

Daniel P. Reid

WHATEVER BECAME OF TWO WEEKS AT THE BEACH? THESE DAYS, IT SEEMS THAT MORE AND MORE HOLIDAY-MAKERS ARE FORSAKING THE SEDENTARY FOR THE DEMANDING, AND ARE USING THEIR LEAVE TO TEST BODY AND SOUL AGAINST NATURE'S HARSHTEST ODDS. TO THE BEST MAN AND WOMAN GO THE SPOILS: A REFRESHING, REVITALIZING CHANGE AND A RENEWED LEASE ON LIFE. DANIEL P. REID IS WELL-ACQUAINTED WITH MANY OF THESE NEW ADVENTURERS, AS THE TAIPEI-BASED JOURNALIST SPENDS A MONTH OR SO EACH YEAR LEADING TREKS THROUGH REMOTE, FORBIDDING, UNFORGIVING TIBET. ON HIS WAY BACK FROM ONE SUCH VENTURE, DANIEL STAYED AT THE MANDARIN, HONG KONG AND TOLD JEFF FORSELL HOW SUCCESSFUL, PROFESSIONAL PEOPLE REALLY GET AWAY FROM IT ALL.

JF: No living off the land, then?
DR: Oh, no. There is nothing in Tibet, basically. Just Tibetans. And yaks. There's not a tree, a blade of grass, a flower, a head of cabbage. No fuel, either. The only "fuel" is yak patties, as it were.

JF: Sounds delightful. Why go?
DR: Because Tibet is so unusual. It has the highest mountains in the world, which gives you a whole different perspective on mountains and terrain. A lot of the land is very glacial: big piles of boulders and rubble and a lot of dust. And the altitude gives you a unique perspective: the higher mountains; the higher snow peaks; better, cleaner light, and a very strong sun. And it's extremely dry. You have to drink about five litres of water a day to keep moving.

JF: Welcome back to the land of the living.

DR: Thank you.

JF: All of this must be something of a shock after what you've just been through.

DR: Yes. All of the treks organized by my company, Mountain Travel Nepal, begin and end at The Mandarin. It's not only that our people like The Mandarin, but that it's such a nice contrast for the treks. Go from the world's best hotel into China, and you get a sense of the differences in levels of service and facilities between the mainland and its periphery — Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore.

JF: And on the way out?

DR: On the way out, we spend the one night here. And people rush into the shower, head for the Grill Room, order room service. Coming into China, you take hot showers and fresh vegetables for granted; coming out after a month, it's icing on the cake, it's the cream float. They really need it after a month in China.

JF: Why? What have they been eating up to this point?

DR: In Tibet, there's a very limited supply of fresh vegetables. So, it's lots of meat and grain. And once into the trek, it's canned or freeze-dried food — which can become quite tiresome after ten to twelve days. People start to dream of a fresh salad, or crispy asparagus with hollandaise or a fresh slice of salmon. But there's nothing like that there in Tibet. At least in western China, in Sichuan Province, for example, you can pick wild cabbages and mushrooms, but in Tibet it's not possible. Your choices range from rancid yak-butter tea to wind-dried lamb.

JF: Lhasa is more than 3,650 metres above sea level, and trekkers routinely go even higher, to 4,800 metres. How does someone prepare himself for that?

DR: First of all, by going to a doctor and getting an examination. But not just any doctor. A sports doctor should be consulted, because he will be able to advise on whether you can handle the altitude. It's hard on the heart and blood pressure, not to mention breathing itself. Then, once you've received the sports physician's okay, you're set. Because Tibet is no more strenuous than any other place in the world.

JF: But trekking is strenuous, yes?

DR: Yes. Your legs must be in shape, and you must have good wind. And you can't be overweight. So to prepare yourself, I'd recommend walking up a tall hill twice a day, and walking long distances.

JF: And then you're ready?

DR: Yes, then you're ready — physically, at least. Mentally is another matter. Obviously, the other reason to go to Tibet is to see its ancient culture. The monasteries are the biggest attraction, and they're starting to repair them after the destruction caused by the Cultural Revolution, so what's left of the native culture is starting to revive. It's amazing to see how devout the Tibetans are to Buddhism. And it's also amazing to see how primitive life is. Tibet is a good place to go if you want to see what life was like in Asia 200 to 300 years ago. People live in stone houses and caves, and use yak dung for fuel.

JF: Has the presence of the Chinese made any difference?

DR: Superficial at best, I'd say. Sure, lots of building is going on in Lhasa, as September 1985 marks the twentieth

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anniversary celebration of Tibet becoming an Autonomous Region of China, and the Chinese are building hotels, bus stations, stadiums and theatres to prepare for the event. But they've pulled out of the countryside.

So, the change is superficial. There has been no change in how the Tibetans dress, or eat — or think, from what I can see. The Tibetans are a unique people. They're childish, but not in a negative sense. They have the spontaneity of children, despite a very hard, rough life. They live in one of the harshest places in the world, there's no question about it. They're poor, and are deprived of a lot of contact with the outside world. But they laugh at the snap of a finger. They find hilarity in almost any situation. That's what I find most endearing.

JF: As trekkers, do you and your group see more of the "real" Tibet?

DR: We see more of the monasteries, temples and fortresses perched high atop mountain peaks, yes. And we see people coming down to the market towns who look like extras from *Raiders of The Lost Ark*: their hair is about a metre long and totally unkempt, their faces are streaked black with grease, and they are wearing various types of hides — yak, lamb, tiger, all sorts of crazy things. They carry daggers and flintlock rifles, and they go to where they live and it's a cave! They *really* live in caves. The Tibetan mystique is all around you, heightened perhaps by the altitude, which psychologically affects you: the land seems more beautiful, the temples more portentous.

JF: It all sounds very adventurous.

DR: Oh, it is. Tibet is a long, long way away from New York or London, and trekking through it is not like those comfortable safari treks in Nepal or Africa with native bearers preparing tents and tea promptly at four o'clock. You're basically on your own — you must be willing to make your own tent. You're getting away from the modern

world, the modern age. The people in my tours are mostly in their forties and fifties, and they've made their mark and their money in that world of air travel and electrical appliances and television; now they want to get away.

JF: How far?

DR: Well, they must be willing to go without a bath for two weeks. On this last trek, I had three people and, except for a hot springs wash at 4,800 metres, we never had a bath. It's impossible to get that much hot water together — either the water is not available, or the fuel, or the facilities. So these civilized people, these sophisticated people, go without. People pay a certain price in comfort to go there.

JF: And what is the reward?

DR: You get a new perspective on your life, and on the international urban life style. After two weeks of really basic living in the mountains, you come to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of city life, or your own life. It clears up a lot of the floss that builds up. Things that bothered you before, don't now. And you also come away with a better understanding of primitive people and primitive life. Lighting a fire there is a major event. Trekkers may have trouble adjusting, but in the end they come back healthier and stronger. Compared to the problems of living in Tibet, their own problems, or the problems of living in the city, are nothing.

JF: And what is the cost, financially?

DR: It's expensive. In Tibet, you can count on spending about US\$200 a day, and that's just for ten days of the month-long trek. Look: there shouldn't be any illusions as to why China is letting in tourists. It's to make money. So, you're paying US\$200 a day to pitch a tent on a rocky riverbed and eat a can of Spam. But it's the only way to get that perspective on your own life.

JF: How will the recent decision to open the Nepal/China border at Tibet affect your treks?

DR: It will mean a big change. Up to

now, all of our treks began in Hong Kong and went to Beijing, Chengdu and Lhasa. But that's starting to change, as people have come to resent going to Beijing when what they've spent their money for is Tibet. You now can start in Kathmandu. And that's the biggest change.

JF: Why?

DR: Because the trekking business begins and ends in Nepal. It's the biggest trekking country in the world, with the most companies and the most trekkers per year. Kathmandu is a trekking centre. The Chinese are still learning. So there are no fully equipped camps every few kilometres in Tibet, as there are in Nepal. There's something like sixteen base camps on Mt Everest alone, you know, where you can get anything: brandy, women. It's a real circus. In Tibet, the Chinese send one unfortunate liaison officer, who doesn't want to go and who doesn't want to watch what you're doing. You find your own yaks, camps, trails. It's hard-core trekking.

Second, the acclimatization is easier, as you're going overland from Kathmandu at 1,200 metres to the border at 3,600 metres to the mountains at nearly 5,000 metres. It's better than the jump from Chengdu to Lhasa by air, which is from zero, essentially, to 3,650.

Third, the Sherpas are in Nepal. On this trek, two of my company's best Sherpas came from Kathmandu to meet us in Lhasa, which was a cause for great envy among other trekkers and mountaineers. The Sherpas do all the work, haul all the food. They even haul Western climbers to the top of the Himalayan peaks, except maybe for people like Meissner. Some guys who claim they've climbed the peaks are hauled up the last fifty to one hundred metres by the Sherpas, who are on the top already, smoking cigarettes and laughing. It's really true!

JF: I can see how they come in handy. Thank you, Mr Reid.