



Kham and Amdo: Through Tibetan Eyes

Day 1: Xining - Rebkong (Tongren) 200kms

Day 2: Rebkong

Day 3: Rebkong - Labrang (Xiahe) 110kms

Day 4: Labrang

Day 5: Labrang - Langmusi 250kms

Day 6: Langmusi

Day 7: Langmusi - Thankor

Day 8: Thangkor - Hongyan Barkam

Day 9: Barkam Senkar monastery - Serta

Day 10: Serta monastery

Day 11: Serta - Ganze

Day 12: Serta Monastery - Ganze

Day 13: Ganze

Day 14: Ganzai - Yachen

Day 15: YaChen

Day 16: Yachen - Phayul

Day 17: Phayul - Kathok

Day 18: Kathok

Day 19: Kathok - Dzongsar

Day 20: Dzongsar - Phalpung

Day 21: Phalpung - Dege

Day 22: Dege

Day 23: Dege - Dzungchen

Day 24: Dzungchen - Sershul monastery

Day 25: Sershul – Kyekundo (Yushu)

Day 26: Kyekundo

Day 27: Kyekundo - Nangchen

Day 28: Nangchen - Gar

Day 29: Nangchen - Surmang Monastery - Galden Monastery

Day 30: Surmang - Kyekundo

Day 31: Kyekundo - fly back to Xining or Chengdu

Detailed Itinerary

Day 1: Pickup from the Xining Airport and Transfer to Hotel in Rebkong

Xining is the capital of Qinghai Province and has a population of 2.5 million people and is at an elevation of 2,500 meters. It is an interesting city of many contrasts, home to many different cultures and customs and at least 6 six different people groups including Han Chinese, Mongolians, Tibetans, Tu, Salar, and Hui. After pickup in Xining we will drive 2.5 hours from Xining to Rebkong, a classic Tibetan town with 3 large Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries. We will sleep in Rebkong for acclimatization purposes.

Day 2: Rebkong. (Tongren)

Rebkong is a dynamic, active town with lots of nomads coming in and out to trade yak meat, yoghurt, barley flour, and bread and to worship at the the important LongWu and Wutun Monasteries. We will stroll around both the lively market scene and the Rebkong monastery in the mid-morning. With a reputation unequalled in the Tibetan world, many visitors come here exclusively to see the monastery's collection of centuries old Thangka paintings. Here we can watch the resident artists continuing this ancient tradition that fuses religion and art together. In the afternoon we may have a chance to witness this

intricate artwork in action as we tour the Monastery of Sengi Shong, a small monastery that produces Thangkas that have been revered, sold, and displayed all over the world.

Day 3: Rebkong - Labrang (Xiahe) 110kms

Eat breakfast and then depart for Labrang in the morning. Our drive will take us through the heart of Amdo's grasslands and by many yak hair tents to see some of the last remnants of functioning nomadic culture in the world. Along the drive we can stop to eat some of the freshest yak yoghurt on the Plateau in Garze town. From here we will ascend to a high pass with prayer flags and continue our drive to Labrang. Before entering Labrang town we will stop in some remote grassland villages to experience local culture and food.

Day 4: Labrang

We will visit Labrang Monastery at an elevation of 2900m / 9512 feet. Labrang Monastery is a popular pilgrimage destination and has incredible alpine forests and rich grasslands all around it.

Labrang was by far the largest and most influential monastery in Amdo and is Tibetan Buddhism's most important monastery town outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Today it has 1,500 active monks and nuns. As we explore in the afternoon we may have a chance to see the local markets and do some shopping for handicrafts and jewelry. Sleep in hotel in Labrang.

Day 5: Labrang - Langmusi 250kms

Eat lunch at an authentic Tibetan restaurant and then drive 220km (4 hours) to Langmusi, a historic Tibetan town right on the border of Gansu and Sichuan Province with two important but very different monasteries - one on each side of the border.

Sleep in hotel in Langmusi.

Day 6: Langmusi

On Day 6 we will explore the two monasteries - one on the Sichuan side of town and one on the Gansu side of the town. Each monastery is very beautiful but very different. Both monasteries have golden rooftops and temples that are filled with meditating monks and beautiful Thangkas. We will do a short hike past the source of the White Dragon river into a narrow gorge that has grandiose rocky summits on either side of the canyon. We will have some rest time in the afternoon with opportunities to explore the local Tibetan markets in Langmusi town.

Day 7: Langmusi - Thangkor

We will embark on a 3-4 hour drive as we navigate our way through some of the lushest grasslands full of livestock, honey bee farms, and endless fields of wildflowers. We will stop in the grasslands along our drive to take photos and visit some nomad families in their simple tent to learn about sustainable living methods.

Day 8: Thangkor - Hongyan Barkam

This day is mostly a driving day as we continue to make our way southward through the classic summer pastures of 1,000's of Tibetans who rely on the yak for their clothing, shelter, food, transportation, and fuel. As on the previous day we will make lots of stops for scenic pictures and to learn more about the nomadic places in grassland steppe.

Day 9: Barkam - Senkar Monastery - Serta Monastery

We will drive 60km from Barkam to come to a very beautiful small monastery famous for its old architecture and brilliant colors. This, Senkar Monastery, possesses a 9-story monastery tower dedicated to the famous yogi, Milarepa and his epic story. Milarepa was betrayed by his aunt and uncle at a young age as they took away his family inheritance after his father's death. Milarepa learned black magic and cursed and murdered his uncle and aunt under the vengeful encouragement of his mother. Repentant of his vengeful anger, Milarepa sought to change under the great teacher Marpa and as a sign of his willingness to change had to build a 9-story stone tower by hand. This tower is a replica of the original tower Milarepa once built near Lhasa and is full of history and the legendary life of one of the only men thought to achieve enlightenment in one single lifetime.

From Senkar it is another 2-3 hour drive to Serta monastery, the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the world.

Day 10: Serta Monastery

Come up close and personal with the diligent and studious ways of Tibetan monks of the Nyimapa Sect as we spend the whole day just wondering around the largest monastery in Tibet. We will walk through the labyrinthine alleys past the residences and the meditation and chanting halls of some 20,000 monks. While this monastery is certainly huge, it is fairly new as Khenpo Jekme Phuntsok Rinpoche established it as a center for Buddhist learning and influence around 1980. We can watch pilgrims walking around Stupas as we

are engulfed in an entire city of holy men and women going about both their sacred and secular rituals. This is true immersion into the life of the Buddhist monk.

Day 11: Serta - Ganze

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Day 12: Serta Monastery - Ganze

We will drive 3-4 hours from Serta Monastery to Ganze town. On the way to the monastery we will stop in some typical Tibetan villages and look at some very old wooden houses. Ganze is particularly famous for this type of wooden log architecture, reminiscent of an antique log cabin in the mountains of the Colorado Rockies. The traveller can often drive for over 100 km without seeing trees on the high, desolate Tibetan Plateau. For this reason the great stands of evergreen trees and the houses that were made from them are, indeed, a very unique sight in an otherwise treeless landscape.

We will sleep in a hotel in Ganze County.

Day 13: Ganze

On this day we will explore the environment around Ganze including Ganze Monastery which is located 2 km north of the town. From a hilltop overlooking the town, we can view the lecture halls and homes of the monks in Ganze County's largest Gelugpa monastery.

From here we will drive 30km to Ganze County's second largest Gelugpa Monastery, Dargye Monastery, located in the productive farm country of Sichuan.

We will also spend some time in Ganze town looking at the fascinating local markets and enjoying the colorful traditional garb of nomads as they walk the streets trading for goods as they come and go from into this hub from their remote nomadic camps.

Day 14: Ganze - Yachen

We will drive 100km over a 4,600-meter mountain pass to take in the views from a host of prayer flags, flapping in the wind to release prayers for compassion for all living beings.

Day 15: YaChen

Yachen monastery is another prodigious monastery, almost as massive as the Serta Monastery that we visited on Day 12. But there are two main things that make this monastery unique from Serta Monastery: this monastery is mostly composed of Buddhist nuns (rather than just the usual predominance of male monks) AND there is an emphasis of practice over teaching here surrounding Buddhist thought. Of course, you will find the teaching of scriptures within Yachen Monastery, but the main emphasis here is in practicing the beliefs of the Nyimapa Sect through meditation and prayer.

Day 16: Yachen - Phayul

Today's journey will take us on a drive through large swaths of coniferous forest and traditional Tibetan villages made of simple, ancient materials like mud, stone, and wood. We can also contrast the two main historical methods of livelihood in Tibet as we pass both farmers and nomads at work.

Day 17: Phayul - Kathok

We will visit Phayul monastery in morning. This is a monastery in the Nyimpa Sect. Phayul Monastery, one of the six mother monasteries of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, is located in Baiyü County in the Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, this monastery was founded in the year of 1665 by Rigdzin Kunzang Sherab. Some 300 years later, the 11th in the throne of the Phalyul lineage, Dowang Pema Norbu Rinpoche left Tibet and established the famous Namdroling Monastery in south India. In this way he preserved and spread many of the ancient teachings from Phalyul Monastery.

Then, after lunch, we will drive 2 hours to Kathok Monastery. Upon arriving at the monastery, we will start to take in a few glimpses of the monastery that we will explore more in-depth on the following day.

Day 18: Kathok

Kathok, seated high on a mountain at 3,900 meters, looks across the rugged mountain peaks like a high sentinel keeping guard of its vast terrain.

Kathok Monastery contains many elegant golden statues and temples and will not only wow you with its gleaming architecture but its sweeping views. You will probably spend all afternoon just trying to figure out how this, one of Buddhism's largest and most historical Nyimapa monasteries, could have been constructed at such a height using simple tools before the Industrial Revolution.

The main building of the School of Philosophy here has been said to rival Lhasa's 13-story Potala Palace, enclosed within massive walls, gates and turrets built of rammed earth and stone, in architectural grandeur.

In the afternoon we will do a short 1-2 hour hike around the mountains of the monastery.

Day 19: Kathok - Dzongsar

It is a 2-hour drive from Kathok Monastery to Dzongsar.

After the drive we will visit Dzongsar Monastery, tucked in the rocky saddle of a mountain ridge at 3,600 meters. Dzongsar Monastery was founded in 746 by a Bön lama. Located on a prominent hill overlooking the great Khamje Valley in Sichuan, China, the monastery is the birthplace of the famous incarnations in the Khyentse lineage. Today it is a vibrant Tibetan community that includes a large monastery, a shedra (monastic college), a clinic, retreat centers, and a school. Dzongsar is home to both lay and monastic practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.

In the beautiful agricultural villages below Dzongsar Monastery are some world class Thangka Schools. We will witness the unique art form as it unfolds before our eyes in incredible detail as we watch the artist's sketch out and paint a painting that often takes one person 3-6 months to complete.

Sleep overnight in Dzongsar.

Day 20: Dzongsar - Palpung

Our route this day takes us on a drive more than 100 km winding through villages and forest landscapes. Palpung is one of the most important Kagyu monasteries. Palpung was founded by the 8th Tai Situ in 1727. Palpung is the mother monastery of the Karma Kagyu Sect in Eastern Tibet, and is an influential center of thought with more than 180 branch monasteries and temples all over Tibet and India. The monastery once hosted more than 1000 monks and had one of the most academically outstanding monastic universities of the area. It is the seat of various lines of incarnate lamas, the most well-known being the Tai Situ and the Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche.

Day 21: Phalpong - Dege

The drive to Dege from Palpong is a 2-hour drive along a very beautiful valley. After our drive will arrive at Dege at 3,600 meters, a town known for its impressive printing press and for producing over 70% of the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures.

Day 22: Dege

Dege, as the cultural heart of Kham, is one of the largest and most important of the five kingdoms in Kham. It is one the best places to see traditional Tibetan culture and the most authentic Tibetan traditional dress. Dege printing house (or in Tibetan, “Dege parkhang”) was built by Chogyal Tenpa Tsering, the 12th King of Dege, in 1729. It is the oldest and biggest printing house in all of Tibet. Dege printing house contains more than 200,000 wooden handmade blocks each of which is inscribed with important texts on religious, historical, linguistic, artistic, medical, astronomical, and mathematical thought in the Tibetan language.

Day 23: Dege - Dzogchen Monastery

We will drive 3-4 hours, or about 170 km, to Dzogchen Monastery from Dege.

Dzogchen Monastery was founded by the first Rinpoche of Dzogchen, Pema Rigdzin, in 1684. The 4th Dzogchen Rinpoche was the master of two famous lamas named Patrul Rinpoche and Ju Mipham as well as many other great masters in Tibet. In particular, Patrul Rinpoche and Ju Mipham were the highest and most revered lamas in the recent history of the entire Nyingma Sect, the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism. Patrul Rinpoche, in fact, retreated from society for 30 years in a meditation cave and wrote his famous text “Words of My Perfect Teacher” here.

Dzogchen Monastery, one of the six great monasteries of the Nyingma tradition, and has a stunning panorama that has been compared to the Swiss Alps in its beauty. The monastery lies couched in a gorgeous small valley full of pasture and forest that leads into and is fed by majestic snow mountains above. It is also the main monastery for over three hundred branch monasteries in the Kham, Amdo, and Central regions of Tibet and India. As home of the Dzogchen teachings of the “Great Perfection” and a site of several meditation caves that are in still in current use, there are a great number of blessed and holy sites to visit.

Day 24: Dzogchen - Sershul Monastery

From Dzogchen to Sershul Monastery it is a 170 km drive through remote rolling grasslands that have seen few to no foreigners in their time.

Sershul, known locally as Dzachuka, is made up mostly of nomadic Tibetans who spend their lives herding sheep and yaks. With many nomads with long black hair and natural dreadlocks and sun-tanned faces, Sershul definitely has a "wild west" feel to it. Though remote and a bit wild, this area is safe and is a great place to see nomadic Tibetan culture, including excellent examples of the chuba, the traditional long-sleeved Tibetan robe. Sershul Monastery is an important Gelugpa monastery and lies on a beautiful hillside. From this vantage point in the summer you can see the green grass of the open valley with its nomad tents in the background. Currently hosting more than 500 studious monks, this is the biggest monastery in the Sershul area.

Sleep in a hotel near Sershul Monastery.

Day 25: Sershul - Kyekundo (Yushu)

We will drive 2.5 hours to Kyekundo from Sershul (Shiqu in Chinese). As we cross from the Kham part of Sichuan province to the the heart of Kham in Qinghai Province, we will navigate this remote area, renowned for some of the best grasslands in all of the Tibetan Plateau. Located 140kms west of Sershul, Kyekundo (Yushu in Chinese) is a place to take a rest from the remote drives and harsh climates of the Sichuan Kham region.

Compared to the relatively small towns we will have been traveling in, Kyekundo has a population of 100,000 and has coffee shops and 4 and 5 star hotels. On April 14, 2010, a devastating 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit Yushu prefecture destroying the prefecture capital of Kyekundo as well as many surrounding villages. In November 2013, the government officially announced that the region was finished being rebuilt and today it is hard to recognize that any such major damage was done nearly 7 years ago. Kyekundo, at 3,600 meters, was upgraded to city status, and has been rebuilt in a kind of modern Tibetan design. It is drastically different than the way the 100% Tibetan town looked before, however, the new town is pleasant and worth spending a couple of days exploring.

Day 26: Kyekundo

Janak Mani Stone Field, Kyekundo Monastery, and Kyekundo market

In the morning we will visit Janak (Jiana) Mani Stone Field which is commonly known as Gyanak Mani. This is the world's largest prayer stone pile with more than two billion prayer stones that have been hand-engraved with Buddhist sculptures and pictures. With a walking kora of more than 3 km in length, this holy site is regarded as both the largest and the holiest mani stone area in Tibet. There are thousands of pilgrims that come from all around the Kyekundo area from 100's of kilometers away to walk around these mani stones every morning. We will walk shoulder to shoulder with these pilgrims and get a very personal view of their daily life and devotion. We will also have an opportunity to photograph these devout and wonderful pilgrims.

In the afternoon we will visit Kyekundo Dondrubling Monastery, which is easily visible from the town where we will be staying. Established in the 14th century, this monastery sits prominently on a high hill and provides an excellent view of Kyekundo city. In the afternoon we will rest and enjoy the sights and sounds and smells of Kyekundo town. We may even get an opportunity to see the traditional form of bartering in a local market where the local Kham people put their hands into each other's sleeves and haggle over price through a secret dance of the fingers inside their robes.

Day 27: Kyekundo - Nangchen

In the morning, we will drive 170 km through the Palthang Grasslands bustling with the activity of yaks and sheep roaming the vast mountain slopes. After a short 1-hour drive, we will arrive at 3,800 meters and stop on the road to take pictures of the ramparts of the nearby rock face. By lunch time we will arrive in Nangchen. Nangchen county is one of 6 counties located in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the Qinghai Part of Kham. Though Nangchen is remote and underdeveloped, it is one of the most beautiful parts of Tibet and has some of the most authentically preserved Tibetan culture. This beautiful small town surrounded by 5,000 meter soaring serrated sawtooth peaks is home to your guide, Tashi Samdrup.

Nangchen was one of the 5 independent kingdoms of eastern Tibet and is renowned for having some of the fiercest warriors in Tibet. However, the native Kham people were not just only fighters, this county alone holds 155 monasteries, a huge number of monasteries for such a thinly populated area spread over snowy mountains and grandiose rock spires. These kingdoms were independent from both China and the Tibetan government in Lhasa and were each ruled by a Kham king. The former Nangchen kingdom expanded over all

of modern day Yushu Tibetan Autonomous prefecture in southern Qinghai. The king of Nangchen ruled this region until the late 1950's/early 1960's.

Day 28: Nangchen - Gar Monastery

This day we will drive 55 km from Nangchen to Gar monastery past the Piza Village and Tibetan salt farms that produce white and red salt from the earth. These salt farms, still active today, were famous in the area; nomads used to ride for 2 weeks on the backs of yaks just for the opportunity to buy this salt for preserving food, feeding their yaks and sheep, and for reselling in other areas of southern Kham.

Gar is one of the most amazing monasteries in all of Tibet and many foreigners describe it as the most beautiful of all the monasteries we will see on this tour. Home to deer, blue sheep, and Himalyan Golden Monkeys, Gar Monastery is set against a dramatic spine of 4,500-meter mountain ridges and tall stands of native cedar forests. Gar monastery was founded by Gardamba Chodeng, the heart-disciple of Dukung Chopa Rinpoche (the first incarnation of Garchen Rinpoche). There is a lot to see and take in here; in addition to the virgin forest, Gar also offers views of a remote lake, many surrounding rivers and deep valleys, and offers wonders and spiritual treasures in both an upper and lower monastery. After a short visit to take in the serenity of nearby "sister" Gar Nunnery we will return to Nangchen and sleep there with full bellies and satisfied hearts.

Day 29: Nangchen - Surmang Monastery - Galden Monastery

We will drive 1.5 hours from Nangchen to Surmang Monastery passing a quaint Tibetan village and majestic mountain views. Surmang is one of the most remote monasteries in Kham. This newly remodeled monastery has a large monk population of more than 300 monks. We will get an up-close look at the sacred routines of monks as they light butter lamp candles as offerings and meditate on Buddhist scriptures from the main monastery hall.

From Surmang, we will continue another 20 minutes along the road to Galden Monastery. Galden Monastery is one of the most picturesque monasteries in Kham, sitting tranquilly on a mountaintop and with the brilliant blue Tsechu River wrapping all the way around it.

We will sleep around Surmang Monastery.

Day 30: Surmang - Kyekundo (Yushu)

We will drive 4 hours from Surmang Monastery back to the comparatively civilized Kyekundo. On the way we can stop in some of the villages seated in the expansive grasslands and have a few chats with the local nomads over a cup of freshly made yak yoghurt. The yak yoghurt is pretty tart but with a little sugar is as creamy as ice cream and very enjoyable.

Day 31: Kyekundo - Fly back to Xining or Chengdu

Today we will say our goodbyes as we drop you off at the Yushu Batang (YUS) airport, a 30-minute drive from Kyekundo (Yushu) city.