TOURISM PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT IN TIBET

Potala Palace, Lhasa

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Part I
Introduction

In June/July 2008 I made my ninth visit in 8 years to Greater Tibet and the Tibet Autonomous Region (T.A.R.). Each visit has been a research planning exercise designed to gather data and undertake analyses for the development of appropriate forms of ecotourism and cultural tourism for Chinese (domestic) and International visitation. Previous outcomes have included a tourism master plan for the ‘Greater Shangri-la Region’ (which encompasses the Tibetan communities of northern Yunnan Province, western Sichuan Province and Eastern Tibet), and various tourism plans for Tibet itself. At the highest political level, a major commitment, supported by more than US$20 billion, has been made for the economic development of China’s western provinces (the Western Development Plan) because of their relative under-development compared to the booming eastern coastal provinces. Tibet and Tibetans are beneficiaries of this national intervention. The objective on the occasion of my most recent visit was to develop a tourism master plan for the Lin Zhi Prefecture and four counties in the south east of Tibet Autonomous Region as part of a team from Sun Yat Sen University Center for Tourism Planning and Research, Guangzhou. This area of Tibet, which abuts Myanmar and India to the south, is in a part of Tibet not yet opened to international tourism and non-Chinese (as with several other areas of my field trips), and approval for access was based on the need for professional tourism planning. I have thus had the privilege of visiting many places not on the tourist map and I have had access to all kinds of people at all levels of society and government, from governors and party secretaries of counties to senior officials and many ordinary Tibetan people, from Lhasa (the capital) to major towns to small villages and tiny hamlets.

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Objectives: A major component of the most recent exercise was to focus on Tibetan ecology and culture to advise on appropriate forms of development that would safeguard and retain the integrity of Tibetan traditions to the greatest possible extent for international visitors and Chinese alike. The Master Plan is being formulated under the auspices of the China National Tourism Administration, a key aim of which is to promote Tibetan culture. In this context, as with all previous field trips, I found a resilient, dynamic living culture being expressed and manifest on a daily basis in literally hundreds of different ways. The total integration between Tibetan culture and their biophysical environment thus lends itself to holistic forms of ecotourism development that have the capacity to benefit local communities directly.

Yang Zhou Yong village

Ba-rang Village

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Touring route development

The scenery in south eastern Tibet is stunning. When the area is opened to international visitors the route we took will I believe become one of the most spectacular touring routes anywhere - towering snow capped peaks adorned with numerous glaciers, deep perpendicular gorges, thick old-growth forests in the lower altitudes, windswept grasslands on the plateau, picturesque villages occupying tiny fragments of arable land among the peaks and gorges, and a vibrant culture all around!
Yarlung Tsampo (Brahmaputra) River

Silong Glacier
“The Roof of the World” - Mila Mountain and pass, 5,424 metres.
I have witnessed, on a daily basis, literally hundreds of religious acts and aspects of Tibetan culture in all its forms and variety. I have spent weeks at a time immersed in an extremely vibrant and dynamic culture that is Tibetan first, Tibetan second and Tibetan last. I have spent many hours in more than 100 monasteries and temples where monks, nuns and pilgrims have practised their beliefs and carried out their religious activities without hindrance. The development plan submitted for the pilgrimage town of Chamdo in central eastern Tibet, home of perhaps the most famous Yellow Hat sect Buddhist teaching monastery in Tibet with currently more than 2000 resident monks, Qianbaling, provides such an example. Chamdo is surrounded by eight ancient monasteries and temples located high up in the surrounding mountains, each one at the end of a road that radiates out from Chamdo like the spoke of a wheel. Each temple requires a full day in 4WD vehicle to reach and return to Chamdo. This configuration lends itself to a classical **hub-and-spokes cluster development** and the concept incorporated in our Tourism Development Plan utilises the Tibetan prayer wheel or circle of life to emphasize the cultural richness of the experience. Each day trip to the ancient temple at the end of the road combines a range of nature based experiences that focus on a village or villages en route so that ecotourism in its holistic form constitutes the foundation of our planning. For example, the trip to the 8th century Garma Temple passes the village of Ridung, famous for traditional Tibetan herbal medicines where there is a thriving cottage industry; Wami, a craft village famous for its metal workers who make Buddhist idols and other statuary for temples all over Tibet; and Wazai which hosts families of ‘thanka’ artists who specialize in producing traditional paintings and art works for temples and monasteries. The village of Dorje is located above a fast flowing stream ideal for kayaking and rafting, and there are many potential wilderness walks into the mountains along the entire route to Garma on yak or pony (or on foot) with local guides and home-stays, including a high alpine forest of rhododendrons and conifers that are home to at least one large troop (more than 250 members) of long tailed Tibetan macaques.

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Annual installation ceremony for graduation of new monks,
Qiangabling Monastery, Chamdo
Diagram showing the hub-and-spokes relationship of Chamdo to the surrounding temples. There is no linking road between any of the temples which are separated by very high mountains, deep valleys and swift flowing rivers.

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Cluster Planning: The Spokes

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Hub-and Spokes Cluster – en route community development

Each of the Chamdo ‘spokes’ could be developed over a period of time as an en route attraction, as exampled by the route to Garma Temple:

- **Attractions en route**
  - Dechen Patsun Holy Mountain
  - Ridung Traditional Medicine village
  - River recreation
  - Wazai Handicraft Centre
  - Master artist’s village

- **Tourism Type**
  - Tibetan religion, built heritage, living culture, forests, nature & eco-tourism
  - Tibetan traditional heritage, living culture
  - Ecotourism
  - Tibetan rural way of life, artefacts, living culture
  - Tibetan religion, religious art, living culture
Pilgrimage: Among many other examples of cultural diversity visible all over Tibet are the hundreds, perhaps thousands of pilgrims on trails and roads all over Tibet slowly and arduously making their way to Lhasa, prostrating themselves full length on the ground, rising, taking three paces forward, and lowering themselves to the ground again to stretch out to the full, an action repeated thousands and thousands of times, on journeys that may take two or more years. We came across one group of pilgrims who had been on the road from Chengdu, Sichuan (where the recent earthquake was) for 2 years, a baby had been born on the way - and they had an Australian budgerigar in a cage!!!! (Of which I have a photo of course!). Another old couple - both in their 60s - let me pull their handcart up and over a pass at 4,884 metres! (I was interested to see how heavy it was). Another family group had two or three family members at a time prostrating themselves along the road for 2-to-3 kilometres and then being replaced by others relay-team style. Their hand cart was adorned with solar cells and a battery – there is no firewood at high altitudes of course, often no yak or cattle dung as an alternate fuel, and so to boil the water for their yak butter tea, they had an electric kettle! The hand carts contain a tent, spare clothing, a few pots and pans and not much else. To protect their hands and chests from abrasions as they prostrate themselves full length on the ground they wear wooden pads strapped to the palms of their hands and a heavy yak leather apron.

Dr Trevor Sofield, Professor of Tourism, University of Tasmania, Australia
On the road 400kms from Lhasa

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Pilgrims approaching Jorkhang Temple, Lhasa
Pilgrim’s handcart with solar panel

Pilgrims on Mt Meli pass

Pilgrims with budgerigar

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In terms of **the integration of culture and environment**, mountains in all forms of Tibetan Buddhism are sacred, every high mountain pass in Tibet is regarded as sacred, and every pass is adorned with literally thousands of Buddhist prayer flags and silk scarves. Buddhist belief is that as each flag flutters in the breeze the prayer that is printed on it drifts on the wind and blesses all those who feel the movement of the air. The latter, **hadah**, are exchanged in welcome ceremonies and in numerous other Buddhist rituals as a symbol of peace and good wishes), with every Tibetan traveller stopping to add more flags and scarves – and nowadays, busloads of Chinese and other travellers engaging in the same action. In some places the fabric is metres thick. Evidence from the metres-thick piles of torn and faded flags and **hadah** as well as brand new ones indicate that the practice has been continuing for a long time. In addition to prayer flags, piles of inscribed **mani** stones and tablets, far more numerous than the many thousands of temples, dot roadsides, hillsides, riversides and other sites imbued with a spiritual essence and are constantly added to, repainted and/or reinscribed. Often the skulls of yaks are also inscribed with a Buddhist mantra and added to a pile of **mani** stones.

*Every mountain is sacred and every pass is adorned with prayer flags*
Sacred *mani* stones. Some are new, many of hundreds of years old.
A living culture: I have seen Tibetans going about their daily life ploughing their fields with yaks while chanting the ubiquitous “Om-ma-ni-pad-ma-ni-om” as a prayer of forgiveness because every turn of their plough is killing animals and insects in the soil in violation of the Buddhist precept of never taking life in any form. Of women climbing cliff faces to place prayer flags and juniper twigs in ‘worship power places’. Of families tending their herds of yaks, goats, sheep, donkeys and horses, milking them, weaving their wool, making yak butter, harvesting barley in the lower valleys, making leather pouches, carving wooden saddles – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not authors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries – not actors museumized for tourists in traditional fancy dress. not Sinicized to destroy their culture, just living as Tibetans have lived for centuries –
Many Tibetans are pastoralists.
Bilingualism: In terms of support for the Tibetan language and traditional script, official signage is all bilingual. Directional road signs, national nature reserves, government buildings, clinics and schools, even government ministry vehicles, all display both Tibetan and Chinese. Some signs were very old judging by the rust and faded colouring, some were brand new, but combined they indicated that it has long been a policy of the Chinese Government to produce bilingual signage and not in response to criticism arising over China’s hosting of the Olympic Games. In the village schools that I visited hundreds of kilometres from the town of Nyingchi, the teaching medium is often in Tibetan for the simple reason that that is the only language with which the teachers can communicate with their pupils. The children learn Chinese, as well as Tibetan, just as Chinese students in many parts of China also take a second language, often English. Once we left the two small cities in this part of Tibet, we needed Tibetan translators because many of the local authorities and most of the people could not talk Chinese. In short, I found a resilient use of Tibetan and a vibrant bilingualism that helps to underpin the cultural foundations of Tibetan-ness.

Grand Canyon National Park signage – Tibetan on one side, Chinese on the other.
This sign, located below a landslip on a hillside near Bacang, carries a clear conservation message in both Tibetan and Chinese:

*Carry Out the “Save the Environment Project” to benefit future generations.*

The date is recorded as March 2001 and the area is surrounded by a large reafforestation project.