

A Family's Travels in Tibet

Children Creating Magical Connections

By LeeAnn Deemer



The dzong or fortress in Gyantse, one of the best preserved dzongs in Tibet.

Three generations went on our family trip to Tibet: my husband's parents – long-time expats in Beijing – and our two older children, nine and six. We piled into a van at Lhasa airport with driver and guide and headed straight to Tsedang, our first stop. The town around the airport is so small that we were almost immediately in the countryside, passing farmhouses with goats, sheep, pigs and dogs, old women threshing grain by the roadside and fields where children were playing.

Tsedang lies in the Yarlung Valley, cradle of the first Tibetan kingdom in the 7th century. We headed to Yumbulagang and arrived just before sunset, the last visitors of the day. Yumbulagang is a fortress-temple and one of the oldest buildings in Tibet, though much of what one sees today is recent reconstruction. It perches on the tip of a ridge overlooking the flat, green valley below. The steep path and steeper steps were intimidating since we had been warned not to exert ourselves during the first few days at altitude. Other visitors had left hours ago and we had our pick of the ponies, yaks and a lone camel loitering in the parking lot, waiting to carry visitors up. The spectacular view over the valley revealed neat green fields in the golden light of the setting sun. With the place to ourselves, the only sound apart from our kids frolicking was the flapping of the enormous tangle of prayer flags in the wind. The setting and the solitude conspired to fulfill every fantasy I had ever had about Tibet.

Every day we spent in Tibet brought amazing experiences. We turned to one another each evening to say something like "that was one of the most beautiful/wonderful/profound things I have ever seen/done/felt."

The next morning we woke early to visit Samye, the oldest monastery in Tibet. Driving an hour back in the direction we'd come the day before, we took a rickety ferry across the Brahmaputra River, boarded a bus and then bounced across a barren, moon landscape to Samye, which we reached before any other visitors had arrived. A ceremony was to be held in which a sand *mandala* is created and then set on fire. The monks worked on the *mandala* outside the assembly hall, which was full of other monks chanting under the supervision of an elderly abbot. We spent a couple of hours exploring, but checked regularly to gauge the *mandala's* progress. Our kids peered over the monks' shoulders as they created intricate designs by pouring brightly coloured sand. After the *mandala* was completed, it was covered with perfectly round bricks of yak dung, which were then doused with yak butter and set ablaze while the monks chanted. It was only just before the fire was lit that a handful of other visitors arrived.

At nearly every stop we had marvellous luck, arriving just before or just after other groups, which allowed us to roam the dimly lit, red-walled corridors and encounter mostly pilgrims and monks. The only place we visited that felt more like a tourist site and less like a 'real place' was the Potala Palace in Lhasa. There were still plenty of praying pilgrims and monks, but for the first and only time, lots of tourists. Fortunately, the palace is spectacular enough to transcend these indignities. We ducked down empty corridors and lingered in atmospheric chapels to escape the noisy, guided tours that seemed to be stalking us.

We congratulated ourselves on the cultural authenticity of our experience. However, therein lies the paradox of this

kind of travel – four Americans travelling through Tibet with children in tow, seeking cultural authenticity. By any honest accounting, the most culturally authentic experience in Tibet was wherever we were not.

There are many reasons to go to Tibet – the unparalleled landscapes, the mysterious palaces and monasteries, the unique and fascinating Buddhist culture. These were all part of my expectations of Tibet and I was not disappointed. Yet there remains an important aspect of such a trip unaccounted for.

As an American living and travelling in Asia for nearly five years, I have been to many places where the implicit goal was to encounter another culture and leave behind what many in the modern industrialised world believe to be our own denatured cultural milieu. We seek to experience a culture that was still ‘authentic’ and connected with its own past – in places such as Bali, India, Sumatra and now Tibet. Tibet has filled that role for outsiders for a long time, as recounted in books like Donald Lopez’s *Prisoners of Shangri-La* and Orville Schell’s *Virtual Tibet*. Many see Tibet and its people as the antidote for the ailments of modernity.

Yet this can easily devolve into a situation in which local people and their practices become part of the scenery, along with the landscape and the temples. Even with a sensitive awareness about the delicate power dynamic between tourist and local, visitor and visited, the pull of ‘cultural authenticity’ can be irresistible. Hence my pang of disappointment when we discovered that in monastery lamps, yak butter has largely been replaced by ‘inauthentic’ solidified vegetable oil. Cleaner-burning than yak butter, it does less damage to the precious, fragile paintings and manuscripts in the monasteries, and presumably also to the monks’ lungs.

This intellectual and emotional conflict forms a backdrop to my travels in places like Tibet and is a reminder that we always encounter other cultures through the filter of our own expectations and our own culture. At the same time, my husband and I realised that we have a secret weapon, at least for another 10 years or so, capable of creating an almost magical connection across cultural gulfs - our children.

Whether on the street in Lhasa or in isolated monasteries, the presence of children shifts the balance in wonderful and unexpected ways. We are tourists, strangers in a strange land and yet the locals suddenly want to take our picture, talk to us and touch the children. We lose track of our kids in a monastery only to find them sitting with a row of young monks, learning some variant of rock, paper, scissors. Mothers walking their children to school in the morning stop and prod them to come over and interact with ours. Old



Yumbulugang, supposedly one of the oldest buildings in Tibet.



Author’s daughter meeting Tibetan schoolchildren, Shigatse, Tibet.

women on the pilgrim paths are drawn to us like magnets, point to the children and to me and ask, “Mama?” When I nod, they put a congratulatory arm around my shoulders, nod their heads and beam. We are suddenly, briefly, no longer voyeurs with cameras, making a spectacle out of another culture; instead we are just parents, our children just children – albeit from elsewhere.

Until I can work out all the philosophical implications of ‘cultural tourism’ to my own satisfaction, perhaps this aspect of travelling the world with my family will help me feel like the scales are slightly more balanced, at least momentarily.

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Photos by LeeAnn and Paul Deemer

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Turquoise Lake or Yam Drok Tso, an example of the spectacular views of unparalleled landscapes in Tibet.

