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On The Cover: Winnebago's fuel-sipping View Profile 24G takes a break at a rest area overlooking Santa Inez Valley, after effortlessly taming the steep and winding San Marcos Pass north of Santa Barbara, Calif. (see test on page 50). Photo by Chuck Campbell.

PILGRIMAGE TO THE TOP OF THE WORLD

WITH THE SIGHT OF MOUNT EVEREST AS THEIR GOAL, A COUPLE IN A RENTED MOTORHOME TRAVEL A TIBETAN ROUTE PAST YAKS, YURTS, STREAMS AND STUPAS

by HARRIET HALKYARD



Although there are some modern roads in Tibet, most of them are poorly paved or dirt roads. Sometimes the road is so poorly defined that you have to hope that you are following the right tracks. Below: The vibrantly painted eaves of the previous summer residence of the Dalai Lama, the Norbulingka Palace and park.



We sat on a vast grassland looking at Mount Everest flushed pink in the setting sun beneath the arc of a rainbow.

After taking a motorhome along the road that “Lonely Planet” described as “the most beautiful and most perilous in the world,” we had reached one of the least hospitable places on Earth — the Tibetan Plateau. My husband, John, and I were camped there alone among fluttering prayer flags and lumbering yaks.

Pilgrims have been coming to Tibet for 1,300 years. Nowadays most of them fly to Lhasa, a few ride the train and some walk. We decided to rent a motorhome and drive from Shangri-La to the Top of the World.

We rented a 22-foot Iveco TC5040XLJ Class C motorhome in Yunnan Province, in southwest China. Our plan was to head due north from Shangri-La (Zhongdian), parallel to the Myanmar border, and turn west into Tibet. We were delighted to learn that the \$150 daily rental covered all fuel. We were not so pleased to find out that it also included a driver, whether we wanted one or not.

In order to get the permits required for foreigners to drive around Tibet we had to agree to be respectful of the local customs and not to import any religious material, fishing gear or sleeping pills. There was no question that we would respect the locals and I understood the problem with religious material, but I could not comprehend the

PHOTOS: HARRIET HALKYARD



This page, clockwise from top left: The travelers found the Tibetan people to be very friendly and welcoming. This Tibetan woman was working in a field to prepare the soil for the next crop of barley. At one of the 14,000-foot passes in Tibet, visitors and locals pause in the rare air for a rest. Much of Tibetan life revolves around the yak and they are commonly used here as a mode of transport. Stupas are religious structures that symbolize wind, fire, sky, water and earth. These mark the gateway to Tibet at a 13,000-foot pass that overlooks a wide, deep abyss.



fishing tackle or the sleeping pills. Fish hardly enter the local diet and many visitors suffer insomnia because of the altitude and lack of oxygen. We did not want to raise problems so we simply signed at the bottom of the page. The police checked our papers a couple of times a day but never caused a problem or entered the vehicle.

We set our sights on Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. National Route 214 is the main interstate highway so we didn't think it could be too bad. Wrong! The road was originally carved out of the mountains to accommodate traders; the Tibetans traded tea from the south for their small horses. It is called the Tea-Horse route and later became part of the lower Silk Road that was used to carry

silk to the Western civilizations.

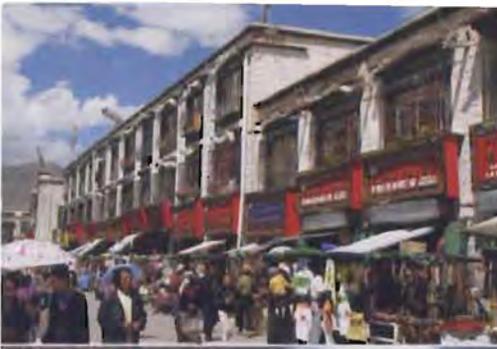
Initially, near Kunming, there were stretches of modern four-lane toll roads where drivers were directed to maintain a distance of 200 meters from the vehicle in front. There was little chance of getting rear-ended there. The road then became mostly two-lane blacktop although we did manage to find long stretches of cobbled roads.

The farther we went from civilization the worse the road surface became and the more dramatic the scenery. The views were breathtaking in every sense of the word. Majestic valleys unfolded at each curve, and there were plenty of curves on these switchback roads. The wheels of the motor-home knocked rocks off the road and I held

my breath as I looked into mist that mercifully obscured the depths of the abyss. The drop was phantasmal. Then a wheel would lurch into a pothole and I would gasp and lose another 10 years of my life.

Luckily, there wasn't much traffic — we met about one vehicle an hour and most of those were local trucks or buses. We usually averaged 20 MPH in spite of the numerous landslides and streams that cut paths across the roads. On the worst stretch our average was cut to 5 MPH. On a couple of occasions our translator offered a cigarette to the driver of a construction truck to encourage him to clear the road for us.

For a week we climbed over passes and through valleys of the most varied terrain



Clockwise from left: This campsite is about as primitive as it gets — the motorhome sits on a vast grassland and in the distance is the mighty Qomolangma, the local name for Mount Everest. The author was invited into a nomad's yurt on the high Tibetan Plateau. The nomad holds a postcard of Texas that the author gave her as a thank-you. Colorful shops line Bakhor Street, which pilgrims have been walking for 1,300 years around Jokhang Temple, Tibet's most holy site. The travelers were halted by a landslide on the main interstate highway between Shangri-La and Lhasa. Construction crews would often help clear the road in cases where the motorhome could not pass.



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imaginable. The road was cut into sheer rock walls that disappeared into the clouds above. At particularly perilous corners faded prayer flags hung limp in the mist across the road or wrapped around boulders.

Then, finally we broke out of the clouds at a 13,000-foot pass at a row of stupas that marked the gateway to Tibet. The white religious structures symbolize wind, fire, sky, water and earth, which are also represented by the white, red, blue, green and yellow prayer flags that are ubiquitous in Tibet.

Above the tree line the mountains were stark and bare where they brushed the pearl blue sky. Their color varied from

rust to gray to rich purple and then, where there was enough sediment for plants to take hold, they were tinged with green.

Hairy hulks of black yaks peered at us through thick eyelashes as we crested the 16,500-foot Yeshan Pass. Descending the other side snow blew across the desolate mountains as we came to a cluster of yurts crouched like rectangular rocks. Tibetan dogs, similar to Saint Bernards, sniffed in our direction and the gentle yaks simply looked and turned their backs to the wind.

Two hundred and fifty miles east of Lhasa we came across the first group of pilgrims on their way to Tibet's holiest shrine,

MAP ILLUSTRATION: SUE CARLSON

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Jokhang Monastery. Each person had a block of wood strapped to their hands that they clapped over their head, again in front of their chest and then hit the ground with them sliding forward until they were prostrate. They then walked to where their hands had been and repeated the cycle. For centuries worshippers have been congregating at Jokhang Monastery and circumnavigating the building in prayer; they walk clockwise around the temple spinning hand-held prayer wheels and fingering prayer beads.

The Jokhang Monastery is rich with gold and magnificent ancient treasures bedecked in jewels. Everywhere smoke from incense burners competed with flames in the burning yak butter for the little oxygen there was in the crowded rooms and narrow passages. Fortunately we went early when there were fewer visitors. Crowning the Jokhang are ornate golden emblems that glisten in the sun against Tibet's brilliant sky.

If it's precious gems that interest you, there are more than enough in Potala Palace. The Potala consists of the Red Palace and the White Palace. The White Palace is the

residence of the Dalai Lama and also where political affairs are handled. Over the centuries the city has grown around the red ochre and stark white fortress that is now the pictorial symbol of Tibet. It takes some effort to climb the hundreds of steps to the Potala as the air is thin — 12,000 feet above sea level. When you reach the complex there are 13 more flights of stairs inside, some of which are almost vertical ladders.

The Potala is a living complex containing accommodations for the monks who are the caretakers of the facility. There are thousands of rooms with as many worshippers winding through a maze of narrow corridors and adding yak butter to the flaming dishes in front of the statues and magnificent stupa.

We streamed into the living quarters of the Dalai Lama and out into the brilliant daylight and air as clean as from another planet. Our legs, lungs and minds were exploding by the time we wound our way down a cobbled path and into a pedicab that took us back to collapse in the motorhome.

We wanted to visit Lhasa, but our goal was to drive a motorhome to within sight of Mount Everest. Here they call the mighty mountain Qomolangma (Cho-mo-long-ma).

A half-day's drive north of Lhasa is Namtso Lake. According to local legend the lakes of Tibet are the broken chips from a goddess's mirror. They are considered sacred and are treated with the utmost respect.

We stopped to photograph a nomad tent home and were privileged to be invited inside by the friendly family. The yurt had a stone sill that kept the ever-present wind from blowing under the yak-felt fabric and a hole in the center to let the smoke from the yak-dung bricks escape.

As we continued toward the Himalayas we were surrounded by bare swaths of hills. Craggy gray peaks cast us into shadow in the middle of the day until we were suddenly faced with a range of snow-covered mountains shining in the sun. We had driven as close to Everest as possible in the motorhome so we pulled off the road and parked.

We sat mesmerized by the sight of the great Qomolangma. Within 20 minutes the sun had tanned us through our clothes, but then it was gone and we were suddenly very cold. We camped there alone, three miles high, at the top of the world, looking at Everest through our motorhome window and savoring the experience. ♦

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