

Three Americans and a Quebecker in Tibet

By COLIN STANDISH
COLIN.M.STANDISH@GMAIL.COM

After one hour of sleep, I haul myself into a minivan at 5:30 am in Kunming, Yunnan, about two and a half hours by air from Lhasa, as my stomach boils and bubbles violently, a bit like last night's hot pot dinner, where I threw raw meat into a spicy soup.

My tour group to Tibet consists of three Americans and myself from Quebec, and we are on the first planeload of foreigners allowed in since it "officially" re-opened to tourists June 26. The plane flies so closely by the Himalaya foothills that I can make out the green brambles giving way to shattered rock. I sit in an empty row next to a Chinese military officer.

As our plane descends into Lhasa we receive a package of altitude sickness pills, which include the friendly reminders: "A. Keep with you sun proof supplies because the outdoor UV radiation is strong on the Yan-Gui plateau, B. Please respect custom and mores of the multitudinous minorities, C. Please protect the environment and our common blue sky."

I have no idea what to expect of Tibet, marred by protests and controversy, so this advice to take the pills and respect people seems as good as any.

On arrival, the intensity of the sunlight and the lightness of the air make my head throb. Red, yellow, and white prayer flags flutter in the breeze next to Buddhist shrines dotting the countryside as we head into Lhasa.

However, my first impressions of this city of half-a-million people disappoint: drab concrete, white tiled facades, twisted street lamps, and government buildings decorated by hammer-and-sickle crests. Chinese troops man each intersection of the Bakhour, the historic old town. Olympic rings are plastered across temple gates, while games' mascots, headed by Nini the Tibetan antelope, overrun city parks.

The Lhasa I'm looking for is found in the old town. At its heart is Johking Temple, a squat white building with oblong black windows, white awnings and a pointed, scarlet roof. The temple stands in the middle of a kora, the cobblestone holy route, around which pilgrims walk clockwise. At the end, they throw themselves down on wooden kneepads in front of temple. Old women with cloth hair braids and men with curved daggers spin their prayer wheels, while chanting, "Om Mani Padme Om," meaning, 'hail the jewel in

the lotus,' in Johkang's Chen-resig shrine. Old shops and market stalls selling silver, knives, and prayer scarves ring the kora. Shopkeepers in red headdresses and blue linens greet customers with "Tashi Delai," or "hello" in Tibetan. A few minutes walk west from where I am staying lies the Potala Palace, towering over the city from a hilltop. The 13-story-high Potala blots out the sun, as I approach.

We are the only foreign tourists here. Tourists usually have to line up the day before a tour at 5:00 a.m. for a lottery held mid-morning to get tickets for the next day, paying a 100 yuan (\$15) entrance fee. We walk right in.

Climbing up the steep outdoor staircase around the Potala's White Palace, once the seat of Tibetan government, the thin air makes my legs and joints ache. When I stop to rest by a window, I see views of prayer flags fluttering on rooftops below and treeless mountain slopes off in the distance. A few monks meditate in a chapel at the Sera Monastery, where the scent of yak oil candles and incense weighs down the air. The smoke whips up the narrow passageways, blowing past monks and a mewling cat. A guidebook says the Sera monastery is renowned for its theological debating sessions, but we do not see anything like that.

In the Sera Monastery, a complex designed for 5,000 holy men, which until recently housed 500, I count only 15 monks. Walking through the rambling courtyards, temples, and dusty alleys, I feel very alone.

Again, we're the only foreign tourists and all the other visitors are Tibetan pilgrims. One monk looks at my three companions and asks "America?"

They nod yes. His eyes dart around the room, and he says "USA-Dalai Lama!" with a grin and a thumbs-up.

We all laugh.

On my first day in Tibet, the glares from soldiers bring to mind the expression, "if looks could kill." Platoons of nine to 16 soldiers patrol the old town in 20-minute intervals, staring at pilgrims. I see many gated police and military posts in town, guarded by stone-faced sentries. Soldiers with riot shields guard the gas stations on the edge of town. There are fewer soldiers on my second day. Soldiers wearing black SWAT uniforms still march around in formation, but appear slightly more relaxed. But a very large police presence emerges on day three, when I see six platoons of 12 or more soldiers. All carry backpacks, perhaps with rifles. That's the evening I see the boy.



Potala Palace in Lhasa, capital of southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region

A soldier drags a boy in a leather jacket towards his post, as the boy struggles against the soldier's grasp. Another soldier twists the boy's neck with both hands, and with one swift movement, kicks out the boy's legs, knocking him to the ground. Men in camouflage gear kick the boy's back, while another boots him in the knee. The boy of about 12 then gets up and runs away with a limp. The beating is over in 30 seconds.

That's my view from the window at the "Lhasa Kitchen" restaurant in the old town. The changing of the guard continues as I watch,

with the young soldiers smiling, jostling each other, and patting each other on the back.

One evening, the guest-house owners where we're staying take us to a local bar where I drink yak butter tea, try to speak Tibetan and roll dice poorly, much to everyone's amusement.

I want to stay on, but my 30-day Chinese visa is running out. I hold my head in my hands at the Public Security Bureau as I realize I must leave Lhasa to get a visa extension, or risk being thrown in jail.

The next morning, my plane takes off from Lhasa,

bound for Chengdu, Sichuan province.

Altogether, I have spent four days in Tibet. What did I see, I think as I fly out. Seared into my memory are the soldiers' glares from under brimmed caps, the Tibetan boy on the ground surrounded by six soldiers, and a lone old monk shuffling past me on a gilded rooftop. In my mind, loose door curtains flutter in the Bakhour, wooden tiles clack rhythmically together on bowing pilgrims, and a monk gently blesses my forehead at Sera Monastery. This is my Tibet.

Subscribe Today!

Call 650-1764

and receive 50 issues for only \$41.65

Reconnaissance, restitution et réconciliation

Lors des premières activités nationales d'internement au Canada en 1914-1920, des milliers d'hommes, de femmes et d'enfants ont été stigmatisés comme étant des « ennemis étrangers ». Plusieurs furent emprisonnés. Dépouillés du peu de richesses qu'ils possédaient, forcés d'effectuer des travaux difficiles dans l'arrière-pays du Canada, ils ont également été privés de leurs droits et soumis à d'autres censures sanctionnées par l'état - non pas à cause de quoique ce soit qu'ils avaient fait, mais uniquement à cause de l'endroit d'où ils venaient et de qui ils étaient.

En mai 2008, des représentants de la communauté ukrainienne du Canada ont conclu un accord avec le gouvernement du Canada qui a mené à la création d'un fonds de dotation pour financer des projets commémoratifs, éducatifs, académiques et culturels ayant pour but de rappeler à tous les Canadiens cet épisode dans l'histoire de notre pays.

Recognition, Restitution & Reconciliation

During Canada's first national internment operations of 1914-1920 thousands of men, women and children were branded as "enemy aliens." Many were imprisoned. Stripped of what little wealth they had, forced to do heavy labour in Canada's hinterlands, they were also disenfranchised and subjected to other state sanctioned censures - not because of anything they had done but only because of where they had come from, who they were.

In May 2008 representatives of the Ukrainian Canadian community reached an agreement with the Government of Canada providing for the creation of an endowment fund to support commemorative, educational, scholarly and cultural projects intended to remind all Canadians of this episode in our nation's history.

Fonds canadien de reconnaissance de l'internement durant la Première Guerre mondiale

Pour présenter une demande de subvention ou pour obtenir plus d'information, veuillez consulter l'adresse www.internmentcanada.ca ou appelez sans frais le 1-866-288-7931

Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund

To apply for a grant or for more information please go to www.internmentcanada.ca or phone toll free at 1-866-288-7931