



The Himalayan Caravan via Everest Base-camp

17 day itinerary

*Kathmandu – Tsetang – Lhasa – Ganden
Gyantse – Shigatse – Sakya – Rongbuk –
Everest Base Camp – Nyalam – Kathmandu*

Travel dates

Starts: Kathmandu - Saturday 5 September 2009
Ends: Kathmandu - Monday 21st September 2009

INTRODUCTION

Travel in Tibet is always an adventure. The roads can be rough and the accommodation, though usually characterful, is occasionally rather basic. However, almost all travellers agree that these are small prices to pay for the privilege of experiencing, first hand, one of the world's scenically most magnificent and culturally most fascinating countries.

Using good quality Toyota Landcruisers we are able to travel in an impressive amount of comfort to off-the-beaten-track locations that are inaccessible by other types of vehicles.

By using local Tibetan drivers and guides, we are able to gain a more informed, informal and in-depth insight into the myriad complexities of Tibetan society. The impromptu as well as scheduled breaks in our journey, as we make our way across the vast Tibetan plateau, offer unforgettable memories of the unique and often mystical sights and sounds that define life beyond the Himalayas.



The Oriental Caravan



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ITINERARY

Day 1 Kathmandu Group rendezvous in Kathmandu. After time to relax at our comfortable, centrally-located hotel, for those who wish, there will be drinks and dinner in the vibrant entertainment district of Thamel, with its cosmopolitan atmosphere and many shops, bars and restaurants. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 2 Kathmandu We spend the day exploring Kathmandu. In the morning we visit the ancient Monkey Temple at Swayumbinath, from where there are commanding views over the valley. It is considered good luck to climb the 365 steps at the front of the temple, although this is by no means compulsory! Later we drive to Bodhnath, the site of an imposing white stupa. This area is home to a large Tibetan community, and is often the first point of contact for refugees coming over the mountains. After lunch overlooking the stupa, we visit the riverside Hindu temple complex at Pashupatinath where chillum-smoking, *sadhu* holymen mingle with pilgrims, devotees and other worshippers. There are then a few hours free before the group meets up again, in the early evening, for a trip briefing. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 3 Kathmandu A day at leisure, allowing time for group members to independently explore Kathmandu and its outlying districts. At any time of day it is worth taking in the many sights and sounds of Durbar Square – the heart of the city – with its countless tiered pagodas and statues of deities looking both ferocious and benign. Nearby are the ornate and finely carved wooden buildings and towers of the recently opened Royal Palace, as well as Kumari Chowk, where it is sometimes possible to catch a glimpse of the young living goddess Kumari. Today the Kathmandu Valley is one of the most fertile in the Himalayas, and home to some of its richest cultural treasures. According to local legend the valley was once a lake, however, with the blow of a sword more properly used for cutting through ignorance, the god Manjusri cleaved a gash in the mountain wall thus allowing the water to escape. Across the valley, and within easy travelling distance of the capital, is Patan (famous for its handicrafts) and the well-preserved, medieval town of Bhaktapur – famous for its yoghurt. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 4 Tsetang An early start, as today we travel to the airport and take a spectacular 1.5 hour flight over the Himalayas to Tibet. In clear weather there are amazing aerial views of Mts Everest, Shishipangma, Makalu and Kangchenjunga. On arrival at Gongar Airport – 90km south of Lhasa – we continue by road, along the banks of the yawning Yarlung Tsangpo river, to Tsetang (at 3,400m). In the afternoon we will visit the Yumbu Lhakang, the oldest and, some would say, most visually striking building in Tibet. This Tolkienesque castle/temple, perched eagle-like on a rocky outcrop, is said to be on the site of the original palace of Tibet's first king, Nyatri Tsenpo, and guards the entrance to the historically important Yarlung Valley. Tsetang itself is a rather windswept place, with the air of a Chinese outpost. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 5 Lhasa (190km) After a brief period of acclimatisation in Tsetang, we travel west towards Lhasa. En route we make a scenic detour to Samye Monastery – the first ever constructed in Tibet and, according to Tibetan cosmology, the centre of the universe. Getting to Samye is half the fun and involves a rather leisurely ferry-ride across the Yarlung Tsangpo River followed by a bumpy, but mercifully short, journey in the back of a truck. The monastery – considered to be one of the most architecturally magnificent in all of Tibet – was founded during the reign of Trison Detsen by Padmasambhava, the Indian monk credited with having introduced Buddhism to Tibet. Returning to the main road we continue our journey to Lhasa (3,590m). As we enter the city, just as Colonel Younghusband, Heinrich Harrer and other early travellers did, we catch our first glimpse of the stately and surreal structure of the Potala Palace looming majestically over the Lhasa Valley and what is now a large modern Chinese city. By late afternoon, we will have established a base for the next 3 days at our centrally-located hotel in the Tibetan area of town. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 6-8 Lhasa We have 3 full days to explore this fascinating and dynamic city. For Tibetans all roads lead to the Jokhang Temple – the Vatican of Tibetan Buddhism. Inside, wildly garbed pilgrims from all over Tibet shuffle slowly through a maze of candlelit temples to the musical drone of softly chanting monks. The temple houses, among its many other treasures, the Jowo Rinpoche, the most revered image in Tibet. Some of the temple's carved wooden pillars, blackened and preserved by centuries of juniper smoke, date back over 1,400 years. The Barkhor, the pilgrim route that goes around the temple, is a great place to wander, shop and meet locals – each circuit is meant to bring religious merit to the circumambulator.

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Day 6-8 continued Across town is the Potala Palace, the winter home of the conspicuously absent HH the Dalai Lama. Once one of the world's tallest buildings – until the early 20th century – the Potala is a town in itself, and historically served both political and religious functions. As well as several lavishly adorned chapels which still contain some priceless artefacts and antiquities, the rooms that are of particular interest are the former living quarters of the current Dalai Lama and the awe-inspiring tombs of several of his predecessors. From the rooftop it is possible to see far across the valley and observe the extent to which Lhasa has expanded over recent years. The Norbulingka, or Summer Palace, is slightly further to the west, and it is from here that the Dalai Lama began his journey into exile in 1959. On the outskirts of Lhasa are the great monasteries (once monastic cities) of Sera and Drepung, both strongholds of the *Gelugpa* (yellow hat) sect founded by Tsongkhapa. Near to Drepung is the Nechung Temple, home to the state Oracle. Time-permitting we will visit one or both of these monasteries, allowing also some free time for individual exploration of the city. There are bicycles for hire just a few minutes from our hotel, and many other places to explore including lesser-known temples and street markets. Anyone with an interest in alternative medicine may like to include a visit to the Tibetan Medical College.

Overnight – hotel

Day 9 Gyangtse (261km) Leaving the city far behind, we head south on a journey that will eventually take us back across the Himalayas, through some of the most magnificent mountain scenery in the world. After first recrossing the Yarlung Tsangpo we climb steeply to the Kamba La Pass (4,794m) and get our first stunning views of the clear, turquoise-blue waters of Scorpion Lake (Yamdruk Tso). After dropping down to the lake, and skirting the shoreline for a while, we soon climb again to Karo La pass, (5,011m) renowned for its unusual hanging glacier. From here the road to Gyangtse levels out and follows a line of slightly incongruous looking mud brick telegraph poles.

Overnight – hotel

Day 10 Gyangtse Gyangtse itself is a lovely well-preserved rural town that has escaped much of the colonisation seen elsewhere in Tibet. There is a fine monastery here – home to the huge Kumbum Stupa – and also an impressive *dzong* or fortress. Anyone with an interest in Imperial history may be interested to know that the fortress was the scene of a relatively violent skirmish between the advancing Younghusband Expedition and the woefully ill-prepared Tibetan Army. The events are recorded in the fortress' interestingly named, 'Museum of Anti- British'.

Overnight – hotel

Day 11 Shigatse (90km) This morning set off through an almost bucolic landscape on the short drive to Shigatse (approx. 90km). Shigatse is Tibet's second city and is steadily growing in political importance and cultural significance. The city provides us with some interesting places to visit this afternoon. Undoubtedly the most important place in town is Tashilhunpo Monastery, traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, and one of the six largest in Tibet. Unusually, but not without good political reason, the monastery was spared significant damage during the Cultural Revolution, and consequently still comprises an impressive array of temples containing many original artefacts, not least Jamkhang Chenmo temple, where we come face to face with the world's largest gilded copper image, a huge 26m high statue of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future.

Overnight – hotel

Day 12 Sakya/Shekhar (233km) Leaving Shigatse's broad plain we ascend to the Tsuo La Pass before dropping down to Sakya Bridge from where we turn into the picturesque Sakya Valley. Although little more than a village now Sakya gave its name to one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and was once the capital of Tibet. The temples within Sakya's blue-walled, Mongol-style monastery are some of the most fascinating in Tibet and having climbed to the roof, we are rewarded with beautiful views of the surrounding countryside. From Sakya we return to the main road and continue via Lhatse and the Lhakpa La Pass (5,220m) – watershed for the Eurasian and Indian subcontinents – to the less than salubrious town of Shekhar where we spend the night.

Overnight – hotel

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ITINERARY *continued*

Day 13 Everest Base Camp (85km) From Shelkar to Rongbuk the road is often uneven, the driving bumpy but the journey is utterly magical. From the main road we pass the village of Chay and then climb steeply up to the Pang La Pass from where it is possible to get breathtaking and unrivalled views of Mounts Everest, Cho Oyu, Makalu and Lhotse. Descending the slopes towards the small hamlets of Paruche and Passum, we drive through wide, fertile valleys, negotiating a few small river-crossings, before travelling through a slightly harsher landscape to reach Rongbuk Monastery – the highest in the world. We expect to arrive in time for a picnic lunch, eating freshly prepared food while gazing at the northern face of the world's highest mountain. According to Hergé, it was to this monastery that Tintin was brought, by monks, after stumbling across the Himalayas in search of his lost friend Chang. The temple buildings themselves are of little historical interest but the sight of the monastery's *chorten* silhouetted against Everest's Kanshung Face is breathtaking, and as one guidebook proclaims "*to sit outside and watch the play of light on the mountain is the experience of a lifetime*". It is possible to either walk or drive the 7 or so extra kilometres to the Base Camp, and from there climb up onto the Rongbuk Glacier to become almost part of the geological drama being played out all around you. We stay at a guesthouse near the monastery which although quite basic can be – with the right attitude and warm sleeping bag – a lot of fun. The resident monks and nuns, some of whom speak a certain amount of English, are mostly quite young and are great hosts. *Overnight – guesthouse*

Day 14 Nyalam (211km) Back on the main road, we begin one of the most scenically astounding days of the trip, as we are confronted at various times throughout the day with the full grandeur of the Himalayas laid out before us. From the old town of Tingri we continue south eventually climbing to the summit of the Lalung Leh Pass, from where the views of the great monolith of Shishapangma (8,013m) are particularly impressive. From here the scenery begins to change again, as we make a steep descent through the Po Chu Gorge en route to Nyalam. As we lose altitude the temperature rises and, in marked contrast to the arid rather barren plateau, we find ourselves in an area of alpine vegetation. Just north of Nyalam we will, if time allows, pause to visit Milarepa's Cave, one of the many former meditation retreats of Tibet's best-loved poet and mystic. A little further on we come to Nyalam (3,750m) where we will spend our last night in Tibet in a simple but friendly guesthouse. *Overnight – guesthouse*

Day 15 Kathmandu (155km) As the winding road continues its descent through densely forested hillsides, and the countryside around us begins to assume an almost tropical air, the rapid transition and marked difference between the high and low altitude worlds of Tibet and Nepal is difficult to ignore. Arriving at the architecturally chaotic Nepali/Chinese border town of Dram (Zhangmu in Chinese) we complete the Chinese border formalities, in order to exit Tibet, before continuing down the road (by vehicle or, if the road is impassable, by foot) to Friendship Bridge, and just beyond it the Nepali border post. After meeting our Nepali guide and driver we continue past the gushing Bhote and Sun Khosi rivers and on through rice terraces and woodland to arrive in Kathmandu in the late afternoon. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 16 Kathmandu Presuming there have been no delays en route, today has been left free for relaxation, a little shopping or possibly even a short trek on the edges of the valley. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 17 Journey's end... The Oriental Caravan heads home

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Tour price (excluding international flights) – £1,885* per person on a twin share basis

* Please note that, unless instructed otherwise, we will be donating an optional 1% of the proceeds of this tour to the Mitrata-Nepal Foundation for Children (www.mitrata.org).

Group & staff The group will comprise between 6 and 12 members, and be escorted throughout by a bi-lingual trek leader from The Oriental Caravan. While in Tibet we will be joined by a local guide and assisted by experienced local drivers.

Transport While travelling in Tibet we will be using top-quality Toyota 4500 4x4 Landcruisers that are capable of comfortably negotiating the region's occasionally rugged terrain away from the main highways. For the section of the journey between Lhasa Airport and Lhasa we may use a minibus, as a more efficient means of ensuring that the group travels together while in urban areas. Transport from the airport is included and will be by minibus or car as will the transfer between the Nepali border and Kathmandu.

Accommodation In Lhasa we stay at a centrally-located, 3-star Tibetan-style hotel with good facilities (in Kathmandu we use a modern 4 star hotel, also centrally located). Elsewhere on the trip we use the best available accommodation. In Shigatse, Gyangtse and Tsetang the hotels are new and comfortable, although as always in Chinese-built hotels the plumbing can be something of a hit or miss affair! The hotel in Shelkar is basic but blessed with its own slightly Kafkaesque charm. In all the above we have rooms with private facilities, and in all hotels guests are provided with large thermos flasks of hot, boiled water for drinking. In Nyalam we stay in a guesthouse which although simple is friendly and full of character. The accommodation at Rongbuk is in the dormitories of the guesthouse, and although quilts are provided it could have been quite a while since they were last laundered, and so it is recommended that you bring your own 3-4 season sleeping bag (hireable in Kathmandu).

Food In Kathmandu only breakfasts are included. Allow around £5 a day for other meals in Nepal. In Tibet all meals are included except in Lhasa where there is a good choice of foreigner-friendly restaurants.

Weather At the time of year when we will be travelling in the region there is generally plenty of sunshine and blue skies in Tibet – our journey having been timed to avoid the Indian monsoon which in July and August occasionally makes its way across the Himalayas. By September the threat of rain is significantly reduced but the temperature, particularly at night, is still warm enough to allow for comfortable travel.

Altitude Most travellers arriving in Tibet experience some of the more minor forms of altitude sickness, such as headaches, sleeplessness and feeling out of breath after only mild exertion. Typically, these symptoms clear up after a few days, and are generally little more than a minor inconvenience. It is extremely unusual for anyone to suffer the more serious effects of acute altitude sickness but anyone with significant heart or respiratory disorders would be strongly advised to consult a physician before committing to a journey of this nature.

Health Formalities There are no statutory (vaccination) requirements for Nepal or Tibet unless arriving from an infected area. All group members should however ensure that they are reasonably fit, and as much of our route across Tibet is above 3,500m (maximum altitude over 5,000m) consider a medical check-up before departure.

Insurance It is a condition of travelling with The Oriental Caravan that each group member be insured against medical and personal accident risks (including the cost of repatriation) and have adequate baggage cover. In addition, it is strongly recommended that all travellers take out cancellation insurance at the time of booking to cover their costs should they, for any reason, need to cancel prior to departure. (The Oriental Caravan is able to provide details of a suitable single/multi-trip insurance policy, available direct from Campbell Irvine Insurance Ltd).

Passport & Visa All nationalities require a passport valid for at least 6 months beyond the date of final departure from Nepal. Nearly all nationalities – including British – require a visa for Nepal, and as we will be entering twice a multiple-entry visa is required. This can be obtained before departure, directly from the Nepalese Consulate, or if you would prefer to use a visa service, we can recommend Travcour (phone 020 7223 5295). Alternatively it is simpler and cheaper to obtain a Nepali visa upon arrival at the airport in Kathmandu or the Nepali border. The Chinese visa is organised by The Oriental Caravan as a group visa, on arrival in Nepal. To ensure the timely processing of the Chinese visa and Tibetan permits we will need a photocopy of the personal details page in your passport at the earliest opportunity.

Special Equipment Group members will need a 3-4 season sleeping bag (can be hired in Kathmandu), warm jacket, UV sunglasses and skin protection, strong walking shoes, and a water bottle. More specific information regarding clothing and what to pack is included in the 'Pre-departure Information' that will be sent to group members closer to the date of departure.

This dossier, and the itinerary it describes, have been carefully compiled and are provided in good faith. As with any such journey to a remote destination unusual and unexpected conditions can occur at any time and this kind of holiday can be subject to unforeseen changes; to fully enjoy this kind of travel it is, on occasion, necessary for participants to be prepared to adopt a certain amount of flexibility.

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