

Incidents of Travel in China and Tibet

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1 Parallel Lives

Sandra worked for SRI International about ten years ago, not as I do in the Artificial Intelligence Center, but in the management consulting division, but she was interested in the AI business, and had a Ph.D. degree in philosophy, so she hung around the AIC quite a bit, and that's where I met her. We had lunch often, and I helped talk her through her divorce.

The years passed. She left SRI, and eventually became a major player in a business consulting firm in San Francisco. She's a quite brilliant woman. She began to travel a lot in western China and Tibet. She told me often that she had wonderful slides of the Sunday market in the city of Kashgar in far western China, that her son had taken on their trip there shortly after the Tienanmen Square uprising. I wanted very much to see them, but we had a terrible time arranging it. We started trying in 1995, if not the slides then at least dinner. We just missed each other in May 1996 when we were both in Washington. Then in July 1997 we finally saw each other. I ran into her at a gate at Dulles Airport. It turned out we were on the same plane flying from Washington back to San Francisco. I gave up my upgrade, and we sat together and had a wonderful conversation; we never stopped talking. I again renewed my request for a Kashgar slide show, and over the next months we tried to find a time again. Most of her communications were post cards from places like Beijing and Turpan, China, India, Nepal, and the Galapagos Islands, where she went to see a total eclipse of the sun.

Finally in July 1998 I went over to her house and had dinner and the slide show. She said then that she had seen many pictures of western China that had fascinated her, and they all turned out to be in Gansu province. I was planning to spend September and half of October traveling around western China, so she suggested we travel through Gansu together. She had been a rugged traveller in China in the past, so it sounded like fun. I said yes,

although given the difficulties we had had before in trying to get together, I didn't really believe it would happen until I saw her at the airport.

She gave me several books, including a book of photographs of Gansu. This later turned out to be significant.

She was an old China hand and a brilliant conversationalist, and I was sure we would have a great time in our week together. We lasted exactly 36 hours.

I was waiting in the Red Carpet Lounge at SFO for my flight at the end of August—United Premier Executives get to do that for international flights even if they are flying coach—and Sandra, flying business, showed up there too. We waited together and chatted amiably, and even excitedly. We were separated by class on the flight to Tokyo, but we waited together in the Red Carpet Lounge there for our connection to Beijing. In Beijing we changed money, went through customs, and caught a taxi into town together. We shared a room—each in our own bed and “no inappropriate relationship,” as our President would say. We walked up and down a side street in the evening, past shops weakly lit in the darkness, and traded recent life stories. Mine was especially complicated at this particular time. The next morning we walked to Tienanmen Square and as far as we could into the Forbidden City without paying admission. So this was all very pleasant.

Her plans at this point were to fly from Beijing to Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu province, and takes buses from there down to Xiahe Monastery for several days. I was going to spend a day in Beijing, take a train to Xi'an and stay there for two days, and then take a train to Lanzhou, where she would return to and we would meet.

So we caught a taxi back to the hotel. On the way an incident occurred, very trivial in itself but, for her, foreshadowing coming difficulties and, for me, a vindication of sorts. The taxi was only across a wide avenue from our hotel when the driver waited behind a stalled bus for three changes of the stoplight without changing lanes and whipping around. I decided he was lame and suggested to Sandra we pay the man and hop out and cross the street on foot. Sandra didn't want to, and at the time she thought what an impatient American yahoo tourist I was. She wanted to have this driver wait and take her to the airport. She got her way.

She told me later that I was right in my judgment of him. On the way to the airport he missed the airport exit three times and drove 20 miles out of the way, and she had to run through the terminal to make her plane.

Let's skip now to my first day in Lanzhou. I got off the train from Xi'an around 11 a.m. There were two trains two days later out of Lanzhou to

our next stop, Jiayuguan, one at 5:20 A.M. and one at 5:40 P.M. We had both agreed the morning train would be better, because it would allow us to see by daylight the famed Hexi Corridor, route of the Silk Road and of barbarian invasions. I looked around the station, but the lines at the ticket windows were huge, and I didn't know which one to stand in. I went to my hotel. They had a business office of sorts, so I went there to see if they could arrange the morning train. They couldn't; only the afternoon train. So I searched around the neighborhood for the China International Tourist Service (CITS) and eventually found it. A long wait for a woman who spoke English to return from lunch, and then she told me that the morning train originated in Shanghai, and they could only sell tickets for trains that originated here in Lanzhou. They could only sell me tickets to the afternoon train. My last try was to go to the train station itself and brave the lines. But there, as soon as I said "houtian" for "day after tomorrow", the clerk said "mei you", "don't have". Tickets for trains become available only the day before.

I have gone into all this detail to show you the trouble I went to to get the morning train. This also becomes significant.

So I spent the rest of the day going around Lanzhou. Chinese cities are by and large ugly. Uniform modern, recently and not very well built buildings of five or six stories faced with white tile, now soiled. No aesthetic touches. I have heard it said that every city in China has exactly one good photograph and you have to find the right spot to stand in to take it. There is some truth in this. But I never found the right spot for Lanzhou. I went to their mediocre regional museum and climbed up to a modern pagoda with a view of the polluted city. These were the only sights mentioned in the guidebook. I mention all this because it too becomes significant.

Sandra was planning to return to Lanzhou the next day, midday. I was going to spend the day, from early morning on, at the Buddhist temple of Binglingsi, several hours out into the countryside from Lanzhou. Then we would meet in the evening, and take the train the next morning.

But as I was lying on my bed in my hotel room, the phone rang. It was Sandra. She was in the lobby. She had managed to catch the last bus of the day into Lanzhou.

I was deliriously happy to see her. I had been, frankly, lonely for much of the last week. We went off to Food Alley and got a dinner of noodles together and traded stories of our adventures. I will only relate one of hers, because of its relevance to later events.

She had arrived in the town of Linxia on her way back from Xiahe,

intending to spend the night there. But a man grabbed her and pulled her onto his bus for Lanzhou. She decided she might as well. But after they were underway, he came back to her and demanded more money because she was a foreigner. She is slight and blonde, and does not look as formidable as she can be. This time, however, she was not formidable. She does not speak or understand any Chinese—as she puts it, she only knows five words and two of them are “xie xie” (“thank you”)—so she showed him 10 yuan, then 20, then 30, then 40, but he kept refusing, indicating it was not enough. (Ten yuan is \$1.20.) She had no more 10-yuan notes than that, so next she gave him a 100-yuan note, expecting 50 yuan in change. But the man lit up when he got it, and returned to the front of the bus, bragging loudly to the driver that he had got 100 yuan from the American. A pall fell over the entire bus, in embarrassment at what he had done. She followed him to the front and demanded her change, but to no avail. She imagined pulling him off the bus in Lanzhou and complaining about his scam, but he got off halfway along, and the loss was final.

I didn't say so, but I was sure I could have avoided the loss. In fact, later in my trip, on a bus from Guelin to Yangshuo, I refused the ticket taker's demand for 10 yuan extra for my suitcase and my daypack, and I held my ground. Of course, in part, this was because I wanted to prove to myself I was a better traveller than Sandra.

Sandra and I shared a room again that night in Lanzhou. We went to bed early because we had to get up early for our trip to Binglingsi.

The next day we worked well together, through several difficult incidents. I had arranged a taxi to pick us up at 6:30 that morning, but by 6:50 he had not shown up, so we went out onto the street to hail a taxi. A yellow minibus stopped, and we got in. But it was rickety, the door wouldn't close completely, and the driver thought the solution to the language problem was to shout in my ear. We couldn't imagine putting up with this all day. Just then we saw a good taxi turn into the hotel driveway and decided it must be the taxi I had arranged, so we jumped out.

It wasn't, but it was a good cab, and we got a good price from him. But we were a bit leery because he had another man in the front seat with him. Right behind him was another good cab with only the driver, and he said he'd give us the same price. We decided to go with him.

The first driver, however, objected. He yelled at the second driver and yelled at me. When I tried to get in the second cab, he grabbed my daypack and tried to pull it away. I had to pry his fingers loose. I told him it was because he had two people in his cab, so he went back there and angrily

ejected his friend. That gave us the chance to get in and get away. But as we were about to make a left turn out of the hotel driveway, the first driver, still raging, pulled past us on the left and made a right turn right in front of us.

At least he was gone after that. Or so we thought. A couple of blocks later, there he was again, right behind us, riding our bumper, and then he pulled around us and cut us off with less than an inch to spare. He angled across in front of us and slammed on his brakes, blocking the whole narrow street diagonally. We managed to pull around him on the sidewalk and some other cars did too, leaving him and the traffic jam he had caused behind. Then we really were rid of him.

It was about a two-hour drive through beautiful countryside, with grain from newly harvested fields piled in loess village courtyards, to the reservoir, on the other side of which was Binglingsi. We were surrounded by touts with photos of boats. We consulted and picked the best looking one and bargained him down to 300 yuan, round trip.

An hour across the reservoir and up the muddy Huang He (the Yellow River) and we reached a Utah-like area of sharp spires and narrow canyons, and finally docked at the temple. Binglingsi is a huge Buddha, 90 feet high, carved into the cliff and flanked by 183 caves excavated into the cliff, with painted interiors, extending far above the Buddha.

There was a difficulty, however. In China there are always difficulties. Half the cliff was covered with scaffolding, and we were not allowed into any but a few caves near the entrance. In particular, they would not let us see the famous Caves 169 and 172. Sandra objected vociferously, and eventually they did give us permission, for 200 yuan apiece (\$24). I'm told in China difficulties can always be solved with enough money, but I'm too cheap to have much personal experience in that regard.

We climbed up six or seven steep, ladder-like flights of wooden stairs on the face of the cliff and along a catwalk to the caves. In general, I'm not fond of Buddhist art. In Confucian art, the men always have a look of being engaged with the world—curious or determined—whereas in Buddhist art the Buddhas are expressionless and disengaged. In Cave 169, that was certainly true of the central Buddhas in each picture. But the other figures exhibited the full range of human attitudes and character traits. They really were magnificent.

Back down on the ground, Sandra and I gave each other high fives for our success.

Then we hired a tuk-tuk and bounced back along a narrow canyon several

miles to a wonderful Tibetan Buddhist temple. Sandra made an incense offering.

Our next adventure came when we boarded the boat again. The price had gone up from 300 yuan to 350 yuan. I was furious at this implicit threat to abandon us on the far side of the lake. I summoned up the little Chinese I knew and said, “Lai hui, san bai yuan; lai, ling yuan.” (“Round trip, 300 yuan; one-way, zero yuan.”) And I looked over at the boats that had recently arrived with other tourists, as though I were about to go over and negotiate with them. He argued, but we both ignored him, and finally he took us back.

So it was a good day together. We had passed through beautiful countryside and seen one of China’s most remarkable ancient sights. We had had the high of overcoming several serious difficulties, proving our toughness as travellers. Things looked good for our week of travel together.

Then everything fell apart.

It was 3:30 in the afternoon when we got back to town. I pointed out to Sandra that we still had time to take this afternoon’s train to Jiayuguan, if we wanted to. She said no, she wanted to go back to the hotel and take a bath and go out to Food Alley for a good Mongolian barbecue. That was okay with me.

We had the taxi driver drop us at the train station, and there we waited in line to buy tickets for the next morning’s train. I asked the clerk for that train in my Chinese and showed her a slip of paper on which I had written the particulars in Chinese characters. When she gave me the tickets, I walked away with a feeling of triumph.

Then I looked at the ticket. It was for the next afternoon’s train. I went back to the head of the line and told the clerk she had given me the wrong ticket. I wanted the morning train. “Mei you,” she said. “Don’t have.”

I had wanted to spend a relaxed evening in Lanzhou with Sandra, but I certainly did not want to spend another entire day in this ugly town. I told Sandra this, and I suggested again that we take this afternoon’s train, if we could, since the next morning’s seemed to be impossible.

Now my impression at the time was that she agreed with this. But to be honest, I cannot remember any specific utterance in which she said she agreed.

There was a window with no line. I went to it. The clerk changed the tickets without any fuss.

For the next hour we had too much to do for me to notice anything of an interactional nature. We rushed back to the hotel, packed up, checked

out of the hotel, and rushed back to the station.

As we got out of the taxi at the station, I said, “Why don’t I watch our suitcases and you go get us some food.”

She replied, “Why don’t I carry my own suitcase, and buy food for myself.”

I was stunned. I had thought we were working so well together, manipulating the gears of the Chinese infrastructure. It was if suddenly the Good Sandra had turned into the Bad Sandra.

She went off to the grocery store next to the station, and I went off to the same grocery store. She stood at one counter picking out items and I stood at another. Then she moved over to mine and I moved over to hers. I paid first and left, went into the crowded waiting room and fought my way to near the front. I found a seat there and saved the one next to me for her.

But when the gate was opened, she had not shown up yet. I gave the room one last scan, and then followed the crowds to board the train. Ten minutes later, just as the train was about to pull out of the station, she strolled onto our car and took the seat next to me, insisting on the window seat since that’s what her ticket said. While I had been in the waiting room, she had stopped off at a sidewalk restaurant for a quick bowl of noodles.

Her behavior toward me during the trip ranged from civil to icy.

Chinese trains have three classes—soft sleeper, which costs as much as an airplane; hard sleeper, which is comfortable, reasonably priced, and perfectly adequate; and hard seat, which when it gets crowded can be grueling indeed. Later I spent some time on a crowded, all-night hard seat car, and people were sprawled in the most improbable positions. A man slept on the floor to allow his wife to spread across two seats. Strangers’ heads flopped on their neighbors’ shoulders. Outstretched legs blocked the aisles. People camped out in the spaces between cars.

I had only been able to get hard seat tickets. So there we were.

Shortly after we started a dour People’s Liberation Army soldier came by and stared at us sternly. He signalled that we should get our bags and follow him. We looked puzzled. He put his two palms together and tilted his head to indicate sleep. He would get us hard sleeper berths.

We lugged our luggage after him through two cars, and he deposited us in front of the desk of some sort of functionary. Eventually, we realized this is where you can buy upgrades, if a berth is available. For the next hour, I stood at the front of a pressing crowd, being ignored, believing it was because I was a foreigner, getting madder and madder, trying to calm myself by saying, “This is why I’m doing this trip now and not when I’m 70,”

while a uniformed woman reached around me for money from the Chinese and gave them tickets.

During this time, Sandra was standing out of the crowd, between the cars, guarding our suitcases and fuming—for all I could tell afterwards, fuming at me.

Finally, when she had served everyone in the crowd, the clerk closed down her desk, signalled me to wait, and walked off toward the hard sleeper cars. I then realized that all those other people had bought unreserved hard seats, and were now paying for whatever they could get. I was not in competition with them at all. The woman returned fifteen minutes later, took our money, and led us several cars away to empty berths in adjacent compartments.

Our interaction that evening was pleasant enough without actually being friendly.

I slept reasonably well. The lights came on at 6:45 the next morning, and everyone got up, including, eventually, me. We made a stop in a town called Qing Shui, and I found it on my aeronautic map of the region. Sandra was already up. I asked her if she wanted to see where we were on the map. She said curtly, “No.” I took that as an announcement that I was still dealing with the Bad Sandra.

A little later I saw snowcapped peaks behind the first range of mountains, and I told Sandra about them. “I’ve been watching them,” she said icily.

A little later I saw my first Bactrian, two-humped camel, pulling a cart. My first impulse was to tell Sandra. But I stifled it, predicting her reaction to be boredom bordering on hostility.

A little later she asked if I knew where we were. I replied: “Yes.”

In Jiayuguan I let her choose the hotel. In the taxi on the way there, Sandra said, “There must be a pony somewhere in this pile of shit.”

When I didn’t respond, she said, “You must not know that story.”

“I know the story,” I said. “I just don’t see its relevance.”

We got a suite together in the old, Soviet wing of the hotel. She had been talking all morning about wanting to take a bath, and I wanted to shower too. But when we got to our room and I asked who should go first, she said angrily, “You go ahead. There’s no time for me.” There was no talking her into going first. She went out to the bank instead.

I went downstairs before her and was trying to find out what a fair price for a taxi all day would be. But before they could tell me, Sandra walked past me out the door, and I had to join her. So I went out ignorant, set up to be cheated.

I asked the first driver how much to see the fort and the Great Wall, Jiayuguan's two sites, and he said 180 yuan. I was tempted to go on the meter, so I turned to Sandra and asked if she thought we should. She said, "I can't make a decision if I don't even know what he's asking." And then, before I could answer, "In fact, why don't I just get my own taxi."

"Okay," I said. And then I said, "Fuck you," as I walked away.

It was a harsh thing to say. But I felt she had been saying the same to me for the last fifteen hours, although in more clever ways.

I went down the line of taxis until I found a driver who would take me for 100 yuan.

We followed about a quarter mile behind Sandra's taxi, out to the Jiayuguan Fortress. At the fortress, our paths didn't intersect, although once as I was on the top of the inner wall, I saw her below walking across the courtyard. She was just getting into her taxi as I exited the fortress, but I stopped for an ice cream bar and fell farther behind.

When I got to the Great Wall (its reconstructed, supposed western end), she was walking up to the highest tower several hundred meters ahead of me. There was no catching up – the weather was hot, the altitude was high, the wall was steep, and I was out of condition. But I knew we'd meet; there was only one way up and down. At the next to the last tower, she was there, standing in the shade of the high part of the parapet. I was puffing, sweating, and gasping for air. I said, "Did you know Jiayuguan is 7600 feet in altitude?" She said, "It's easier going down." She had already been to the top.

The next major stop on the standard tour was on the other side of town, the "Xinchang Wei-Jin Art Gallery", 1500-year-old miniature paintings of daily life in a tomb beneath a mound on the desert. But before going there, I had my driver look for another ancient site—he showed me something, but I'm not sure what—and then he stopped for gas and groceries in town. So as we drove out the long straight narrow road to the site, we saw Sandra's taxi returning from it. The drivers honked, but Sandra and I did not wave.

I had the driver drop me off at the bus station. I bought a ticket for Dunhuang the following day. Only one ticket. I couldn't see Sandra and me continuing to travel together. We couldn't even communicate well enough to split the cost of a cab.

When I returned to our hotel room, Sandra was not there. Gradually it dawned on me that neither was her luggage. She had up and left, lock, stock and barrel. I looked around for a message, but there was none. I speculated on where she had gone—left for Dunhuang on the afternoon bus, returned

by train to an earlier town in Gansu she felt she had missed by traveling with me, moved to another hotel, ...

Then I recalled she owed me, I figured, \$240, for expenses so far on this trip. E-mail when we got home was not necessarily an option, because she had said she was just about to switch to another job, maybe in Hong Kong, maybe in Melbourne.

So that was the end of the friendship. We had had difficulties getting together over the years, but when we did, it was the Good Sandra and we had wonderful conversations. It was the Good Sandra as we planned the trip to Gansu together, and the night we spent in Beijing, and the glorious day in Bingleisi. But suddenly at the train station in Lanzhou she turned into the Bad Sandra, and the trip together was doomed.

I wondered how the other men in her life had dealt with the Bad Sandra. Did they buckle under and lick her toes? Did they ignore her until the Good Sandra reappeared? Did they try to coax her out of it? But I usually respond to anger, the kind of anger that denies communication, with greater anger, and we got into an escalating spiral that ended with the end of a friendship.

I suspected the real issue was that she felt she was losing control of her trip, that it was going too fast, and that I was too much in charge. She tried to retake control of her own trip by closing me out of it, and she succeeded. The trip was all hers now.

Not all friends can travel well together.

I didn't see her the rest of the day.

The next morning I went to the bus station, and Sandra showed up ten minutes later. She had merely moved to her own hotel room. I asked her if she wanted to meet for dinner tonight at Charlie's Cafe in Dunhuang. I said I was asking her for a date. "That's sweet," she said. She accepted.

On the bus ride to Dunhuang, across brown gravel desert with bare eroded mountains in the distance, I mostly talked with the bus's five other foreign travellers.

At the Dunhuang bus station I caught Sandra's suitcase for her as it was tossed off the top of the bus. While I was waiting for my own, she went off to buy her bus ticket for Golmud for two days hence. I went and stood in line behind her to buy a ticket for the same bus, and she was at pains to insist to the clerk that we were not together.

I mentioned to her that she owed me \$240. She said she didn't believe it was that much, and anyway she didn't have it. It looked like trouble ahead.

That evening Charlie's Cafe was closed, so we went to Shirley's Restaurant across the street, and got kunbao chicken and Szechuan beef.

First we did the arithmetic. She had me on two counts. I had forgotten to divide by 2, and then I subtracted the 180 yuan she had paid for last night's hotel before rather than after dividing by 2. When I said I wanted cash, she said she didn't have it, and besides, since most of it was hotel bills I had paid on my credit card, she would be acting as my bank. I had to agree with her on that. So I said she could send me a check.

She said she would send the check as soon as I returned her books on Gansu province. Otherwise I would have no incentive to return them. I was of course outraged that she would suspect me of wanting to steal her books, and eventually I called her a despicable person for it.

Then she launched into her story of victimhood. She was losing \$300 on air tickets and had made numerous changes in her itinerary for the sake of traveling with me. But she had wanted a slow-paced, relaxing vacation, and I wanted to race ahead. I had disregarded her wishes when I bought the train tickets in Lanzhou. I was self-centered and did only what I wanted to do—a charge I have heard from enough other people to distress me.

I had no way of keeping up with her dazzling verbal pyrotechnics during this diatribe, or even of hinting at it in this description. But after she was finished, I asked if there was any way we could have predicted this disaster, and used that to launch into my Good Sandra-Bad Sandra theory, the best I could do for a counterattack. I asked how other men in her life had dealt with the Bad Sandra; she didn't know what I was talking about. Then I summarized the whole episode with the coda: "We both like to be in control of our own destinies too much to travel well together." She neither agreed nor disagreed. I said I was sorry that all this had destroyed what I had always thought of as a good friendship.

A bit of silence. Then she catalogued the things she had liked about me, and I responded in kind.

Then we ordered another beer, relaxed, and talked with each other as we had in the past. She recommended things to see in Turpan and Delhi. We laughed about how the China International Tourist Service's primary function is extortion. We debated the optimal time to see a country, as its bureaucracy declines and its tourist traffic increases.

We walked together down to my hotel and we hugged as she boarded a pedicab for her hotel.

Our trip was already planned, so we were going to be in the same places, regardless. The next morning I hopped on a minibus for 10 yuan to Mogao Caves. Sandra and I were both on the morning's only English-speaking tour. She had reserved a taxi for the day for 200 yuan. In the evening, we went

together to the Singing Sand Mountains for a ride on a Bactrian camel. The next day we were on the same bus to Golmud. She was in the window seat, I had the aisle. In Golmud, there was only one hotel, but we stayed in different wings.

Sandra was heading back east from Golmud; I was heading south to Tibet. So we didn't see much of each other in Golmud.

The next day at noon we had our last little adventure together. I was in the lobby with two young Japanese travellers, trying to arrange a bus trip to Lhasa. Sandra came down to check out before going to catch the 2:30 train. In Chinese hotels you have to pay a 10 yuan deposit for a room key that you never receive (the concierge for the floor opens your door), and you are given a receipt, a dirty little scrap of paper. To get the deposit back you have to return your receipt. Sandra had lost hers. She was complaining loudly to the hotel clerks, demanding her deposit back. She said she deserved a discount anyway, since nothing in the room worked—no lights, no hot water. I resisted intervening for as long as I could, but it just looked like too much fun. So I finally leapt to her aid. The argument was with a tall, slender, rule-governed man who spoke excellent English. He remembered taking Sandra's deposit, but refused to return it without the receipt. Regulations. I tried arguments placing blame on the hotel. No dent. I said he was stealing from tourists. No dent. Finally, Sandra gave up, so I did too. She remembered the Lonely Planet guide calling the staff at this hotel "surly", so I found the passage in the book and looked up the word in my Chinese-English dictionary, and I went up to show it to him. "I'm not surly," he said in a surly manner.

Sandra and I hugged goodbye and she went off to the train station.

She got back to America before I did, and her check was waiting for me when I got there. I mailed her books to her my first day back. I haven't seen her since then, although I have gotten post cards from her from Timbuktu, and from Iran where she had gone to witness a total eclipse of the sun.

2 Getting to Lhasa

Formerly China only allowed group tours. Now they allow individual travellers as well, but they are not comfortable with them. The China International Travel Service (CITS) does its best to shunt individual travellers onto fixed tracks, so that they are in effect one large tour, and can be managed more easily. At certain bottlenecks, CITS is able to put a stranglehold on

the routes of travel, and there is almost no avoiding them. Golmud is one of those places. It is the only place you can get into Tibet from China by land, and CITS controls the access. A sign on the bus station ticket window directs all foreign tourists to the CITS office in the Golmud Hotel. The price for a ticket was about \$120, probably five to ten times what a Chinese would pay.

The morning after I arrived, at 8:30, I went down to the CITS office to see if I could get on today's bus. There were two people in front of me already—a young Japanese woman named Aska and a young Japanese man named Yoshi. They were not traveling together. Aska spoke reasonable English; Yoshi none.

The CITS agent was just telling them that they could not take the bus until five or more foreign tourists were ready to go together. New regulation. We had to be part of a tour, and a tour was five people. It didn't matter if the bus was going anyway and had plenty of empty berths.

We were three. We had to find two more before the bus left at 3:30. We learned there were no others in the hotel, but we knew the train from the east came in at noon and all foreign tourists had to stay at the Golmud Hotel. We agreed to meet in the lobby at 11:45 and try to recruit two more people.

The first in from the train was a Canadian couple, Nicholas and Heather. I was unable to convince them to join us. They thought they could get tickets a lot cheaper directly from the bus station, and they went off to try.

Next came a Japanese woman named Yumi, and Aska recruited her. Now we needed one more.

Next came two emaciated, bearded Germans, Buddhist monks in training. They weren't going all the way to Lhasa and thought the price was extortionate. They turned us down and went off to look for another way.

Then three Japanese tourists, a man and two women. Aska asked them, but they said they were too tired from the train trip and wanted to rest in Golmud a day or two. They said one other Japanese backpacker was coming, our last hope for finding a fifth person today.

He arrived. He was young, laid-back, with almost a perpetual puzzled expression, good-looking, wore his emotions on his face. He spoke no English. I didn't catch his name, so let me call him The Kid. Aska talked to him a bit, and then announced that he had agreed. We were now five people, and we could leave today!

But there was a problem. He did not have the Chinese money for the fare; he would have to go to the bank, and they did not open until 3:00, and

that would not give him time to get his ticket at CITS and get to the bus by 3:30. I offered to change yen into yuan for him. But we didn't know the rate. No problem, I said. We can approximate, and in Lhasa I'll return the yen to him when he returns the yuan. He was confused by this until Aska explained: "Deposito." Then he was insulted. I had questioned his honesty. He announced he could not join us after all.

I backtracked and said I would just advance him the yuan. But it was too late.

He went upstairs to get the other three Japanese, and the seven of them sat in the lobby for fifteen minutes discussing the situation. I had no idea what was going on. Finally Yumi announced that they had arrived at a solution. She would exchange yen for yuan with me. Then she would advance The Kid the money until Lhasa.

I had retained my room til three, for half price, and offered to let The Kid shower there. He took me up on it. To show I trusted him, I left him in the room with my luggage. When I got back, he was gone, but his luggage was there, to show he trusted me.

Aska, Yoshi, Yumi, and I went to a nearby noodle shop for lunch, and a grocery for food for the trip. Aska was the first of a type I met quite a few of later on in Tibet and Xinjiang. Young, slight Japanese women in their twenties traveling alone in absolutely wild places, with minimal Chinese, with a backpack the size of a large handbag, insouciantly taking broken-down old buses across the deserts and disembarking at utterly desolate intersections in the hopes that a truck would come along in a day or two to take them to their next destination. Aska had been traveling around Xinjiang for a month, visiting obscure places along both branches of the Silk Road, getting to know tiny towns while waiting days for the bus to arrive. She was cute and soft-spoken but tough as nails.

We boarded the bus at 3:30 at the Tibet Bus Station. It had three rows of double berths, one along each side of the bus and one down the middle. I was fortunate to get a window berth. The berths were about three fourths body length and curved like a lawn chair. During the day you could sit up slightly and during the night you could almost lie down.

We made two stops before leaving Golmud. At the second, Nicholas and Heather boarded. They had worked out a deal with the bus driver and the conductoress for half our price. Aska was furious with them, feeling they had taken advantage of our being on the bus. I told her not to "begrudge other people's good fortune." Later she told them that she did not like Western travellers in general, and them in particular, although she liked me.

The bus headed south across a black gravel desert, and then followed a river flanked by 100-foot sandstone cliffs into the fabled Kunlun Mountains, a metaphor for desolation in Chinese poetry, red, jagged, and barren with sanddrift skirts. Around six we turned west and around eight we stopped at an isolated truck stop. I didn't eat there, and neither did Nicholas and Heather.

After this it was dark. The outline of the horizon was flat for the first half of the night, rounded hills the second half as we crossed the Qilom Mountains. We stopped a couple of times during the night, and I got out to stand once. I was amazed at the brightness of the stars before the three-quarters moon rose.

But I did not sleep well. Each berth came with a huge, bulky blanket, but who knew its history. I put it under my berth. But when night hit, it became bitterly cold, and I no longer cared who else had used it. Even my sweater, my jacket, and the blanket were not enough. My window did not latch, and the jarring of the bus jiggled it open an inch or so every fifteen minutes, a stiff wind slashing my face. Add to this that in front of me were a Chinese married couple whose baby threw up almost immediately. The woman spit on the floor, and the man chain smoked and talked with his wife in piercing tones all night. I had a few moments of drowsiness during the night.

The next morning we crossed Tanggula Pass, 17,000 feet. We drove past the beautiful town of Amdo on a hillside—I was frustrated that we couldn't stop and take pictures—and we stopped two miles on, out of sight of the town, at a garbage-strewn roadside restaurant where the driver had a deal with the restaurant owner. But we saw our first herd of yaks there.

The terrain all day was grassland from the edge of the road to the edge of the snow-capped mountains, which reached up to 23,000 or 24,000 feet. A rare town, and frequent Tibetan walled encampments with separate herds of sheep and of yak, and a small group of horses as well.

Lonely Planet has called this bus ride a nightmare, but in fact the road, though, gravel, was quite good. After all, if the Tibetans revolt, this is the route the Chinese Army will have to take. However, there had been heavy flooding in the spring, and all the bridges were out. Every few hours we would have to take a long, slow, bumpy detour to ford a river.

We stopped for dinner in Damxung, a larger town with a well-to-do Chinese class and a poor Tibetan class. After dark, the road became worse as we descended into Lhasa, only 12,000 feet in altitude.

At the Lhasa bus station, the bus conductress pushed Nicholas and

Heather into a taxi to get them out of view of the CITS agent, and I jumped in with them. We went to the Yak Hotel and got rooms there.

3 The English Lesson

The Potala does not disappoint. It is truly the wonder of the world you hope it will be. I spent a morning going through it and then an afternoon circling it.

The next morning I took a three-hour, 45-kilometer, bone-jarring journey in a broken-down old bus on roads of potholed dirt or under construction. The bus crossed the bridge in Lhasa to the south bank of the river and then went upstream along beautiful wheat and barley country at harvest time, bounded by bare, eroded mountains. It turned off the main road to a village and then up a steep hillside on a slow series of switchbacks. Ganden Monastery came into view, nestled in a bowl-like hollow at the top of the mountain—five or six major temples. I spent the day exploring it.

The next morning I began to feel my time was running short, and I had to figure out how I was going to get out of Tibet to Kathmandu. It might take several days to arrange. I wanted to split the cost of a Land Cruiser with some other travellers. The bulletin board at the Yak Hotel had notes from several people at other hotels looking to hook up with others for the trip out. I took their names down, and went off to their hotels. But they had already checked out.

I spent the day seeing Norbulingka, the Dalai Lama's old summer palace, and Sera Monastery, on the outskirts of Lhasa. More about the latter below.

By that evening I had decided not to spend days arranging a way out. I would just leave, take the public buses as far as they went, and then trust that something would appear.

Early in the next morning, I left Lhasa on the bus for Shigatse, Tibet's second largest town. Once there, I took a tractor-taxi to the other side of town and immediately boarded a bus for Gyantse. Gyantse was wonderful—a very Tibetan town of about 20,000, and not very Chinese off the one main street.

I spent a day wandering around the fortress and the monastery, dodging the dogs in the Tibetan neighborhoods, and walking out into the country where Tibetans were picnicking and harvesting crops. It was all quite beautiful.

I had a nice experience that evening. I went to a restaurant where I

was the only customer. First a Tibetan young man who was raised in India talked to me, complaining bitterly about the poverty of the Tibetans in comparison to the Chinese, about what the Chinese were doing to Tibet, and about all the Chinese “naughty girls” in the “red houses” who “have sex for money”, not a block from the elementary school. He showed me a post card propped on a high shelf that was turned toward the wall; it was a picture of the Dalai Lama. There was a round mirror on the wall with a circular neon light around its perimeter. He pulled its string, the light in front turned off, a light in back came on, and a picture of the Dalai Lama shone through. I asked what the Chinese would do if they discovered that. He said he would be arrested and beaten up and given electric shocks.

He left, and a 15-year-old Tibetan girl who worked there as a sort of waitress came in. She said she was too poor to go to school, so she would never get a good job, but she was trying to learn English. I told her she could learn English pretty well by practicing with tourists, as she was doing with me, and that could well lead to a good job in the growing tourist industry. She said she had two English books. I asked to see them. One was pretty bad—a bizarre phrase book of Buddhist mystical terminology. The other one was okay—a phrase book for people in the tourist industry. We spent about 45 minutes going through about 30 pages of it, her reading me the English and me correcting her pronunciation. Afterwards, I wrote down the ten or twelve words she had the most trouble with and had her practice each of them a dozen times or so. When I was explaining the difference between “who” and “how” to her, I wrote down in pinyin the way they are pronounced—“hu” and “hao”. I think that was a revelation to her. It had never occurred to her that she could write down the pronunciation of English words in a system she could understand. So she immediately took my pen, had me pronounce all the words again, and wrote down in pinyin what she heard.

I thought it was appalling that she only had two English books, so I told her I would buy another one when I got to Shigatse. What I had in mind was an elementary textbook in English for Chinese speakers. But when I got to Shigatse, it turned out that the bookstore had no such book. All their English books were far too advanced, and the clerk was surly and reluctant to help me look. I did manage to find a fairly elementary dictionary of the most common words, however, and bought that. I gave it to a German tourist on her way to Gyantse to give to the girl.

4 Of Monasteries and Dogs

On my last day in Lhasa, I had gone to the Sera Monastery, just beyond the edge of town. I toured the principal temples, and then I saw well up a mountain a retreat called Tsongkhapa's Hermitage. I began to climb up toward it. But Lhasa is at 12,000 feet, and my lungs were not in the best of condition after my pneumonia earlier in the year. Halfway up there was a large shade tree by the path. I sat down and wrote in my journal. There was a magnificent view of Sera Monastery, and of all of Lhasa and the valley it lies in, with the Potala on its hill right in the middle.

A monk came by in a saffron and maroon robe. He had a bunch of peaches girded up in the folds of his robe, and he gave me half a dozen. Then he sat down beside me. I had my Tibet Guide out and beside me for proper names as I wrote. He picked it up and began looking through it aimlessly. I took it and turned to the picture of Sera Monastery before the Cultural Revolution, when it was much larger. He was old enough to remember. Then I turned to a group picture of the Dalai Lama escaping from Tibet in 1959. He asked exactly which person was the Dalai Lama, and when I pointed him out, he focused on him for a long time. I had the impression he was rocking back and forth. We shared only a few words of Chinese, so communication was difficult, but one message did get across. He said, "Dalai Lama," then pointed to Lhasa, then wrote "1999" in the dirt, then held up his fingers and said "Zhongguo" (China), and then blew on his fingers to show the Chinese flying away. "That would be nice," I said.

He invited me to his quarters for tea. We went around the corner of the hill to a small temple, and upstairs to his two small rooms, a flower pot in the window and a view of the Potala. In the corner, his pallet and a shrine with a picture of the Dalai Lama, and below that a Coca Cola can. He made me tea, gave me some bread and more peaches. Conversation was slow. He was 57, had been at Sera for two years, and was at a nearby monastery for four years before that. I took his picture and promised to send it to him.

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I'm afraid I got monasteried out three days later in Shigatse. I'm reluctant to say this, because I feel contempt for the American tourists who go to Europe once in their lifetime and don't go into the Florence cathedral because they've already seen a cathedral in Paris. But I'm afraid after seeing Tashilhumpo monastery in Shigatse, I decided I didn't need to see any more.

Actually, it would be more correct to say that I got dogged out in Shigatse. I have a thing about dogs. I view them as carnivores and myself as carni. Actually, this is my view of dogs in America. I'm afraid of dogs in America. I'm not afraid of dogs in Europe. In the Third World, dogs are afraid of me. This in part is because I'm usually, by necessity, more alert and assertive—well, aggressive—when travelling in the Third World, and in part because of the random and frequent cruelty practiced against dogs by the people in the Third World. I remember the Indian village I went to in the Bolivian jungle three years ago where the dogs must have viewed human beings, from toddlers on up, primarily as creatures that would whack them with sticks at unpredictable moments.

But China is different from the rest of the Third World. When I was in Taiwan two years ago, I noticed the packs of wild dogs that slinked around the streets of Taipei during the day and took over the city at night. In the street markets vendors have baskets full of cute little puppies that they sell. People apparently buy them, but then after a year when they are no longer so cute, they turn them loose in the streets to fend for themselves.

I had a run-in with a Taiwanese dog when I was driving through the interior of Taiwan, south of Taipei. At Sun-Moon Lake I parked in a parking lot across from a temple. Next to my car was an array of shitake mushrooms drying in the sun, so I took a picture of it. Then over in the corner of the parking lot, at the end of a row of shops, I saw two men washing shitake mushrooms in a tub of water, and I thought that would make a good picture. I went over and asked their permission. They said yes, so I positioned myself to take a picture. Then I happened to glance down and see a small but very vicious-looking dog about ten feet away, next to his doghouse. He was on a leash, but I was well within his reach, standing in the one small patch of the planet Earth that he thought of as his own, making what in his doggy mind might have been interpreted as threatening gestures toward his owners. So I decided to take a few discrete steps backward. I don't know whether this saved me or triggered the attack, but he charged and lunged for my ankle, and I backed up so quickly I tripped and fell and skinned my elbow; it's still scarred. He didn't break my skin, but there were now three neat incisions in my pants leg and I had a bruise on my ankle the size and shape of a canine tooth.

That incident was always fresh in my mind in Tibet.

I guess in the rest of China, the Communists, especially during the Cultural Revolution, made a concerted effort to rid the cities of dogs. I was told that in Tibet the people view dogs as reincarnations of bad monks, so

they gave them refuge in the monasteries.

I realize that dogs and people live parallel lives, rarely intersecting. Dogs care mostly about other dogs. As I paid my admission at Palkhor Monastery in Gyantse, I heard a dog barking angrily and charging past right behind me. I wheeled in alarm, but he was only attacking another male dog that was attempting to copulate with apparently the wrong female.

In Lhasa and Gyantse I had no trouble with the dogs. They were mostly sleeping in the shadows, and I'd triangulate among them, trying to maximize my distance from the nearest, holding my day pack between me and it.

In Shigatse, during midday when the monastery was closed, I walked through a Tibetan neighborhood and up the mountain to the fortress. As I entered one small plaza in the town, a dog with a limp limped into the wrong part of the plaza and several other dogs attacked it loudly and chased it back. That made the dogs around the corner perk up at the noise and wait alertly to see what was happening. And what was the first thing they saw come around the corner, but me. Well, it made me nervous, but I managed to keep them calm by speaking softly and carrying a big daypack.

But later that afternoon as I went around Tashilhumpo, the incident happened that completely unnerved me. As I came out of a temple into the narrow street, I heard a dog, not barking, but giving off that low growl that lets you know he means business. I looked his way and saw that he was looking directly at me. I don't know why. A couple of other dogs joined him, ready for the attack. I ducked into the closest open door I saw, and closed it. It turned out to be a storeroom, and in the corner was a stack of walking sticks. I picked out the biggest I could find, something about six feet high and two inches thick, and I went out onto the street again, thumping the stick loudly on the pavement. It worked. The attacking dogs turned and slinked away. So I continued around the monastery thumping the stick as loudly as I could, and dogs avoided me.

But there was a down side to this strategy. There was one narrow place in a passage where three dogs were sleeping. Several French women ahead of me deftly stepped between the dogs' legs and got past without disturbing them. Then I came along, thumping my stick. The dogs woke up, and moved out of the way, but stood watching me from a moderate distance, highly agitated. Then I came to another narrow passage, with a dog in the middle of the path. When I thumped, he got up and barked at me, also highly agitated, and stood his ground, having no place really to go. It was a standoff, and finally I decided I had had enough of this monastery, and as it turned out, monasteries in general, and I left.

(At least I was not alone in my concern about dogs. In Tingri I met a backpacker from New Zealand who had just walked to the Everest base camp and back, and he said the entire way he had to fight off dogs with his walking stick. It didn't help to bend down and pick up a rock. They would just wait poised til you threw and then attack. They would gang up and he felt he was being pack-hunted.)

On the bus the next day, the only other foreigners were two Japanese waifs—young women traveling with backpacks the size of large handbags. True to form, they got off at the utterly desolate turnoff to Sakya Monastery, to wait for whatever might come along in the next day or two. I had intended to myself. But on the spur of the moment, I decided that I'd seen enough monasteries and that I should push on.

5 Escape from Tibet

The bus line gave out in Lhatse. I'd have to find some other way to travel. I thought back in Lhasa that it would be easy enough to catch a ride with some Land Cruiser that was already taking tourists to the border and had an extra seat. That afternoon I saw some Italian tourists and I struck up a conversation, tried to summon up all the charm I am capable of. I won them over, but I had to get the permission of their group leaders. I won them over, but I had to get the permission of the driver. He complained that the shock absorbers were worn, and the Land Cruiser couldn't take that much weight.

That was what I encountered for the rest of my trip out of Tibet. Someone, the guide, the driver, the group leader, someone always had a reason I could not be taken along. Back in my youth when I was hitchhiking around the United States and Europe, I had a philosophy of life that made asking for rides easy. Now I just felt like a beggar. I hated having to plead for a ride, and I hated putting other people in the uncomfortable position of having to turn me down. I hated it that whenever I started up a conversation with someone, I had to calculate the best moment to ask.

So the next morning I went out to the "Friendship Highway" and stuck my thumb out. I stood there for about half an hour and two trucks passed. Then a jeep stopped on the other side of the road and the driver and his young helper asked me if I wanted to go back to Shigatse. I said no, but I'd pay them 200 yuan (\$24) if they'd take me to Tingri, one day from the Nepalese border. They said yes.

This part of the road was the worst of the entire trip. The driver, just a kid really, was pretty good. He charged through the puddles without stopping. He rode ruts on the rims if they were deeper than his clearance. He easily passed several Land Cruisers that were stuck in the mud. But then he got overconfident, and charged into a long stretch of deep mud on a curve without checking it out beforehand. Halfway along the ruts got very deep and the edges of the ruts were too slippery to hold the car, and he slipped in and ended up propped up on the mound between the ruts with his wheels spinning freely.

We got out and tossed rocks under the wheels and tried pushing, but the car stayed where it was. Soon half a dozen trucks had lined up behind us, unable to get past. Finally, the truck driver just behind us got impatient. He pulled forward, made contact with the jeep's bumper, and pushed it through to dry land, scraping its bottom along the rocky mud.

There is a town called Shekar that is also called New Tingri, for some reason, about 80 kilometers before the real Tingri, nothing more than a hotel and a few roadside restaurants. We stopped there for lunch, and then the driver started to take my suitcase out, saying this was Tingri. I objected and insisted he drive on. Then he turned toward the hotel, and I objected again. Finally he proceeded on in the right direction. But about a kilometer out of town, just before the crest of a hill, he stopped again. His helper got out and walked to the top of the hill to peek over. Then he tried to explain something to me that included the gesture of a salute. I insisted we go on, and with some reservation, he did. Just over the top of the hill, I could see the police post.

We parked behind a row of trucks there and the two boys went to check in. A few minutes later they returned with a Chinese soldier. The soldier managed to explain to me that the boys did not have the passports to travel beyond this post. I told him that then he had to get me a ride in one of those trucks. I was polite but demanding. I figured at this point my leverage was that if he didn't get me a ride, I would be *his* problem. I followed him into the police post where the truck drivers were sitting around eating and drinking tea. I said I would pay the boys 100 yuan for bringing me this far, and I'd pay a truck driver the other 100 yuan. Then I asked where the toilet was and walked there slowly, giving them time to discuss the offer among themselves. When I got back, the soldier pointed out the truck driver who would take me and said because of the difference in the roads, I should give the boys 150 yuan and the truck driver 50 yuan.

The rest of the way to Tingri was a good smooth gravel road with no

mud.

In Tingri it was the same story with the Land Cruisers. None of them had any room, even the retired American man traveling alone. We had a good, bantering conversation before I asked, but when I asked, he closed up and looked away. Every truck driver I asked for a ride to the border town of Zhang Mu just laughed at me; I don't know for sure that any of them understood a word I said, even the name of the town.

But the view of Everest and its neighbors from Tingri was impressive.

The hotels in town were more like caravansarais—a rectangle of mud brick rooms with dirt floors around a central courtyard with a well on one side of the courtyard and a pit toilet in a corner. There were no locks on the doors, so I put an oxygen cannister I was traveling with just inside my door. Sure enough, around one in the morning, someone tried to get into my room, knocked over the cannister, and woke me up. I yelled at him and he quickly withdrew.

The next morning I went out to the road again, with little hope and much desperation. I knew of every vehicle in town and I had already asked their drivers for a ride. After about fifteen minutes a truck with three men in the front seat turned out of one of the hotels. I gave the driver a quick sequence of three gestures—the thumb for hitchhiking, rubbing the tips of the fingers together in the universal gesture for money, and pointing to the back of the truck. He stopped. I offered him 100 yuan (\$12) for a ride to the border. He said 150 (\$18). I knew that was too much but I didn't feel I was in a position to bargain, so I said yes.

The first thing I had to do was alter my environment. The back of the truck was completely enclosed, so I would have had no view on one of the most spectacular roads in the world. The back of the truck had a wooden panel that came up to about waist level. Two side flaps of canvas were tied together in the middle. A top flap came down to about mid-chest level. I untied the side flaps and pushed them aside and tucked them in. I rolled up the top flap to above head level and pinned it up there with a safety pin I had in my daypack. So now I had a window about two feet wide and three feet high, and I spent the day looking out. Of course, it is always a bit disconcerting when you look out backwards in a vehicle and see not where you are going but where you have been. But I tried to convince myself that I was seeing just as much.

The road was bumpy, so I had to stand for 200 kilometers, looking out my window, my hands grasping the top of the wooden panel, my knees flexed, my feet ready to dance in any direction to keep my balance as we

hit the bumps. I soon learned that when the truck slowed down to almost a complete stop, that was no time to relax. The worst of the bumps were imminent. Only once or twice in the whole trip was I thrown against the side panel.

There was a half-inch-deep layer of dry loose dusty dirt covering the floor of the back of the truck, and after a few bumps it covered my suitcase and my daypack and me. By me, I mean my coat, my hair, my face. I took off my glasses when I could no longer see the scenery and they were brown with dirt. I blinked to tear and clear some the dust out of my eyes, and when I wiped the tear away, it was mud. I took a few shakey pictures of the Everest Range at sunrise from my little window, but soon my camera was so covered with dirt I thought I'd better keep it put away to save it from more damage.

There were kilometer markers all along the road, so I could tell how far I had to go, and I charted the kilometers against my physical state. I figured for the first 80 kilometers or so, I was at 100%. In the next 50 or 60 kilometers I dropped down to about 90%. After 150 kilometers, I was down to 80%, and in the last ten kilometers, I plummeted rapidly to 70%.

When I travel I tend to get very goal-driven and assertive, sometimes verging over into aggressiveness. This then becomes anger. Several years ago I noticed that I was often, when traveling, going through the world angry. I figured that didn't make sense, so after that, whenever I caught myself angry, I would take a deep breath, calm myself down, and start enjoying my life again. I was angry in the back of the truck, but when I tried to calm myself down, I realized I shouldn't. Anger was the only emotion that could provide me with the energy I needed to survive this experience.

When I verbalized the anger to myself, it always seemed to come out, "I'm too old for this." When I tried to calm myself down, my sentence was, "This is why I'm doing this now and not waiting until I'm seventy."

Another sentence I often verbalize lately: In March I almost died (well, 50-50) of pneumothorax during an operation on my lungs. Since then, whenever I have an especially beautiful day, and I've had quite a few, I say to myself, "I might not have had this day." Now, bouncing and filthy in the back of the truck, this sentence took on an ironic twist.

My anger was particularly directed against the Land Cruisers that pulled up behind and passed us. The comfortable Land Cruisers that had refused me a ride. And the tourists in them. Here we were passing through some of the world's most beautiful and unique scenery, and the tourists in the Land Cruisers were sleeping!

In the early afternoon the truck stopped for a long time. Since I could not see ahead, I didn't know why, and I didn't want to get out for fear the driver would start up again without seeing me. But finally I did get out. It was the police post at Nyalam, some 30 kilometers before Zhang Mu. We were behind three Land Cruisers. I must have been quite a sight, covered in deep layers of dirt, because the tourists who were standing around had trouble suppressing their laughter. One middle-aged Northern European man didn't even try. I pretended to ignore him, but when I took off my jacket to shake off some of the dirt, I just happened to shake it in his direction. He zipped behind the Land Cruiser.

Another hour downhill through beautiful, green, and very non-Tibetan agricultural country brought us to Zhang Mu. The town is strung along the switchbacks of the road for several kilometers. We wove among long lines of trucks parked on the narrow road. Then we came to a stop. I finally figured out we were not going to be starting again, so I got out. A recent landslide—we were the second vehicle behind it—had blocked the road with large boulders.

I paid the driver, looped my suitcase over my shoulder, scrambled over the boulders, and continued down the road on foot, for three kilometers, until I reached the Chinese border post.

There I got a jeep to take me the ten kilometers to Kodari, the Nepalese border post; a bunch of locals jumped in too as we took off. This was perhaps the worst, muddiest stretch of road on the entire trip, and I wasn't sure my driver would make it as he charged again and again up one muddy slope.

In Kodari I got a taxi to Kathmandu. This part of the trip was long and hard only because I was so exhausted. When I got to a hotel in the Thamel district of Kathmandu, all I cared about was whether they had hot showers and laundry service.

6 The World Travellers of Kashgar

In one mad day I went out to the Kathmandu airport, took a flight to Delhi, got drenched by a monsoon in a two-hour attempt to see something of Delhi, bought a ticket to Karachi and flew there, bought a ticket to Islamabad and flew there, and at two o'clock in the morning had a cab driver I didn't trust drive me through dark empty streets to a hotel I had no confidence in. The next day early I caught the bus up the Karakorum Highway to Gilgit, and

the day after that I hired a jeep to take me to Baltit. I stayed there for several days, hiking up a steep canyon to a high plateau or just sitting in my hotel room and looking at the huge rainbow that ended at the base of the brilliant, 25,600-foot gleaming snow pyramid of Rakaposhi. The next day I got a jeep to take me to Sost, the last town in Pakistan before the Chinese border.

The bus company didn't have enough people for a bus, so they stuffed us into two jeeps. The other foreigners with me were Seiji from Osaka, David, a civil engineer from Scotland who had just finished working on a 10-kilometer causeway bridge in Pakistan, and a Scottish couple now living on the Riviera, Scott and Ann Morrison. Scott was in cable networks and Ann was an unemployed pharmacist; they were on vacation. I told Ann she looked like Hilary Clinton, and then quickly added that I thought Hilary Clinton was a very attractive woman.

The road followed the dramatic canyon of the Hunza River to its end—Utah, only bigger. The area was deserted except for the occasional herd of goats with a goatherd, and several police posts. The road switched back and forth up a mountain and then we were at the high Khunjerab Pass, 15,600 feet, with a stone monument to mark the China-Pakistan border in the midst of wide sweeping deserted grassland surrounded by snow-capped peaks.

We reached Tashkurgan, the first town in China, by late afternoon. I walked streets photographing women and girls in their colorful Tadjik outfits. Gangs of children begged to have their pictures taken. Goats and cows had their run of the streets and courtyards. I found my way to the large ruin of a fort, more a pile of rocks in which wonderfully curved walls could be discerned. At the top, there was a view of the large flat grassland with grazing livestock, riven with streams, extending all the way to the chocolate mountains in the east. Two Western photographers waited there to catch the last spangle of sunset on the rock wall.

The next day's bus arrived in Kashgar mid-afternoon. That evening I joined Ann, Scott, and David at the Oasis Cafe, across from my Seman Hotel. At the next table were a Norwegian Olof and three Americans, Mike from Jane Street in Greenwich Village who had been studying in China for a year, Will from Oakland with red hair and dry humor who renovates houses for a living and takes long travel breaks in between, and a man from Wisconsin.

They had just been to the former Soviet Central Asia, and were stuck with \$25 worth of Khazakh money and a book by Petrarch. A Uighur man

came by trying to sell them knives, and they enlisted his aid. He went away and came back with a man who was willing to buy the Khazakh money for 120 yuan (\$14.40); he wasn't interested in Petrarch. They negotiated a long time, but no deal.

I joined them after Ann, Scott and David left. All were around thirty and long-term backpackers. We traded stories of being shaken down by police. I told my Ukraine and Mexico stories. The Wisconsin man had been shaken down once in Kirghizistan and twice in Kazakhstan. A policeman will stop you for no reason, often shortly before your train is to leave, and pull you into a little room where there are about twenty other policemen. They will make you take all your money out and lay it on the table, and then take all your other stuff out, and then in the confusion will try to steal something. He advised being calm and friendly during all this. They are just trying to have a little fun.

The next day I explored the bazaars, parks and mosques of Kashgar by foot, taxi and donkey cart. In the evening I returned to the Oasis Cafe, and joined Mike, Will, Sam from Antwerp, Marita from Holland and Kristian from Zurich, a couple, and Olof and his travelling companion Heidi, a veterinarian from Syracuse, New York, an attractive, vivacious, exuberant woman in her mid 30s. All had been traveling for months and living on nothing.

We concocted a crazy plan to sneak into the buffet dinner for tours at the Qiliwak Hotel. We appointed Mike our tour leader and he led us in. But they caught on to us right away. They led us to a back table, let us eat our fill, and then brought us a bill for 30 yuan apiece, reasonable enough.

On our way back to the hotel we passed a Muslim restaurant with a singer and several Uighur couples dancing. We peeked in, and then went in, some welcoming us, some hostile to us until they could force glasses of raki down our throats, in challenges to chug-a-lug. Heidi spent the whole time dancing wildly, sometimes with Uighur men, sometimes alone, and one amazingly sensual dance with Sam from Antwerp. Never with Olof, her traveling companion, who left early. Then one final dance, more of a battle actually, with a drunk, fat, brutish Uighur man. I told her afterwards I had been worried for her. "I could handle him," she said dismissively.

We returned to the Seman Hotel (or the Sperm Hotel, as Heidi called it), and went to the karaoke bar. We were the only ones there. To give you an idea of the quality of the songs, the best was "You Light Up My Life". We took turns singing. I deadpanned my lines, and to the politically obnoxious "Exodus" added lyrics about killing Arabs. But Heidi was the

star; she sang with flair and in tune. The manager of the bar came up to Mike and asked if any of us men wanted a woman. Four prostitutes came in and sat in the back of the room for a bit, but when none of us seemed interested, disappeared into a side room.

After they closed the bar down, Heidi decided to lead us on a juvenile tour of the old wing of the hotel, that used to be the Russian consulate. We walked through the upstairs hallway as the night clerk followed us at a discrete distance, to make sure the drunk foreigners did no damage.

Then we turned in after one. Or so I thought. I heard Heidi whisper my name at the door. I briefly imagined she wanted a tryst, but when I opened the door, Mike was there to and they both broke into giggles. The woman across the hall, an American on a Kashgar Sunday Bazaar tour, opened her door and asked us to be quiet.

The next morning I went early to the Sunday bazaar, and found my way to the livestock market. Trucks jockeyed their way into the packed enclosure and let down the back gate. Goats exploded from the back and sheep were pulled off. The men would spread a circle of fresh grass, and that contained the sheep. They were selected one by one and noosed together in a long line, head to head, like interlocked fingers, with one long rope. Occasionally a sheep would bolt from the circle and a man would chase it and beat it on the rump with a switch or a length of rope back into the circle. One young man picked up a large stake, about two inches in diameter, and swung it at a stray sheep and klonked it on the back of its skull. It went down immediately. Several boys tried for ten or fifteen minutes to revive it. The last I saw it, it was still lying there, occasionally convulsing, still out cold. The boys had put a stalk of green grass by its mouth. Later in the day when I returned there, sheep were being sold, and then sheared. Just outside the livestock market, sheepskins were for sale, and food stalls were serving mutton.

I ran into Scott and Ann at the bazaar, and we agreed to meet in the afternoon to go to the ruins of the old city of Hanoi, some thirty kilometers outside Kashgar in the desert.

We met at three, flagged a taxi, and negotiated a price, helped by the fact that he had no idea where it was. We circled around the Sunday market, headed northeast past the Abakh Hoja Tombs. After a while we reached a town where the road was closed because they were building grape arbors over it. We followed a narrow lane next to a ditch, and then after some lengthy consultation with locals, we jogged over to the northwest about 500 meters and continued northeast on a very rough road that had our driver cursing, whose only other traffic was donkey carts. The road was lined with

double rows of poplar trees on both sides, and on the other side of the poplars were farming compounds walled with mud brick. Then the road splintered into multiple tracks across the gravel desert. We hesitated, but then I spotted the Mor Pagoda in the distance, and we followed the desert tracks that would take us closest. Eventually we got there.

I loved it. It was the real Takla Makan Desert. The pagoda and another nearby building dated from the 500s, and Xuan Zang, the ancient Chinese Buddhist pilgrim to India, had passed this way and worshipped at this temple. This was the ruin of an old Silk Road principality. Scott and Ann were excited as well, and even the driver seemed to take an brief interest.

But back on the road all that was gone. His taxi was taking a beating, and even though we could not understand his Chinese, we understood him when he said he had never been here before and he was never coming back.

That evening I had dinner with Scott and Ann in a restaurant we found, and then I joined Will, Olof and Heidi at John's Cafe. Heidi was in a desperate search for good chocolate. The sundae at John's Cafe was terrible, the Oasis was closed, and Dove bars we bought at a stand outside the hotel tasted like wax.

The party broke up at 12:30. Early the next morning I took the bus out of Kashgar.

7 Uncle Bob and Mister Xu

I had made a mad vow to travel only by land in China. I was at the farthest reach of China, and my plane home left from Hong Kong in two and a half weeks.

The bus from Kashgar to Urumchi was two days, lying on a pallet berth. Flat gravel desert on the right, dry brownish red fractal mountains on the left, for two days. The old woman in the berth next to mine was friendly and smiled at me, but in two days we did not manage to communicate one word.

I got off in the middle of the night in a desolate town of Toksun before Urumchi and negotiated with an unsavory cab driver to take me on a shortcut to Turpan. I stayed alert during this drive.

A day in Turpan seeing the ruins of ancient adobe desert ruins, looking more like strange geological formations, bizarre humps of mud.

Then a three-day train ride to Chengdu, in Sichuan. When the train stopped in Hami, I bought a bundle of three of the famous Hami melons on

the platform, kept one for myself and gave the other two to my neighbors. As a result I spent the next three days fighting off or giving in to reciprocal offers of food. The old woman from the Kashgar bus was in the compartment next to mine, and for three more days we did not manage to communicate one word between us, try though we did. On the evening of the second day we were passing through the desert of the Hexi corridor, a sliver of the Gobi desert visible in the distant, broken fragments of the Great Wall and its towers running parallel to the track. On the morning of the third day we were in the steep green valleys of Sichuan, above the Jialiang Jiang, a tributary of the Yangtze, green-gray with copper-brown currents, people below carrying large loads on their backs as they forded the river on foot or rode on rowed ferries. The hills were steep with scattered attempts at terraces.

Near Chengdu, I went to Emeishan, where I spent two days hiking the steep, often staired, misty trails of mountains out of Chinese landscape paintings, spending the night in a frigid Buddhist monastery and scaring off marauding baboon-sized Tibetan macaques with a 5-yuan monkey stick.

On the two-day train ride to Kunming, I offered a tangerine to Lu Pan, a 28-year-old salesman for a medical electronics firm, and in Kunming he stood in line with me for an hour to make sure I got a good ticket for my next two-day train ride to Guilin. On that ride I talked with a young woman from Manchuria who spoke good English, although she made mistakes like “barrier” for “barren” and “air conductored” for “air conditioned”, and earnestly wrote down all my corrections in her notebook of English phrases. She laughed at the speed of my recent travels and thought I should travel with a friend.

Guilin is an ugly Chinese city plunked down in an utterly beautiful natural setting. It is as though the Americans had taken the beautiful Yosemite valley and filled it with Fresno. I had bitten into a bad hard-boiled egg at a train station in the morning, and ate a dubious street dinner in the evening. Whatever the cause, I spent the night emptying out at both ends, and the morning lying utterly spent on my bed, barely able to move. I got up around noon to move slowly around town, drinking liters to fight dehydration in the heat. There was supposed to be a beautiful view from the roof of the Li Jiang Hotel, and indeed there was. When I went out, the guide was showing a tour group the view. When I went to leave, the tour group had already left and the guide had locked the door behind her. I had to shout down to the doorman thirteen stories below to get released. In the late afternoon I took the bus to the smaller town of Yangshuo, in an even

more beautiful natural setting.

I wanted to arrange a river trip through the karst peaks, and arrange my bus and boat to Hong Kong. In the lobby of the Sihai hotel there was a CITS desk, and behind it was Uncle Bob. He spoke excellent English, but was very overbearing and tightly wound. He said the best part of the river was between Xingping and Yanti, but if I was only going to be here one day, he insisted I should get off at Xingping and bicycle back from there. He didn't like my idea of going all the way to Yanti and hiring a taxi to wait for me there. But when I insisted on doing that, he insisted on arranging the taxi. "I can get my own taxi," I said. "Of course you can!" he shouted, almost vituperatively. "But I can get it for you *cheaper!*"

For getting to Hong Kong, he strongly discouraged my plan of taking the six-hour night bus to Wuzhou and spending all day the following day taking a hydrofoil down the West River. The bus was unreliable and took a bad road, and you had to catch it at night out on the highway. He insisted I take a twelve-hour night bus to Guangzhou instead, missing the landscape of Guangdong province, and taking a three-hour high-speed ferry from there. He would sell me all the tickets here.

Uncle Bob epitomized for me the coercive nature of the official Chinese tourist industry, in an extreme and naked form, trying to channel all tourists into a small number of options and demanding top dollar for everything.

I went out for dinner, and when I came back, I signed up for the boat trip all the way to Yanti, and paid him 80 yuan for a taxi to pick me up there. He pushed me to buy his Hong Kong package as well, but I postponed.

The next morning Uncle Bob walked me down to the river and showed me my boat, now trying to sell me the night bus to Wuzhou and the hydrofoil to Hong Kong, for a combined price of 500 yuan. I learned later the true cost was 340 yuan.

There were about fifteen tourists on the boat, including a young Dutch couple and two dour heavy-set French women. I spent the ride sitting on a small stool on the front deck. Once when I stood up to take a picture, one of the French women grabbed my seat. I quickly reclaimed it.

The Li River passes through magnificent jungle-covered steep karst peaks, and the river itself teems with life. Gangs of boys swam in swimsuits. Girls in twos and threes waded in shallow water in hiked-up skirts. Fishermen with cormorants stood on three-log boats barely above the level of the water. Water buffalo grazed with their heads underwater eating river weeds, and a woman pulled up weeds from the bottom and piled them onto her boat. People with bundles of grass at each end of a balanced pole walked along

the bank.

At Yangti I got off, and so did the young Dutch couple and the dour French women. The taxi was waiting for me, a minivan. I asked the Dutch couple if they wanted a ride back to Yangshuo, rather than waiting for a chancey bus, and they said yes. The French women asked if they could come along, and I said yes. The driver was quite unhappy with this. He had wanted to fill up the minivan with his “sister” and two older Chinese women. My view was that I had paid for the taxi and I could take along anyone I wanted. I prevailed. His “sister” was able to squeeze into the back seat, but the two older women had to be left behind. My explanation to him: “Wo de peng you. Ni de peng you.” (“My friends. Your friends.”) He seemed to smile at this.

It was several kilometers to the main road, amidst karst peaks and iridescent green-yellow rice fields. Once on the main road the driver called Uncle Bob on his cell phone and complained that he was giving a ride to five people, not one. Then he handed the phone to me. Uncle Bob yelled at me, bawling me out for inviting the others along. I said I had paid for the taxi and could use it as I pleased. He said they should get out. I said I wasn’t going to put them out on the highway. He said it was too much responsibility for the driver. To save face, he concluded by instructing the driver to drive slowly and carefully, and told me he had done so.

Back in Yangshuo the Dutch couple and the French women wanted to pay me their share of the taxi. I declined, but suggested they could tip the driver instead. The Dutch couple did; the French women didn’t.

On the way back to the hotel, I ran into a man who the night before had asked if I wanted to change money—Mister Xu. I asked if he could arrange the night bus to Wuzhou for me. He made a phone call and said he could, and I paid him 80 yuan.

Uncle Bob was waiting for me when I got back to the hotel. He castigated me again for bringing the others back in the taxi. Then he wanted to know if I had decided to take the night bus to Wuzhou. I told him I didn’t think we made a good team and that I wanted to work with someone else. Then he exploded. I should be happy that I got my own way. I shouldn’t be mad at him. All Americans are like that—troublemakers who don’t do things the right way. I replied that he had yelled at me in the taxi and now again at the hotel, and in addition he was insulting my country, and he wondered why I wouldn’t work with him. I said the only reason he was angry was that he thought he could have gotten more money out of five people than just the 80 yuan.

I packed, and at eight I went to the street corner where Mr. Xu hung out. We took a pedicab to the edge of town by the highway, and waited there for more than an hour in the dark, by the busy highway, peering into the oncoming headlights at the Chinese characters on the buses that passed. I was grateful to have it his concern to stop the right bus, and not mine.

The bus he had contacted arrived. I boarded. On the Golmud-Lhasa bus I had thought of the metaphor of being in a bouncing lawn chair for the duration. Here it was not metaphor. A wooden lawn chair, too short for me, had been set up in the middle aisle right behind the driver, and that was my place. Mr. Xu had assured me the driver and conductor were friends of his and would take care of me. That was apparently true. The driver was surly and gruff, but as I lay there, he grabbed my ankle and placed it between him and the gear shift, so I would be more comfortable.