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'Our tourist vehicle had CCTV, a GPS tracker and a listening device' – seeing Tibet, under the beady eye of Beijing

By Alan Fletcher



Monks at the most sacred temple in Tibet, the seventh-century Jokhang Credit: getty

1 March 2019 • 10:12am A quarter of a century ago, to enter [Tibet](#) all you had to do was buy a plane ticket from [Kathmandu](#), or from [Chengdu](#) in China, or hitch a ride on a truck, and endure some rigorous bag-searching and questioning when you got there. Once in, you were largely free to explore the culture, and to take any road you pleased out of Lhasa across the high plains or south to the [Himalayas](#), though speaking to Tibetans about their religion or politics was fraught with risk (mainly for them).

Today, the experience is very different. Unnerved by the Tibetan population's continuing resistance to Chinese rule (the region was incorporated into China in the 1950s), Beijing requires Western tourists to obtain group visas and special permits, and to join an officially sanctioned tour. The itinerary is fixed before you arrive, no straying permitted. You see what the authorities want you to see.

Recently, I returned to Tibet on one of those tours, 23 years after my previous visit, when I'd spent six weeks travelling along dirt roads into the far west: to [Mount Kailash](#), a holy place for Buddhists, Hindus and Jains, and to the ruins of the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Guge. I wanted to see how things had changed since then. My wife was keen to see the monastic treasures of Lhasa, and to experience the vast Tibetan plateau, whose average elevation exceeds 14,700ft.

We flew from Kathmandu over the Himalayas, obscured by late-monsoon clouds except for the crest of Everest, and landed in the giddy air of Lhasa. On the road from the airport, we had a glimpse of what was to come. The Tibetan capital had about doubled in size, the urban sprawl filling the Kyi valley to the east, west and south. More houses, factories and offices, more traffic, and many more settlers from mainland China, drawn by government incentives and the developing infrastructure.

I spent the first night floored by a vast headache and struggling to breathe in the thin air. At least that felt familiar. The next morning, we took to the streets. The most sacred temple in Tibet, the seventh-century Jokhang, which houses a statue of Buddha thought to be 2,500 years old, was a few minutes walk away. To get close to it and into the heart of the Tibetan quarter you have to pass through airport-style security gates. The Barkhor, the walkway that surrounds the Jokhang, has long been a symbol of Tibetan protest, and it seems the Chinese are taking no chances. We spotted police observers on the surrounding roofs, and numerous surveillance cameras.



Sacred Mount Kailash, which it is forbidden to climb Credit: getty

Once through the checkpoint, we joined the line of Tibetan pilgrims circumambulating the temple. Hundreds take part in this walking ritual each day, spinning prayer-wheels, repeating mantras and prostrating themselves before the temple doors. Inside, in tiny chapels lit by hundreds of yak-butter lamps, we encountered the full line-up of Tibetan Buddhist iconography: statues and murals of prominent masters, deities, reincarnated Buddhas and fierce-looking protector spirits.

One thing Tibetan pilgrims have to endure that their parents didn't is a scrum of tourists at every important shrine. The number of visitors to Tibet has increased by around 30 per cent every year since the mid-2000s, to 25 million today, according to the official Chinese news agency. Some 70 million a year are expected by 2022. Almost all of them are from mainland China – Tibet has become the number one domestic destination.



The 13-storey Potala Palace Credit: GETTY

In the 13-storey Potala Palace, the winter castle of the Dalai Lamas that still dominates the Lhasa skyline, we found ourselves cheek by jowl in a conga line through the many chapels and galleries, hurrying to get through in the officially allotted 50 minutes.

As a tourist, it is impossible to tell how much of an impact the development, the surveillance and the tourism is having on the indigenous culture of Tibet. It was too dangerous to ask anyone about such issues: we discovered early on that our tourist vehicle had been fitted with a CCTV camera, a GPS tracker and a listening device, and that our movements and conversations were being monitored by the security services.

It was clear that Tibetans have some freedom to worship, though they are not allowed to display or even possess a picture of their beloved figurehead, the Dalai Lama. China has spent millions of dollars restoring some of the monasteries that its revolutionary guards ransacked during the Cultural Revolution. Yet all prominent displays of cultural identity are Chinese: every house, every monastery, must fly the Communist regime's five-star red flag. Tibet is being motherlanded. The Dalai Lama has warned that Tibetan identity may be "nearing extinction" in its country of origin (unlike in the exile communities, where it is thriving). This seems most obviously true for the language, which appears as a secondary script on signs, and is barely spoken in schools.

Curious about what lay beyond the Lhasa valley, we headed into central Tibet, west to the monastery towns of Gyantse and Shigatse, then south towards Mount Everest and along the northern flank of the Himalayas. This route across the roof of Asia, much of it above 16,400ft, is among the most spectacular in the world. In Lhasa, the landscape is ever-present beyond the city limits, but once you're out on the plateau it steps right in through the mind's eye. It is desolate, primitive, infinite: vast plains, turquoise lakes, jagged peaks, rock faces shattered by the desiccation and cold. On the high passes, lines of prayer flags cast their incantations to the winds: to Tibetan Buddhists, this is all sacred space.



"It is desolate, primitive, infinite: vast plains, turquoise lakes, jagged peaks, rock faces shattered by the desiccation and cold" Credit: getty

The roads through this part of Tibet are good, but there aren't many of them, so for much of the time we shared the way with a conveyor belt of tourist buses. A grotesque roadside culture of kitsch has flourished to cater for them. We watched dozens of our fellow travellers queue up to be photographed beside Tibetan mastiffs with coiffured, lion-like manes, yaks in colourful accoutrements and kid goats tethered to rocks, a dollar a shot. The further we travelled from Lhasa, the less we saw of this circus, but it caught up with us at Everest. There is now a paved road to Everest base camp – it seems a perversion to write that sentence, though at 17,060ft there's no denying the engineering achievement.

On our last night before crossing the border into Nepal we stayed at Rongbuk Monastery, the world's highest, which is in full view of Everest, and walked to the foot of the glacier to watch the sun set on the mountain's north face – us and 200 others. There was a kind of redemption in that unchanging massif. We hadn't enjoyed being so tightly controlled by the Chinese state. In the monasteries and in the streets around the Jokhang, we caught a sense of Tibet's enduring spirit, and of the great dangers it faces. In the Tibetans' struggle for cultural autonomy, the landscape represents something immutable, the hope that enough of what matters will prevail.



A Tibetan mastiff Credit: getty

How to do it

Tour operators including Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk), Wendy Wu Tours (wendywutours.co.uk) and Responsible Travel (responsibletravel.co.uk) offer escorted tours to Tibet.

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office has the following [advice for travel to Tibet](#) and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR):

“You can only travel to the TAR on an organised tour and you must get a permit first, through a specialised travel agent in China. Chinese authorities sometimes stop issuing these without notice, and also restrict travel to Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in neighbouring Provinces, even if you have a permit. You should check with tour operators or travel agents and monitor this travel advice and other media for information. Once in Tibet you should avoid demonstrations and other large public gatherings. Ongoing political and ethnic tensions can lead to unrest and protest, sometimes violent. Security measures will be tight and unauthorised gatherings may be dispersed by force. Don’t film or photograph any such activities or outbreaks of violence. Local authorities will react negatively if you’re found carrying letters or packages from Tibetan nationals to be posted in other countries.

Photography in Buddhist monasteries requires permission and carries a fee. You should be aware that the ability of the British Embassy Beijing and British Consulates in China to provide consular support in the Tibet Autonomous Region is limited.”