre-Buddhist Faith

Bon, an animistic faith with emphasis on magic and spirits and the taming of demons, was Tibet’s native religious tradition before the arrival of Buddhism. Many Tibetan legends concern the taming of local gods and their conversion to the new faith. Much of today’s Buddhist iconography, rituals, and symbols, including prayer flags and sky burials – where the deceased is chopped to pieces and left on mountainside for vultures – are Bon in origin. The ancient faith has been revived by a handful of Bon monasteries in Tibet.

Wheel of Life
The continuous cycle of existence and re-birth is represented by the Wheel of Life, clutched in the jaws of the Lord of Death, Yama. Achieving enlightenment is the only way to transcend the incessant turning of the wheel.
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THE TIBETAN PANTHEON

An overwhelming plethora of deities, buddhas, and demons, many of which help with the accrual of merit. Koros, which are always followed clockwise, can be short circuits of holy sites or fully-fledged pilgrimages. The most auspicious koros is around Mount Kailash, considered the center of the universe; nirvana is guaranteed on the 108th circuit.

PRAYER AND RITUAL

Worship in Tibet is replete with ritual objects and customs, many of which help with the accrual of merit. Koros, which are always followed clockwise, can be short circuits of holy sites or fully-fledged pilgrimages. The most auspicious koros is around Mount Kailash, considered the center of the universe; nirvana is guaranteed on the 108th circuit.

The outer ring illustrates the 12 factors that determine karma, including spiritual awareness (a blind man with a stick) and acts of volition (a potter molding pots).

The inner wheel depicts the six realms into which beings can be reborn—gods, demigods, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons.

The ritual drum was made from the upper part of two skulls, has extra potency as a tool of prayer, because it is fashioned from human remains.

Spinning a prayer wheel clockwise sends a prayer written on coiled paper to heaven. The largest wheels contain thousands of prayers and are turned by crank or water power.

A worshipper spins a hand-held prayer wheel, rings a Tibetan bell called a drilbu and holds offerings of banknotes, all in aid of prayer.

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Mani stones are carved with the Sanskrit mantra “om mani padme hum” (hail to the jewel in the lotus), a powerful Buddhist chant.

BUDDHIST DEITIES

Jowo Sakyamuni: the present Buddha
Jampa (the Maitreya): the future Buddha
Dipamkara (Marmedze): the past Buddha
Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava): earthly manifestation of Buddha who spread Buddhism throughout Tibet
Chenresig (Avalokitesvara): multi-armed bodhisattva of compassion
Drolma (Tara): female aspect of compassion

The Tibetan Pantheon

An overwhelming plethora of deities, buddhas, and demons, many of them re-incarnations or evil aspects of each other, make up the Tibetan pantheon. Buddhhas, “awakened ones,” have achieved enlightenment and reached nirvana. Bodhisattvas have postponed the pursuit of nirvana to help others achieve enlightenment.

Dharmapalas, defenders of the law, fight against the enemies of Buddhism. Originally demons, they were tamed by Guru Rinpoche, who bound them to the faith. Mahakala, one of the most common dharmapalas, is a wrathful manifestation of Chenresig.

Jampalyang (Manjusri) represents knowledge and learning. He raises a sword of discriminating wisdom in his right hand.

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Nomadic life

THE CHANG TANG, a high plateau covering almost 70 percent of Tibet, is home to about a quarter of Tibetans, many of whom are nomads, or drokba, as the harsh, and climate precludes farming. Their existence has barely been touched by modern life, and they still herd sheep, goats, and dzos (a cross between a yak and a domesticated cow), as they have for centuries. The animals are adapted to high altitude, having larger lungs and more hemoglobin than lowland animals. The nomad’s culture is also adapted to the harsh, arid climate.

These men enjoy cups of salted tea made with yak butter, a popular drink throughout Tibet. The salt combats dehydration and the fat gives much-needed energy. They wear knee-length pokhals, with a black strip at the edge, the traditional dress for male nomads.

Traditionally, nomads wear belted robes made out of goatskin called pokhals that double as blankets at night. The fleece is worn on the inside, while the sturdy hide is exposed to wind and snow. The sleeves are extra long to keep hands warm. Women braid their hair and wear their wealth as jewelry. Coral, in particular, is highly valued.

Each household has a bone tent, four-sided and made out of the coarse hairs found on a yak’s belly. Often, the tent is pitched in a pit and surrounded by stone windbreaks. Another cloth tent may be used for traveling.

Dried yoghurt is thought to protect the skin from the sun, but men don’t use it at all; women smear it on with a tuft of wool as a cosmetic.

THE HERD

Nomads rely totally on their herds for food, clothing, shelter, and sometimes income, so no part of any animal goes to waste. Goats, for example, provide milk for yoghurt, skins for clothing, wool for trading, and dung for fuel.
The wool of the yaks, sheep, and goats in the nomad’s herd is woven using a loom, creating robust textiles for tent walls, blankets, and clothing. The incomes of many nomads have been augmented recently by the popularity of cashmere wool, the soft down on a goat’s underbelly.

A woman spreads yak dung over a windbreak wall. Once it has dried, she will scrape the dung off the wall and use it to fuel fires for cooking. Such tasks are strictly demarcated by gender; women do all the milking, churning, cooking, weaving, and fuel gathering, and so work harder than the men for most of the year.

A nomad pours yak butter from a churn for adding to strong, salty tea. The nomadic diet is basic; the staple is tsampa, roasted barley flour, which, often eaten dry and on its own, provides about half of a nomad’s calories. Goat’s milk yoghurt, radishes, and occasional meat stews supplement the diet.

Moving the Herds
Nomads on the Chang Tang do not move continuously, nor do they move far – only around 10 to 40 miles (15 to 65 km), as the growing season is the same all over the plateau. Indeed, they try to minimize travel, declaring that it weakens livestock. Some families even build a house at their main encampment. In the fall, after the herds have eaten most of the vegetation at the main encampment and the growing season has ended, the nomads move their livestock to a secondary plain for grazing. Here livestock must forage for eight to nine months on dead vegetation. Later the nomads may move some of their herds farther up the hills. They then return to their original encampment.

A herder driving his yaks over a snowy mountain pass.
The fertile valley created by the Yarlung Tsangpo river is bordered by the Himalayas along Tibet's southern boundary. A mere 14 million years old, the Himalayas are the youngest mountains on earth, and also the highest, with over 70 peaks reaching elevations of 23,000 ft (7,000 m), including Mount Everest, the world's highest at 29,029 ft (8,848 m). The spectacle of these snow-clad peaks is perhaps what led to Tibet being called the “Land of Snows.” In reality, at an average altitude of over 13,000 ft (4,000 m), the thin air intensifies the sunshine making acclimatization and sun screen essential.

Tibet's eastern reaches are riddled with gorges carved out by the three of China's rivers – the mighty Yangzi, the Salween, and the Mekong. The wide, open spaces of northern Tibet are home to nomads who live a hardy pastoral existence. These wilderness areas are slowly shrinking as a result of the encroaching industrial world.

However, despite rapid development and more than 50 years of Chinese occupation, Tibet still clings strongly to its cultural heritage, most visible in the revitalized monasteries. Tourism too, is a growing industry as more areas are opening up, allowing visitors tantalizing glimpses of a once-forbidden world.
Tibet’s capital since the 7th century, Lhasa is an intoxicating introduction to Tibet. The Dalai Lamas’ splendid but poignantly empty seat, the Potala Palace, dominates the city from its site on top of Marpo Hill. The old Tibetan quarter to the east is Lhasa’s most interesting area; its centerpiece is the revered Jokhang Temple. Around it is the Barkhor, which retains its medieval character with smoky temples and cobbled alleys. Most Tibetans come here as pilgrims. The additions of concrete buildings and internet cafés show how the city has changed over recent decades.

**Lhasa**

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**Statue, Tsepak Lhakhang**

Strikingly-colored mural at the Lukhang Temple

**Potala Palace**

See pp534–5.

**Lukhang**

Ching Drol Chi Ling Park. Picturesquely located on an island in the lake behind the Potala, and cloaked by willows in summer, this temple is dedicated to the king of the water spirits (lu), who is depicted riding an elephant at the back of the main hall. The upper floors are decorated with striking 18th-century murals, representing the Buddhist Path to Enlightenment. Their great attention to detail and vivid stories offered visual guidance to the Dalai Lamas (see p520), who retired here for periods of spiritual retreat.

Buddhist myths dominate the walls on the second floor, while the top-floor murals depict the esoteric yogic practises of the Indian tantric masters. They also illustrate episodes in the life of Pema Lingpa, ancestor of the 6th Dalai Lama who is credited with the Lukhang’s original design in the 17th century.

**Ramoche**

9am–5pm daily. & 6 fee.

The three-story Ramoche, just north of the Barkhor area (see pp530–31), is the sister temple to the Jokhang. It was built in the 7th century by Songtsen Gampo (see p520) to house the statue of Jowo Sakyamuni (Tibet’s most venerated Buddha image), brought by his Chinese wife Wencheng. According to legend, the threat of Chinese invasion after the king’s death compelled his family to hide the statue inside the Jokhang.

It was replaced by a bronze statue of an eight-year-old Sakyamuni (see pp30–31), part of the dowry of another of his wives, the Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti.

The reconstructed temple features some huge prayer wheels, and is not as busy as the Jokhang. Next door is the Tsepak Lhakhang, a chapel with an image of Jampa, the Tibetan name for the Future Buddha (see p523).
The Summer Palace of the Dalai Lamas in the Norbulingka

**LHASA CITY CENTER**

**Ani Tsankhung Nunnery**
- Daily.
- Situated in the old Tibetan quarter, the Ani Tsankhung Monastery is difficult to find. Wandering through the busy back alleys south of the Barkhor area in search of the place, can, however, be a wonderful experience. It is located in a yellow building on the street running parallel and north of Chingdol Dong Lu. The nunnery’s main hall contains a beautiful image of Chenresig, the multi-armed Bodhisattva of Compassion (see p523), and behind it lies a meditation chamber used by Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century. An air of quiet serenity pervades this quaint place, with its flower bushes and spotless compound. The nunnery’s main attraction is the warm welcome the curious nuns give to visitors.

**Jokhang Temple**
- See pp532–3.

**Tibet Museum**
- 10am–5pm daily.
- This impressive building presents a rather one-sided version of Tibetan history. If the propaganda is ignored, however, the over 30,000 relics are worth a visit. There are plenty of religious artifacts, but the most interesting displays are of rare Tibetan musical instruments, medical tools, and even a coracle.

**Norbulingka**
- 9:30am–6pm daily.
- Today a pleasantly scrubby park, the Norbulingka (Jewel Park) was once the summer palace of the Dalai Lamas.

**Visitors’ Checklist**

- 2,700,000.
- Lhasa Airport at Gongkhar, 58 miles (93 km) SE of Lhasa, then bus.
- Main Bus Station, CAAC, Minibus Station.
- 4WD vehicle.
- Losar (1st lunar month).

Founded by the 7th Dalai Lama in 1755 and expanded by his successors, the park contains several palaces, chapels, and buildings. The path west from the entrance leads to the oldest palace, the **Kelsang Potrang**, used by the 8th to the 13th Dalai Lamas. Its main hall has a wealth of *thangkas* (see p536) and a throne. More diverting is the **Summer Palace**, just north of here, which was built for the present Dalai Lama in 1954. Its audience chamber holds bright murals depicting events from Tibetan history, from the tilling of the first field to the building of the great monasteries, including the Norbulingka. Next to it are the Dalai Lama’s meditation room and bedroom, preserved exactly as he left them in 1959, when he escaped from this palace disguised as a Tibetan soldier and began his journey to India. The Assembly Hall where he held state has a golden throne and colorful murals depicting scenes from the Dalai Lama’s court, and episodes from the lives of Sakya Thukpa (Sakyamuni, the Historical Buddha) and Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelugpa order of monks (see p520).
Lhasa’s liveliest neighborhood, the fascinating Barkhor bustles with pilgrims, locals, and tourists eager to visit the Jokhang (see pp532–3) – by dusk the crowds are enormous. The pilgrimage circuit or kora that runs clockwise around the Jokhang is Tibet’s holiest and has been since the 7th century; market stalls have always lined the route to serve the pilgrims staying in the area. Many of the buildings in the Barkhor are ancient, some dating back to the 8th century. Despite the efforts of conservationists, some important buildings have been demolished and replaced with less attractive traditional architecture. Still, the Barkhor’s cobbled alleyways maintain a unique, archaic character.

★ Jokhang Temple
The magnificent Jokhang, Tibet’s most important religious structure, sits at the heart of the Bharkor, and is the structure around which the rest of Lhasa developed.

Prayer flags
Two poles laden with flags stand outside the Jokhang. Vertical flag poles originated in the Amdo region, and represent battle flags that have become signs of peace.

Butter stall
A stall-holder sells yak butter for burning in the Jokhang. Widely available, it gives the area its distinctive smell.

Incense burner
Juniper bushes are burnt in the four stone incense burners, or sangkang, which mark the route of the kora.
The Jamkhang is a 15th-century building housing a two-story image of the Maitreya.

The Nangmano, complex is home to 22 families.

Tromzikhang
This 18th-century building once housed government officials such as the Ambans, representatives of the Qing emperor. Now a housing complex, all but the front was destroyed in the 1980s.

Meru Nyingba
Originally founded in the 9th century, this monastery was enlarged in the 1800s to become the Lhasa residence of the Nechung Oracle (see p.536). Beautifully restored in 1999, the building includes a wing of public housing.

An ancient shrine dedicated to Palden Lhamo, the female protector of Lhasa, is surrounded by modern buildings.

Labrang Nyingba was once home to the 5th Dalai Lama and Tsongkapa at different times.

Stalls along the kora
Stalls selling all manner of intriguing bric-à-brac, from cowboy hats to prayer flags, line the entire pilgrimage route. The shops behind the stalls have better quality goods, including religious statuary, and carpets.
THE CONSTANT BUSTLE, gaudy paraphernalia of worship, flickering butter lamps, and wreaths of heady incense make the Jokhang Temple one of Tibet’s most memorable experiences. The Jokhang was founded in AD 639 to house an image of the Buddha brought as dowry by the Nepali Princess Bhrikuti on her marriage to King Songtsen Gampo. Its location was chosen by another wife of the king, the Chinese consort Princess Wencheng. She declared that a giant female demon slumbered beneath the site and a temple must be built over her heart to subdue her. After the king’s death, Wencheng’s own dowry image of Jowo Sakyamuni was moved from the Ramoche (see p528) to the Jokhang, where it was thought to be safer from invading forces.

Jokhang Temple

Courtyard
This open courtyard, or dukhang, is the focus for ceremonies during festivals. The long altar holding hundreds of butter lamps marks the entrance to the interior.

Just inside the entrance are the four Guardian Kings, the Chokyong, one for each cardinal direction.

This stele is inscribed with the terms of the Sino-Tibetan treaty of AD 822, guaranteeing mutual respect for the borders of the two nations.

STAR SIGHTS
- Chapel of Chenresig
- Chapel of Jowo Sakyamuni
- Inner Sanctum

Roof ornament
The spokes of the wheel of law represent the eight paths to enlightenment.

Prostrating pilgrim
The Jokhang is Tibet’s most venerated site. Pilgrims bow and pray on the flagstones just outside the temple doors.
The chapel of Tsongkapa has an impressive and accurate image of the founder of the Gelugpa order.

The chapel of Songtsen Gampo, where the king is flanked by Wencheng on the right and Bhrikuti on the left.

Prayer Wheels
Pilgrims spin the wheels on a route that surrounds the inner chapel called the Nangkor, one of the three sacred circuits of Lhasa.

Visitors’ Checklist
The Barkhor, Lhasa. 9am–6pm daily. Visit from left to right clockwise. Inner Chapels 8am–noon. Monlam, during the first lunar month.

Chapel of Chenresig
A large statue of Chenresig, the Bodhisattva of compassion, dominates this room. The doors and frames, crafted by Nepalis in the 7th century, are among the few remains of the original temple.

Chapel of Jowo Sakyamuni
Pilgrims crowd around this impassive statue of the 12-year-old Sakyamuni to make offerings and pray. Part of Princess Wencheng’s dowry, it is the most revered image in Tibet.

Chapel of Jampa
Enshrined here is a copy of the one brought to Tibet by Princess Bhrikuti.

Inner Sanctum
This houses some of the Jokhang’s most important statues, including images of Guru Rinpoche, the Jampa and a thousand-armed Chenresig. The chapels lining the walls are visited clockwise, and there’s a line for the holiest, with monks at hand to enforce crowd discipline.
The Potala Palace

BUILT ON LHASA’s highest point, Marpo Hill, the Potala Palace is the greatest monumental structure in Tibet. Thirteen stories high, with over a thousand rooms, it was once the residence of Tibet’s chief monk and leader, the Dalai Lama, and therefore the center for both spiritual and temporal power. These days, after the present Dalai Lama’s escape to India in 1959, it is a vast museum, serving as a reminder of Tibet’s rich and devoutly religious culture, although major political events and religious ceremonies are still held here. The first palace was built by Songtsen Gampo in 631, and this was merged into the larger building that stands today. There are two main sections – the White Palace, built in 1645, and the Red Palace, completed in 1693.

The Chapel of the 5th Dalai Lama contains a stupa gilded with around 6,600 lb (3,000 kg) of gold.

Golden Roofs
Seeming to float above the palace, the gilded roofs (actually copper) cover funerary chapels dedicated to previous Dalai Lamas.

The Chapel of the 13th Dalai Lama
Decorated with gold and jewels, the stupa of the 13th Dalai Lama, containing his mummified remains, is nearly 13 m (43 ft) high.

3D Mandala
This intricate mandala of a palace, covered in precious metals and jewels, embodies aspects of the path to enlightenment.
View from the Roof of the Red Palace
On a clear day the view over the valley and on to the mountains beyond is unequaled, although the newer parts of Lhasa are less impressive.

White Palace
The entrance to the main building has a triple stairway – the middle set of stairs is for the sole use of the Dalai Lama.

The Western Hall
Located on the first floor of the Red Palace, the largest hall inside the Potala contains the holy throne of the 6th Dalai Lama.

Defensive Eastern Bastion

School of Religious Officials

Heavenly King Murals
The East Entrance has sumptuous images of the Four Heavenly Kings, Buddhist guardian figures.

Maitreya Chapel

East Sunshine Apartment

The Eastern Courtyard

View from the Roof of the Red Palace
Exploring Around Lhasa

Lhasa’s environs are dotted with the major monasteries of Drepung, Nechung, Sera, and Ganden. Easily accessible from Lhasa by bus, minibus, or hired vehicle, these are ideal for day-trips, especially for those unable to venture farther afield in Tibet. Agencies in Lhasa hire out landcruisers along with a driver and guide, and also handle the necessary permits. Vehicles can take up to five people — if looking for companions to share the cost, check the bulletin boards in backpacker hotels.

Drepung Monastery

5 miles (8 km) W of Lhasa.

8am–4pm daily (chapels close between noon–3pm).

Drepung meaning “rice heap,” was founded in 1416 by Jamyang Choje, a disciple of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa or Yellow Hat order of monks (see p520). In its heyday in the 17th-century, it was Tibet’s richest monastery, with four colleges and 10,000 monks; today there are fewer than a thousand.

The site is vast and the easiest way to get around is to follow the pilgrims, who circle the complex clockwise. From the entrance, turn left to the Ganden Palace, built in 1530 as a residence by the 2nd Dalai Lama. His rather plain apartments are upstairs on the seventh floor. The courtyard is usually busy with woodcarvers and block-printers creating prayer prints at great speed. Next is the Tsogchen or Main Assembly Hall. At the hall’s entrance, stairs lead to the upper floor from where it is possible to see the massive head and shoulders of the Maitreya Buddha, the future Buddha or Jampa, rising up three stories. Pilgrims prostrate before it and drink from a holy conch shell. The Tara Chapel next door contains wooden racks of scriptures and a statue of Pranjnaramita, the Mother of Buddhas and an aspect of the goddess Tara; the amulet on her lap contains a tooth said to belong to Tsongkhapa.

Behind the Tsogchen, the little Manjusri Temple has a relief image of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Jampalyang, chiseled out of rock. The circuit continues north to the Ngagpa College, then to various colleges toward the southeast. Each building contains fine sculptures, though some might prefer to skip them and rest in the courtyard outside the Tsogchen. Those who are acclimatized can walk round the Drepung kora or pilgrim circuit, which passes rock paintings and the cave dwellings of nuns, and offers great views.

Nechung Monastery

4 miles (7 km) W of Lhasa.

8am–4pm daily (chapels close between noon–3pm).

A fifteen-minute walk southeast from Drepung, Nechung Monastery was the seat of the Tibetan Oracle. The Oracle not only predicted the future, but also protected the Buddha’s teachings and his followers. During consultations with the Dalai Lama, the Oracle, dressed in an elaborate and weighty costume,...
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Monks engaged in group debates at Sera Monastery

would go into a trance before making his pronouncements, concluding the session in a dead faint. Tibet’s last Oracle fled to India in 1959, and now the monastery has only a few caretaker monks. Nechung’s décor is startling as the courtyard outside is filled with gory paintings and demon torturers. Within the chapels, leering sculptures of skulls loom out of the gloom. The airy Audience Chamber on the second floor is a welcome respite. Here, the Dalai Lama used to consult the Oracle. The roof-level chapel is dedicated to Padmasambhava, the Tantric Buddha, also known as Guru Rinpoche.

Sera Monastery

2 miles (4 km) N of Lhasa. 3–5pm daily. Founded in 1419 by disciples of the Gelugpa order, Sera Monastery was famous for its warrior monks, the Dob-Doa. Once home to 5,000 monks, today there are less than one-tenth that number, although the energetic renovation suggests that this may improve.

Activity centers around its three colleges, visited in a clockwise circuit. Turn left from the main path to reach the first college, Sera Me, that was used for instruction in Buddhist basics. Sera Ngag-Pa, a little farther up the hill, was for tantric studies and Sera Je, next to it, was for teaching visiting monks. Each building has a dimly lit main hall and chapels toward the back that are full of sculptures. The largest and most striking building in the complex is the Tsogchen located farthest up the hill. It features wall-length thangkas, a throne that was used by the 13th Dalai Lama, and images of him and of Sakya Yeshe, the founder of Sera monastery. At the top of the path stands the open-air debating courtyard, well worth a visit at 3:30pm every day, when the monks assemble for debates. Their ritualized gestures – clapping hands and stamping when a point is made – make it fascinating to watch. The Sera kora, or pilgrim circuit which heads west from the main entrance, takes about an hour to complete and passes some beautiful rock reliefs.

Ganden Monastery

28 miles (45 km) E of Lhasa. Shuttle from the square at Jokhang Temple. 8:50am–4pm daily. The farthest of the monasteries from Lhasa, Ganden is probably the one most worth visiting, with its scenic setting high on the Gokpori Ridge. To get a feel of the place, it is best to travel with the excited pilgrims on the bus that leaves from Lhasa’s Barkhor area every morning at 6:30am, returning at 2pm. The monastery was founded in 1410 by Tsongkhapa, and its main building, the Serdung Lhakhang, has as its centerpiece a huge gold and silver chorten (stupa or funerary mound) with Tsongkhapa’s remains. However, the buildings are not its main appeal. Its highlight is the kora, which takes an hour to walk. The circuit offers fine views of the landscape and a chorten or two that pilgrims (and visitors if they wish) must hop around on one leg.

A domestic yak on the steep hills surrounding Ganden Monastery
WITH ITS ORDERED DESIGN, wealth of religious treasures, and stunning location, Samye makes a deep impression on visitors. Tibet's first monastery, Samye was founded in the 8th century during Trisong Detsen's reign with the input of the great Buddhist teacher, Guru Rinpoche. Indian and Chinese scholars, invited to Samye to translate Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan, argued over the interpretation of doctrine, and so Trisong Detsen held a public debate to decide which form of Buddhism should be followed in Tibet. The Indian school won out and Chinese-religious influence gradually waned. Today the monastery has a well-worn and eclectic feel, having been influenced by numerous sects over the years.

**Star Sights**

- **Jowo Sakyamuni Chapel**
  Samye's most revered chapel centers on an image of Sakyamuni at age 38. He is flanked by two protector deities and ten Bodhisattvas.

- **Chenresig Chapel**
  This chapel centers on a stunning statue of Chenresig, with an eye painstakingly painted on each of its thousand hands.

**Exploring the Ütse**

The Ütse is dimly lit, so take a flashlight to explore. The entrance leads directly into the Main Hall, with the Chenresig Chapel to the left and the Gongkhan Chapel to the right. The Jowo Sakyamuni Chapel is at the far end of the Main Hall. Numerous chapels and the Dalai Lama's quarters are located on the second story. The third story has an open gallery lined with impressive murals.

Monks live in quarters on the upper level of the outer wall.

The outer wall facing the Ütse is lined with prayer wheels and elaborate murals of Buddha.

A superb view of the monastery can be had from the surrounding hills. From here it is easy to see that the monastery is laid out as a 3-D mandala (see p536).
Guru Rinpoche
An 8th-century monk-king from Swat in modern-day Pakistan, he is said to have subdued evil demons and established Buddhism in Tibet. Images of him carrying a thunderbolt are found throughout the complex.

Plan of Samye Complex
Samye’s design echoes Tibetan Buddhism’s cosmology of the universe. Many of the 108 buildings have been destroyed, but the four ling chapels representing the island continents that surround Mount Sumeru (the Utse) are still intact. Jampa Ling holds an impressive mural of the complex as it once was. The circular monastery wall is topped with 1,008 chortens that represent Chakravala, the ring of 1,008 mountains that surrounds the universe.

Visitors’ Checklist
93 miles (150 km) SE of Lhasa. from Lhasa or Tsetang to ferry on Tsangpo, then truck. unless fee paid. Samye Festival, 15th day of fifth lunar month.

The mural to the left of the entrance on the third story depicts the 5th Dalai Lama receiving the Mongol Khan Gushri and his retinue.

The main hall houses images and statues of Guru Rinpoche and the Buddhist kings, Trisong Detsen and Songsten Gampo.

Main entrance

Pehar
Kordzoling, protector chapel

Entrance to Utse

White chorten

Aryapalo Ling

Jampa Ling

The inscription on this stone stele (779 AD) declares that King Trisong Detsen has proclaimed Buddhism as the state religion.

The inscription

Gongkhan Chapel is packed with draped statues of fierce demons. A stuffed snake guards the exit.

Quarters of the Dalai Lama
This simple apartment, consisting of anteroom, bedroom and throne room, is full of relics, including Guru Rinpoche’s hair and walking stick.

Main entrance

0 meters

0 yards
The Eight Auspicious Symbols

The Eight Auspicious Symbols represent the offerings that were presented to Sakyamuni Buddha, after he attained Enlightenment. Born as Siddhartha Gautama, prince of the kingdom of Kapilavastu, he renounced his princely life at the age of 30, and went in search of answers to the meaning of human suffering and existence. After years of penance, Siddhartha attained Enlightenment after meditating under a Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, India. Tibetans regard the symbols as protective motifs and use them to decorate flags and medallions as well as tiles in Buddhist temples, monasteries, and homes. The Conch Shell is blown to celebrate Sakyamuni’s Enlightenment; the Endless Knot represents harmony, and the never-ending passage of time; and the Wheel of Law symbolizes the Buddha’s eightfold path to Enlightenment. Other symbols include the Golden Fish, representing liberation from the Wheel of Life, and the Lotus Flower that represents purity.

Conch Shell
Endless Knot
Wheel of Law

Nomad tents, at the edge of the breathtaking Namtso Lake

Tsurphu Monastery

Situated at an altitude of 14,700 ft (4,480 m), this monastery was founded in the 12th century by the Karmapa or Black Hats order and is important as the home of the Karmapa Lama, the third most important religious leader in Tibet after the Dalai and Panchen Lamas (see p344). The present incumbent, the 17th Karmapa, fled to India in 1999 at the age of 14. His departure was significant as he was the only senior Tibetan Buddhist official recognized by both the Chinese authorities and the Dalai Lama. The flood of daily pilgrims who came for blessings has now stopped and the monastery is rather quiet, though several hundred monks still reside here.

Tibetans regard the symbols as protective motifs and use them to decorate flags and medallions as well as tiles in Buddhist temples, monasteries, and homes. The Conch Shell is blown to celebrate Sakyamuni’s Enlightenment; the Endless Knot represents harmony, and the never-ending passage of time; and the Wheel of Law symbolizes the Buddha’s eightfold path to Enlightenment. Other symbols include the Golden Fish, representing liberation from the Wheel of Life, and the Lotus Flower that represents purity.

One of the many brightly-colored murals at Tsurphu Monastery

Namtso Lake

Beautiful Namtso Lake, with its classic Tibetan scenery of azure water beneath snow-capped peaks and grasslands dotted with herds of yak, has made it the most popular overnight jeep trip from Lhasa. About 45 miles (70 km) long and 19 miles (30 km) wide, it is the second largest saltwater lake in China after...
Gyantse

158 miles (255 km) SW of Lhasa.

Minibus: alternate days from Lhasa bus station. 4WD from Lhasa.

Travel Permits required (see p519).

A n attractive, if dusty, small town, Gyantse is Tibet’s third largest settlement, famous for its carpets, and usually visited en route to Nepal (see p547). Often called “Heroic City,” it was originally capital of a 14th-century kingdom, and the remnants of its old Dzong or fort watches over the town. Heavily bombarded during the British invasion in 1904, when it was captured at great loss of life to the Tibetans, it is today a dramatic ruin with a small museum. Here, Chinese propaganda describes the “heroic battle fought to defend the Chinese motherland,” although at that time China had no authority over Tibet. The Dzong offers good views from its roof.

The British Invasion of Tibet

Alarmed by the growing influence of Tsarist Russia in the 19th century, Britain’s viceroy in India sent a diplomatic mission to Tibet in an effort to build links and facilitate the free flow of trade. When the mission failed, an expeditionary force – part of the Great Game (see p491) – of 1,000 soldiers and 10,000 porters, led by the dashing 26-year-old Colonel Francis Younghusband, invaded Tibet in 1903. As the force traveled inward, they killed almost 700 peasants, who were armed in part with magic charms to ward off bullets. Then, in the world’s highest battle, the British captured Gyantse Fort with only four casualties, while the Tibetans lost hundreds of men. The force proceeded to Lhasa, where an agreement allowed Britain to set up trade missions.

Built 20 years after Kumbum, the Pelkor Chode Monastery was designed for all the local Buddhist sects to use; its murky Assembly Hall has two thrones, one for the Dalai Lama and one for the Sakya Lama. The main chapel at the back of the hall has a statue of Sakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, and some impressive wooden roof decorations. At the very top, the Shalyekhang Chapel has some fine mandalas (see p536). On the way to Gyantse it is worth taking a detour to see beautiful Yamdrok Lake, one of the four holy Tibetan lakes.

About 650 ft (200 m) north-west is a compound housing the Kumbum and Pelkor Chode Monastery.

The Kumbum, constructed around 1440, is a magnificent six-story and 115-ft (35-m) high chorten, honeycombed with little chapels. It is built in an architectural style unique to Tibet and this is the finest extant example. A clockwise route leads up past chapels full of statuary and decorated with 14th-century murals – kumbum means “a hundred thousand images.” On the fourth floor, painted pairs of eyes, signifying the all-seeing eyes of Buddha, look out in each of the cardinal directions. The staircase in the eastern chapel leads into the chorten’s dome. There are dramatic views from the top.

Highly decorated doorway to the main chapel, Kumbum, Gyantse

Kumbum, Gyantse, a three-dimensional mandala

Qinghai Hu (see p499). The flat land around it offers good grazing, and is usually ringed with nomad encampments in summer. From November to May, the lake freezes over. Most people stay a night at Tashi Dor, a monastery on a lakeside hill. Bring a flashlight and a warm sleeping bag. The lake is situated at the incredible height of 15,500 ft (4,718 m), so visitors must be thoroughly acclimatized.
Shigatse & Tashilunpo

Capital of the Tsang Region, Shigatse sits at an elevation of 12,800 ft (3,900 m). To its north, the Drolma Ridge rises steeply, topped by the ruins of the ancient Dzong, once home to the kings of Tsang. Shigatse holds a powerful position in Tibet, and was the capital for a spell during the early 17th century. After Lhasa regained its status, Shigatse continued to hold sway as the home of the Panchen Lama, Tibet’s second most important religious ruler, whose seat is located at Tashilunpo Monastery, the town’s grandest sight. Worth exploring for a day or two, Shigatse is the most comfortable place in Tibet after Lhasa, with decent food and accommodations on offer.

Gang Gyen Carpet Factory
Qomolangma Lu. 9am–12:30pm & 2:30–7pm Mon–Fri.
This factory, where local women produce beautiful carpets, first skeining the wool than weaving it, is the place to come if you have no intention of buying. A project initiated by the 10th Panchen Lama in 1987, the business is part-owned by the monastery. Conveniently, shipping can be arranged on the premises.

Night Market
A small cluster of street food stalls can be found at the corner of Qomolangma Lu and Jiefang Zhong Lu. Chairs and tables, and even the odd sofa, line the sidewalks next to the stalls. Enjoy a large bowl or noodles or a kabob.

Tashilunpo Monastery

Summer: 9am–12:30pm & 4–6pm Mon–Sat; Winter: 10am–noon & 3–6pm Mon–Sat.
A huge monastic compound of golden-roofed venerable buildings and cobbled lanes, Tashilunpo would take several days to explore fully. It was founded in 1447 by Genden Drup, retrospectively titled the 1st Dalai Lama. It grew suddenly important in

The 11th Panchen Lama

The death of the 10th Panchen Lama in 1989 brought Tibet’s leaders and the Chinese government into conflict over succession. Like the seat of the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama’s position is passed on through reincarnation. Traditionally, upon the death of either of these leaders, top monks scour the land hoping to identify the new incarnate. In 1995, after an extensive search, the Dalai Lama named a six-year-old boy, Gedhun Choeki Nyima, as the 11th Panchen Lama. The chosen boy and his family soon disappeared and have not been seen since. Keen to handpick the next Dalai Lama’s teacher, the Chinese authorities sanctioned a clandestine ceremony which ordained Gyancain Norbu as the “official Panchen Lama” and immediately whisked him off to Beijing.

Young Gyancain Norbu, the China-sanctioned 11th Panchen Lama
1642, when the 5th Dalai Lama declared his teacher, the monastery’s abbot, to be a reincarnation of the Amithaba Buddha and the fourth reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, or great teacher. Ever since it has been the seat of the Panchen Lamas, who are second in authority to the Dalai Lama.

Head up the main path to the back of the compound for the most impressive sights. The gold and silver chorten straight ahead holds the remains of the 4th Panchen Lama. Built in 1662, it was the only funeral chorten in the monastery to escape destruction during the Cultural Revolution. The larger, jewel studded chorten just to the west holds the remains of the 10th Panchen Lama, who died in 1989; it was constructed in 1994 at a cost of eight million US dollars.

Continue west for the Chapel of Jampa, which holds the monastery’s most impressive artifact, an 85-ft (26-m) golden image of Jampa, the future Buddha, made in 1914. It took almost a thousand artisans four years to complete using more than 600 pounds (275 kg) of gold.

The complex of buildings on the east side is the Kelsang. It centers around a courtyard where monks can be observed praying, debating, and relaxing. The 15th-century Assembly Hall on the west side holds the imposing throne of the Panchen Lamas.

Those with energy left can follow the monastery kora, which takes about an hour. It runs clockwise around the outside of the walls before heading up to the Dzong. On the way you’ll pass colorful rock reliefs, some of Guru Rinpoche, and the huge white wall where a thangka of Buddha is exposed to the sun during the joyous three-day long Tashilunpo Festival.
Sakya Monastery

Sakya Monastery is dominated by the huge, fortress-like monastery, that looms up from the gray plains. Sakya or “Gray Soil” in Tibetan, was the capital of all Tibet in the 13th century, when monks of the Sakya order formed an extraordinary alliance with the Mongols. In 1247, the head of the Sakya order, Sakya Pandita, traveled to Mongolia and made a pact, whereby the Mongols were the overlords, while the Sakya monks ruled as their regents – the first time a lama was also head of state. His nephew, Phagpa, later became the spiritual guide to the conqueror of China, Kublai Khan. In 1354, Mongol power waned, and infighting among the religious sects led to a decline in Sakya’s influence.

Originally, there were two monasteries on either side of the Trum River, but the northern one was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (see pp64–5). The mid-13th century Southern Monastery, built by Phagpa, is a typical Mongol structure, with thick walls and watchtowers. The entrance leads to a courtyard with an enormous prayer pole in the center. To the left is the Puntsok Palace, the traditional home of one of the two head lamas, who now lives overseas. Apart from the statue-filled chapel, its rooms are mainly empty. Moving clockwise, the next chapel, the Purkhang, holds images of Jowo Sakyamuni and Jampalyang among others, while wall murals depict tantric deities. The Main Assembly Hall has 40 huge wooden pillars, one of which was said to have been gifted by Kublai Khan, while another is said to have come from India on the back of a tiger. The elaborately decorated hall has rich brocades, statues, and butter lamps and holds thousands of religious texts (sutras). The fine central Buddha image enshrines the remains of Phagpa. The chapel to the north has 11 silver chortens containing the remains of previous Sakya lamas. Sakya houses are traditionally painted gray with red and white vertical stripes; the colors are supposed to symbolize the Bodhisattvas Channa Dorje, Jampalyang, and Chenresig respectively.

Everest Base Camp

Rongphu 336 miles (540 km) SW of Lhasa. From Lhasa to Shigatse (7 hrs), then rent 4WD (more difficult to hire here than in Lhasa). 4WD from Lhasa, 2 days; 4WD from CITS office near Shigatse Hotel or Tashi 1 restaurant in Shigatse. For Everest area. Travel Permits required (see p519).

Despite the spine-jarring, four-hour trip off the Friendship Highway – that connects Lhasa to the Nepal border at Zhangmu – the craggy lunar landscape en route to Everest is enchanting. Rongphu is a good place for a stop and at 16,500 ft (4,980 m) is the highest monastery in the world. Although it has some good murals, the interior is not as riveting as its stunning location in front of Everest’s forbidding north face in the Rongphu Valley. The monastery was founded in 1902 on a site that had been used by nuns as a meditation retreat for centuries, and is now home to some 30 monks. Everest Base Camp lies 5 miles (8 km) to the south. The trip across the glacial plain takes about 15 minutes by vehicle or two hours on foot. It is just a jumble of tents, with a makeshift teahouse and the world’s highest post box, but the views of Mount Everest, the world’s highest mountain at a staggering 29,029 ft (8,848 m), are absolutely unforgettable. The entire Rongphu and Everest area has been designated a nature reserve that covers 13,100 sq miles (34,000 sq km), and borders three national parks in Nepal. A spectacular viewpoint at the Pangla Pass en route to Rongphu has a chart that helps identify peaks over...
TIBET

THE FRIENDSHIP HIGHWAY

The 435-mile (700-km) route between Lhasa and the Nepal border, known as the Friendship Highway, is probably the most popular journey for visitors to Tibet and includes some important sightseeing detours along the way. Many agencies in Lhasa and in Kathmandu in Nepal can arrange the trip, sort out the necessary permits, and provide an appropriate four-wheel drive vehicle, a driver, and guide. Depending on the itinerary, which usually includes the towns of Shigatse and Gyantse, the trip can take up to a week. Visitors must ensure that the contract specifies exactly what they want and what they are paying for.

Zhangmu Nepal border. 435 miles (700 km) SW of Lhasa. Private minibus from Lhasa’s Barkhor area to Zhangmu, 2 days. 4WD rented from Lhasa, 2 days (direct), or 5–6 days (via Gyantse, Shigatse & Everest Base Camp). Travel Permit for all places (between Shigatse and border) required (see p519).

THE NEPAL BORDER

尼泊尔边境

26,000 ft (8,000 m) high – Cho Oyu, Lhotse, Makalu, and of course, Everest, known as Chomolungma in Tibetan.

The rarefied air at this altitude (17,000 ft/5,150 m) makes any strenuous activity impossible. Unless visitors are properly acclimatized, it is best to go all the way back to the Friendship Highway and carry on to the town of Shekhar to spend the night.

THE FRIENDSHIP HIGHWAY connecting Lhasa to the Nepal border is one of Tibet’s most popular link routes. From the Rongphu turn-off along the highway, it is another 31 miles (50 km) west to Tingri, on what is a surprisingly good road. This is a small, traditional Tibetan town with good views of the Everest range. After climbing for 56 miles (90 km) the road begins a steep, winding descent through mountains that are densely wooded; the change of scenery is startling after the desert landscape of the high, arid plateau. It is only another 20 miles (33 km) to the border town of Zhangmu, which is relatively low and oxygen-rich at 7,600 ft (2,300 m). Although much of Zhangmu consists of slightly dilapidated shacks, perched above one another on the mountainside, this frontier town has a gaudy vibrance. Border formalities to get into Nepal are fairly cursory. The Nepalese immigration post, 6 miles (10 km) farther down at Kodari, will issue a single-entry visa, though visitors have to pay in US dollars and provide a passport photo. From here, it is a four-hour trip to Kathmandu.

Everest Base Camp, with magnificent views of the world’s highest mountain