

TIBET 1987



photos **Uli Zimmermann** | words **Rupert Wolfe Murray**

Introduction

by Rupert Wolfe Murray

Bucharest, 2015

When I hitchhiked into Tibet in the summer of 1986 I only had one film for my cheap little camera. I stayed in that mysterious country for almost a year and saw incredible things, many of which will remain etched in my memory forever. I used up my one precious film but now, almost 30 years later only one photo remains – and that was taken in India.

After an incredible journey it's important to describe your experiences to someone, to get it out of your system. It's a key part of moving on. Some people do this by chatting with friends and loved ones but others don't have anyone who is willing to listen to so much experience. When I first came back from Asia one of my brother's made me realise that I was being a crashing bore. It was a humiliating experience I will never forget but it made me realise I have to express myself in other ways.

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My way of getting Tibet out of my system was to write about it. I had kept a daily diary for many years and that was a good basis to write my travel book. It took me almost a year to write and the fact that it wasn't suitable for publication didn't really matter as the experience of writing it had been healing in a therapeutic way. The manuscript sat in a box for 20 years until I re-wrote it and published it under the title "9 Months in Tibet".

I came across many travellers in Tibet and many of them were sporting cameras. When I first hitched into the country I travelled past Mount Everest in the back of a flat-bed truck, but I had no interest in the view as my head was pounding (altitude sickness) and I felt like I was freezing to death. The truck stopped, we all piled out, a bossy Englishman pointed to the distant horizon and said "cameras out – that's the tallest mountain in the world."

Just over a year later I met with Uli (Ulrike) Zimmermann, the author of the photos in this little book. Unlike many travellers I had met, Uli didn't carry her camera around as if it were an object to be admired. It wasn't thrusting out of her chest or slung nonchalantly over her shoulder, ready to "shoot", like a gunslinger in an old cowboy movie.

This passive-aggressive posturing with cameras is particularly inappropriate in Tibet where traditional people believe that a photograph (specifically, the negative) takes away a part of their soul. According to recent reports from Tibet the situation is much worse nowadays as their country is now being flooded by wave after wave of Chinese tourists, many of whom are using their cameras to continually photograph Tibetan pilgrims. This can be very intimidating. Where the foreigners were in awe of traditional Tibetan costumes and pilgrims, some Chinese look down on Tibetans as dirty, primitive, ungrateful and disloyal.

Uli is from Vienna and she visited Tibet in 1987 with her friend Bettina Tucholsky – my girlfriend. The love affair was a complicated mess as I had just fallen in love with an unavailable Italian and I described it in embarrassing detail in my book. My memory of their visit is patchy but I do remember travelling to Gyanste with them. What's interesting now, looking back after all those years, is that I don't remember Uli taking any pictures at all. She was obviously one of those more subtle photographers who only took

it out when the time was right and some sort of relationship had been established with the subject. This is the anthropological approach and the results can be seen in some of the photographs here, where a rapport is established with the subject – an unspoken agreement between photographer and subject, an informal form of consent.

In 2014 I got the train to Vienna and met up with Uli for the first time since 1987 (I also met with Bettina who had, with great strength of character, forgiven me for writing about our failed relationship). Uli and I connected on many levels and we share a passion for travelling and environmental issues. She told me about her family, her travels and her environmental work in Austria and she offered me these wonderful photos, none of which I had even known about.

The first time I looked at these photos I couldn't really take them in as there were too many of them – about 90. They awoke all sorts of buried emotions and memories and I found it hard to focus on them. I looked at them again some months later but only really connected with them when I made the selection for this book. The "problem" was that each and every one of her images is powerful, interesting and unique and I found it really hard to process so many of them at once – hence the need for a smaller selection of shots and long captions.

The intention of this little photo book is to give people a snapshot of life in Tibet in the 1980s, during a period when the ravages of modern capitalism had not yet hit the country. Communism was terrible in terms of human rights abuses and the destruction of Tibet's cultural heritage (not to mention its independence) but the ancient way of life was still functioning by the 1980s. I fear that China's corrupt brand of capitalism, its desperate hunger for raw materials, their policy of swamping Tibet with Han Chinese immigrants may be succeeding in drowning a unique and ancient culture.

When I re-wrote my travel book I didn't want to use any photographs in it (although the designer used one of Uli's shots of me on the cover). But I did want to do something with her amazing photos as they give a different perspective to what I was describing. I hope you enjoy them and I would love to hear from you so please visit my website which I built in order to encourage other people to discover the liberation of independent travel. I'm sure Uli would like to hear from you too and I would be delighted to forward any messages to her. Get in touch!

Rupert Wolfe Murray | www.wolfemurray.com

cover photo: **Chinese Cook in Gyantse**

Even in the 1980s there were a lot of Chinese settlers in Tibet and this photo shows one of them – a cook – at home in Gyantse (a small Tibetan city) making a meal. This photo reveals some interesting detail about life in the 1980s – a lack of electric light, simple burners that threw out a big flame which was captured by the wide bottomed steel wok, and an oil barrel that has been converted into a wood burning stove. Typical of most kitchens in this region there is a lack of space, a challenge that is dealt with by hanging up the pots and pans on the window frame.



Anonymous Tibetan Girl

This photo sums up Tibet in the 1980s as it shows a raw, natural beauty that you don't see on the faces of most kids. You can also see dirt which reflects the fact that Tibetans didn't have running water in those days, and probably don't even today. Finally, it suggests warmth and friendliness – the photographer Uli

Zimmermann would not have been able to get such an intimate portrait had the girl not been friendly.



Lhasa, the Old Town

The Barkhor is a series of old streets that wrap round the Jokhang Temple – the central point of old Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. This photo shows an unpaved street with traces of yak dung, Tibetans at the side of the road (is that a bicycle repairman?), local Chinese settlers on their bikes – the main form of transport

in the 1980s – and some interesting detail on the traditional Tibetan buildings: uniform stone blocks, black-painted window frames and funny little curtains they put above the windows.



Boys on the Roof of the Jokhang Temple

One of the most attractive things about the way Buddhism is practiced in Tibet is that it is fun-loving and seems to be blessed with a light-heartedness that is welcoming to the traveller. I can't imagine another religion that would toler-

ate two boys playing on the roof of their most sacred religious site – the Jokhang Temple – but in Tibetan monasteries boys run amok among the monks and nobody seems to mind. This photo also reveals some interesting features about the Tibetan monastic architecture – note the concrete forms the boys are sitting on; these are the tops of

the walls, they keep the rainwater out and are repaired every year. Behind the boys you can see a row of Buddhist deities wrapping round the golden roof of the temple and sticking out towards them is a dragon's head – its role will be to ward off evil spirits and protect the faithful.



Earthquake Proof Building

Tibetan architecture has a tradition dating back for hundreds of years. Part of their unique building style is to build structures that can stand up to the devastating earthquakes that hit their country every now and again. In

this photo you can see how it works: the walls are wider at the bottom than at the top, and when the earthquake hits the structures lean in on themselves – and remain standing. The most famous building in Tibet, the vast Potala

Palace, was first built in the 7th Century. A thousand years later it was rebuilt by the 5th Dalai Lama and legend has it that they used molten copper in the foundations in order to make it earthquake proof.



Friendly Tibetan Women

Before Tibet was overrun with Chinese tourists the local people were extremely friendly, even if the travellers didn't know a word of the Tibetan language. This photo shows the immediate warmth and friendliness that is characteristic

of the Tibetan people, and also suggests a mischievous humour. Their skin colour suggests these women have worked outside all their lives and their clothes show a mixture of traditional, Tibetan woollen garb mixed with modern Chi-

nese jackets and boots. The basket on the left is of the type used in construction work – where the labourers tended to be women – and it's interesting to note that they are mixing a mortar using stones rather than modern tools.



Friendly Young Girls

This photo shows the infectious friendliness of the Tibetans in the 1980s, when outside visitors were still a rarity and the joyous expression of the girl on the right shows her delight in meeting strangers. But the girl on the left is

obviously older and her expression is more cautious and reserved, even worried. It's clear that she is also curious, and probably trusting of the photographer, but she's at the age where she's probably become aware of the worries of her parents and her community. It's interesting to note the perfect white teeth of the younger girl, a feature that many

travellers noticed in Tibet at the time: how can such poor people have such great teeth? They would ask. They don't even have running water and they've never even heard of toothpaste!



Getting Water at Sera Monastery

This photo tells us a lot about life in a Tibetan village in the 1980s: fetching water is an arduous task invariably done by the women of a household, and made more bearable by the presence of humour. The girl on the right is wearing

traditional Tibetan clothes, garb that is ideally suited to the harsh Tibetan climate. She is also carrying the traditional stick-and-two-buckets that has been used for getting water over thousands of years. The other girl is also Tibetan but she's wearing a cheap Chinese suit and is carrying plastic jerry cans; she will get less water but each drop helps in a

household with no running water. Note the newly planted trees, protected from grazing animals by a makeshift fence, and the wall which has been recently plastered with mud. These constructions require constant maintenance and hard work by local volunteers.



Gyantse Fortress

Gyantse is a small Tibetan city located a few hundred miles west of Lhasa. The fortress you can see in this photo was first built in the fourteenth century and added to ever since. Tibet was a peaceful country for centuries but

in 1903 the British sent an expeditionary force up from colonial India, stormed this fortress and massacred several hundred Tibetan soldiers who were armed with ancient weapons. The Tibetans hadn't seen invaders for centuries. The Brits then looted the local monasteries, installed a trade representative and a telegraph wire and then with-

drew. A generation later the Chinese Communists invaded Tibet and, during the Cultural Revolution, the walls of this ancient fortress were blown up. Today it has been restored and is a must-see location on Tibet's increasingly busy tourist circuit.



Traditional Tibetan Building

This photo may seem ordinary at first but it tells us a lot about traditional Tibetan construction: the strongest feature in the picture are the windows – framed by black-painted shapes that seem to resemble the human form. It's interest-

ing to note that the wooden-framed windows are uninsulated and the interiors were probably freezing in winter. A charming feature of Tibetan buildings are the little roofs, and mini-curtains, above each window. The walls were almost certainly stone-built, rendered with sand and lime and white-washed every year. Note the splash marks at the bottom of

the building which suggest a wide roof (and no drainpipes) that gets the rainwater away from the building but it splashes back after hitting the muddy street below. The donkey and cart add a human touch to the photo as the beast is looking (affectionately?) at the man coming out of the building in a traditional Tibetan "Chuba" (a thick woollen cloak).



Gyantse

Gyantse was a medieval city-fortress and this photo shows the layout of the ancient walls. It also shows the Tibetan landscape which, in the eastern part of the country, is barren. The walls used to wrap round the whole settlement

but they fell into disrepair over the centuries, now they seem to serve as a protective feature for Gyantse's celebrated Buddhist temple. What's particularly interesting about this shot is how the buildings fit in with the landscape so well, not only in terms of colour but also in their spread: the houses seem to be huddling in the lee of the hills in

order to find protection from the wind. Traditional Tibetan builders would never have built on an exposed piece of land, unless it was constructed like a fortress (as many monasteries were).



Hanging out at Monastery

This group of Tibetan teenagers are doing what most teenagers in Tibet do – waiting for something to happen; hoping to find a job (most jobs go to Chinese settlers). It's interesting to note that all of them are wearing cheap

Chinese clothes and shoes, which makes sense as traditional Tibetan garb is expensive to make. Groups of teenagers can often seem intimidating but this lot seem friendly enough, and in the 1980s everyone in Tibet was really friendly. It's no surprise that they're sitting outside a monastery as they were the centres of social life in traditional

Tibetan communities – and before their destruction in the Cultural Revolution there was a monastery in virtually every settlement in Tibet.



Man Flies Kite from Roof of Jokhang

This photo gives us lots of clues about life in traditional Tibet: the stone built walls topped by slates and concrete; the lines of "prayer flags" (Tibetans believe that the wind carries their prayers from the little flags up to heaven);

and the shanty-type dwellings with tin roofs held down by rocks, tools and large sticks. The maroon walls of Lhasa's Jokhang Temple can be seen in the background and in the upper left of the photo a golden dragon's head is just

visible – one of the corner pieces of the great temple. The man flying the kite is almost certainly a Tibetan although he is dressed in Chinese clothes. Lhasa is a windy city in the autumn and kite flying is popular in that season.



Monk Artisan Waits for Lift

The bleak landscape in this picture is typical of central Tibet and the photo was probably taken near Lhasa. The sign in the background is almost certainly in Chinese and the baskets in the foreground (the ones on the left, lying

on their sides) were common on building sites across Tibet for carrying rubble and other building materials (usually by women). The larger baskets are better made than the smaller ones and were probably destined for some ceremonial purpose at a monastery. All this material, plus the monk, were almost certainly waiting for a lift when this

photo was taken. There was very little transport available in the 1980s and hitchhiking on trucks was the easiest way to get around. The monk himself is wearing two layers of traditional purple robes, the inner layer would be worn about the monastery and the outer layer for travelling in the cold season.



Monk at Jokhang Temple

This rather intimate shot of a monk on the roof of Lhasa's Jokhang Temple gives a glimpse into the style of Tibet's great temple. One of the major functions of the building is accommodation for hundreds of Buddhist monks and in

the background you can see the simple, elegant and subtly coloured windows that were typical of the Tibetan construction style. Yellow and maroon are the main colours of Tibetan Buddhism and there are in fact two sects of the religion – the Yellow Hats (who run the Jokhang Temple and the main monasteries) and the Red Hats who are

predominant in the west of the country. The monk himself seems to be engaging in a conversation with someone on a lower level.



Young Tibetan Monks

This photo shows young Tibetan monks relaxing near their monastery, Drepung, which is located near Lhasa. Drepung is the largest monastery in Tibet and prior to the Chinese invasion housed between seven and ten thousand

monks (currently it is controlled by the Chinese police who only allow a few hundred monks to live there). The monks in the photo can be seen laughing, having fun and relaxing – and one of the striking things about Tibetan Buddhism is that its practitioners know how to have fun and relax (in contrast to some western religious orders where severity

seems to be the order of the day). In Tibet a big proportion of young people would join the monasteries and although they had to study and work extremely hard, they were allowed to have fun and relax just like ordinary kids of their age. In this way there was little in the way of a division between lay people and the men in robes.



Mountains Near Lhasa

Tibet is essentially a vast plateau with high mountain ranges to the south (the Himalayas) and to the east. As this photo shows, much of Tibet is actually as flat as a pancake. This is a typical view of a landscape in Central Tibet,

near Lhasa: a valley floor that is flat, barren and very wide; mountains on either side of the valley that rise to over five thousand metres. The line of trees on the horizon seem to be microscopic in this photo and yet close up the trees

probably look huge – all of which suggests the epic scale of the Tibetan landscape. The presence of rain clouds on the mountains is typical for the autumn season when this photo was taken.



Festival at Dalai Lama's Summer Palace

The Norbulingka is a 18th century palace, set in a large park (36 hectares) in Lhasa. The palace is described by Wikipedia as "a unique representation of Tibetan palace architecture." Before the Chinese invasion the Norbulingka

was the Dalai Lama's summer residence and fortunately the magnificent building survived the Cultural Revolution, which resulted in the destruction of thousands of other unique buildings in China and Tibet. Every summer thousands of Tibetans gather at the park in order to celebrate various festivals, the biggest one being the Yoghurt Festival.

This photo, taken through a veil, suggests some of the mystery attached to this location and the traditional Tibetan festivals. The white material that is hanging in the background is produced at the Norbulingka Tent Factory and is often used in festivals like this.



Family at Dalai Lama's Summer Palace

Families from all over Tibet gather at the Norbulingka Palace every summer for the Yoghurt Festival. Here you can see a family taking shelter from Tibet's penetrating sunlight, in a doorway of the palace. The door itself has

interesting metalwork and a symbolic hanging in the middle of it but this would not have attracted attention as it was just a typical wooden door to a traditional Tibetan building. The men in the photo are smoking which is typical of males in both China and Tibet and it's interesting to note that they are all wearing cheap Chinese clothes rather

than traditional Tibetan garb which, one would have thought, would be more appropriate for a Tibetan festival. The home-made rendering on the wall is of interest as it is probably hand-made and almost certainly contains some yak dung mixed in with the sand and lime.



Picnic at Dalai Lama's Summer Palace

The word "picnic" is a quintessentially English word although the term actually comes from the 18th century French term for "pleasure party including meal out of doors": piquenique. While picnics seem to have fallen out of fashion in the west they are still very popular in Tibet (or they were in the 1980s) and a nothing seems more

natural than a gathering of Tibetans sitting round a meal in the grass. In Lhasa the weather in August is perfect – neither too hot nor too cold – and the vast Norbulingka Park is the ideal place to gather for a picnic.



Tibetan Woman

The woman in the foreground is wearing a mixture of traditional Tibetan gear (the brown cloak, useful for the cool evenings) and Chinese clothes (top, shoes, socks). But it's clear from the headdress that this woman is totally Tibetan and she has an expression which suggests both strength

and independence. In the old days when most of Tibet's male population would go to monasteries the women were left to run the household, bring up the children and play the leading role at home. As a result, Tibetan women are a lot stronger and more self-sufficient than women in

countries like India where they have been oppressed for centuries.



Drinking Chang

No social gathering of Tibetans would be complete without "chang" – an alcoholic beverage made from fermented barley. It is a white coloured drink resembling milk mixed with water and to foreign tastes (at least this author) it tastes disgusting. In this picture the chang is contained

within a plastic container which looks like it was designed for fuel, and it is served in small glasses which are constantly refilled. Legend has it that chang is a good remedy for colds, fevers and allergies – even alcoholism – and in the Himalayan region of Western Ti-bet they say the Yeti

(the Abominable Snowman) raids local villages in order to drink it.



Wooden Beams

This photo gives an insight into Tibetan decorative arts, as well as building technique. This type of wooden construction is a key part of any Tibetan monastery as they hold up the ceilings. Every piece of structural timber in a Tibetan monastery tend to be painted with the sort of lively mural you can see here. In the lower timber we can see a formal flower arrangement, in the middle section

we can see a mythical bird (or is it a peacock?) and some kind of spiritual being amidst the foliage. The colours are tasteful and have probably been used in this combination for centuries.

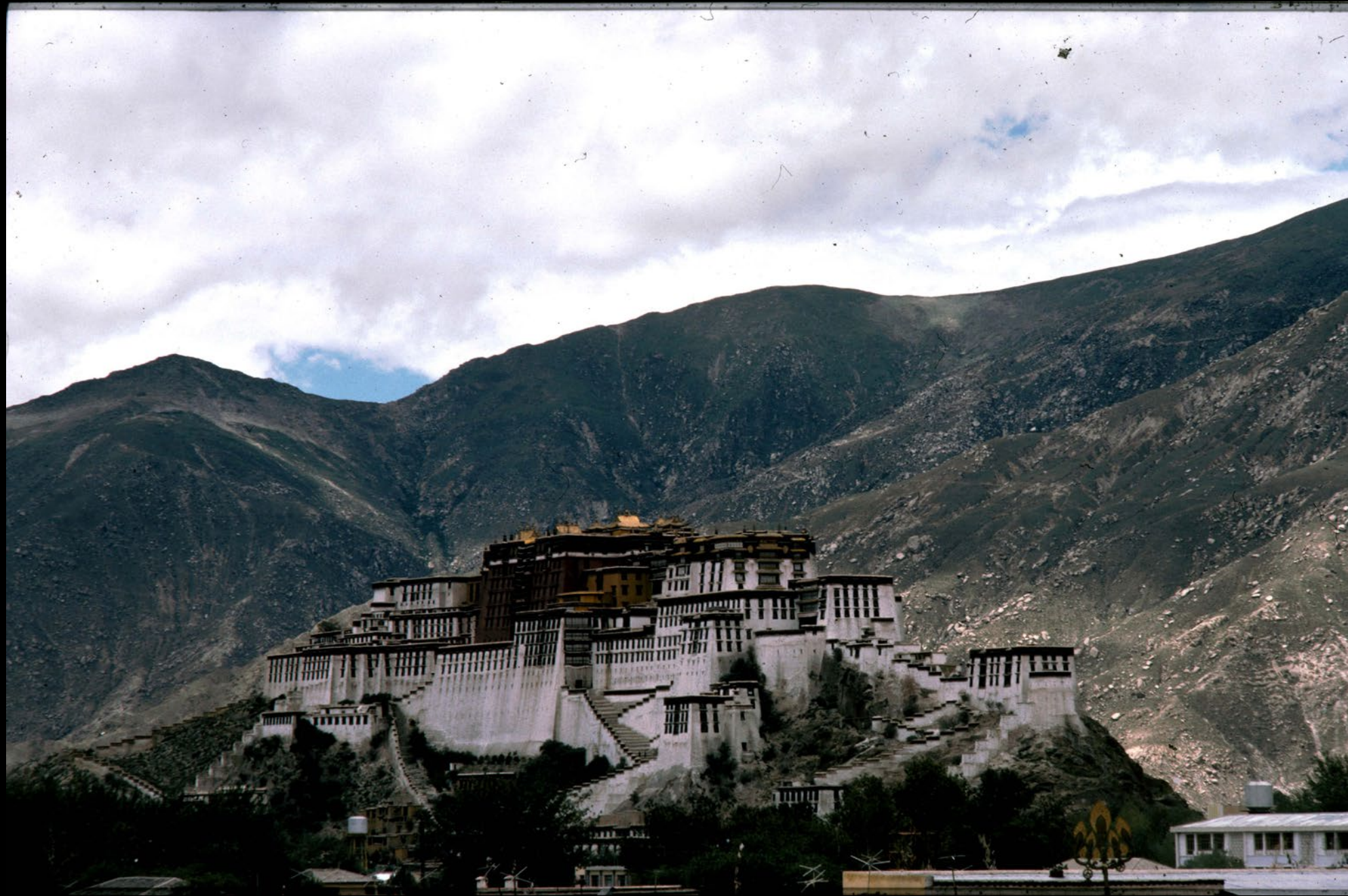


Pilgrims from Eastern Tibet

A typical scene in the Barkhor (Old Town) of Lhasa in 1987: a Stupa (the vase-shaped white object on the right), the stone-paved street, the black framed window in the background and the smoke which comes from the burning of aromatic bushes. The main subject of the photo are three

women who almost certainly come from Eastern Tibet (the Kham Region) and are probably in Lhasa on pilgrimage to the most holy place in Tibet: The Jokhang Temple. It is clear from their traditional clothes, as well as their wide-brimmed hats, that these women come from the east, from

Kham, where traditional garb was the norm in the 1980s. Lhasa is often filled with pilgrims from all over Tibet and it is likely that these women travelled for thousands of miles, probably hitching on open back trucks.



The Potala Palace

The Potala is the most extraordinary building in Tibet. It was built over a thousand years ago, sits on its own hill, is earthquake proof (see the way the walls lean in) and should be one of the great "wonders of the world". The Potala Palace was the centre of Tibet's government for

centuries, until the invasion of the Chinese Communists in 1949 in fact. One of the most remarkable facts about this building is that it wasn't destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, a period in the 1960s when thousands of Tibetan monasteries were razed (China itself

suffered terrible damage to its cultural heritage during this period). Rumour has it that Chou en Lai, China's Prime Minister at the time, gave orders that the Potala should be spared.



Rupert Wolfe Murray in Gyantse

It's difficult to write about a photo in which I am the main subject and it's also strange to look back at oneself after quarter of a century. What can I say? I was younger, slimmer, better looking but I'm still wearing the same type of clothes and have a similar hairstyle (but less of it). When

I was in Tibet I would always wear a blue Mao-style hat which was useful to keep the sun, dust and cold out, as well as make some of the foreign travellers think I was a Communist. The small canvas bag hanging over my middle would go everywhere with me and contained my diary

(I would write exactly one page a day), a book and a pen. I have no recollection of where this photo was taken but Uli tagged it as being in Gyantse, which is very possible as I accompanied her and Bettina Tucholsky there in 1987.



Tibetan Homestead

For an anthropologist this would probably be the most interesting photo of this collection as it gives a direct view into Tibetan traditional village houses of the 1980s. The photo is taken from above, giving a rare glimpse into the

layout of a typical homestead in central Tibet. The space is divided between a small home for the family and other spaces for the animals and the fodder. Note that hay and firewood have been gathered up, are being stored in every available space and will prove essential for the long, hard winter ahead. The home-made ladder is an essential

instrument in this process as it gives the villagers access to the flat roofs, which double up as storage spaces. Note the thick, dried bushes on top of the outer walls – a precaution against the wind. The whole setup is designed to withstand a harsh winter, a piercing summer sun, storms and extreme temperatures.



Teenage Girls Carrying Fodder

There are many remarkable things about this photo: the fresh and healthy expressions of the young peasant girls, the stupa on the left that looks more like a roadside feature than a revered spiritual object, the high mountains that rise up in the background – and the very fact that

young teenage girls are carrying basketfuls of grass from the field to the smallholding (why isn't this being done by a tractor?) In the 1980s Tibet's villages had very little in the way of mechanisation and work like this had to be done by hand and, as is common in all undeveloped countries, it is

invariably the women who do this type of hard work.



Young People on the Streets of Lhasa

A typical street scene in Lhasa in the 1980s – a group of young Tibetans sitting around chatting. What's unusual about this scene is that these people are sitting right in front of a series of white cotton bedspreads that a local tradesman is trying to sell. Not many salesmen would

tolerate the presence of a bunch of chatting young people in front of their shop, but the culture in Tibet is very different and they are a very tolerant people. The white cotton sheets are commonly used all over Tibet, often as tent-type setups at picnics and festivals. Note the mixture of Tibetan

and Chinese clothing on the young people, and the carpet-type dress with the multicoloured lines.

Afterword

by Uli Zimmermann

Wien, 2015

When I took these pictures I was 22 years old. Photographs were still taken on rolls of film that you bought for more money than you could afford and were developed months later. Looking at them now, they show me an incredible place and the time when I first travelled alone.

I really had wanted to see Tibet but would have struggled to explain why - and then I had the good luck to meet Bettina. She had also thought of going to Tibet and turned out to be the most interesting, unpretentious and fun company for travelling.

We reached Lhasa after a remarkably weird journey through China, and there I first met Rupert who I remember as a very concentrated, friendly and unhappy Scottish hero. Bettina decided to stay and I continued traveling.



So I found myself in an unheroic state of health, not recovering from altitude sickness for weeks, pushing impossibly heavy bicycles up to monasteries, sitting there forever; watching dark, colourful places filled with mural paintings, smoke, Gods, demons and butter candles. Sometimes I would draw but mostly I just watched - and always somebody adopted me, made me feel at

home and gave me salted butter tea. Or something solid, greasy and crumbly that didn't go well with a sick stomach.

Connected to these pictures is the memory of strong and impressively friendly people whom I met travelling on crowded buses and boats or in the back of open trucks. Kaleidoscope memories: a pig slithering across the loading platform of a truck, trying to avoid the hole in the wooden floor; a river below a vast sky, flowing down to India; and people making me part of their group for the simple reason that otherwise I would be alone. And with their air of belonging to their place and feeling free to act friendly, it was easy to learn to say "yes please" instead of "no thank you". They made me drink their beer, eat their food (to be thrown up later) and join in their fun.

The pictures show some of the people and some of the places but may fail to show how close the sky really was, how awful the ditches smelled in some of the villages and the friendly mood of the dusty Tibetan women in Mao suits who were trying to rebuild, by hand, their completely devastated holy places.

It was exceptionally nice to meet Bettina and Rupert again after so many years, looking at these slides and watching the past. I wish for the people in the pictures – that their lives in their beautifully wild, occupied country went well.

TIBET 1987

