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ACCOMMODATION

Most towns in Tibet now offer a decent range of hotels, many with hot showers and some three- or four-star options. In smaller towns you may be limited to rooms with a shared bathroom, while in the countryside electricity and running water are luxuries that cannot be expected. Hotels are divided into *binguan* or *dajiudian* (hotels), *zhaodaisuo* (guesthouses) and *lüguan* (simple hostels). The Tibetan terms are *drukhang* (hotel) and *dronkhang* (guesthouse). Midrange hotels generally have rooms with private bathroom and hot-water showers, at least part of the day. Top-end

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

hotels are limited to Lhasa and one or two other towns.

Hot water is provided everywhere in thermoses and even in basic places a basin and drum of cold water is usually provided for washing. Bedding is provided, but in the cheapest places it's often not clean and a sleeping bag is a good idea.

In some towns the local Public Security Bureau (PSB) keeps a pretty tight lid on which places can and cannot accept foreigners. Most tourists will only come up against this problem in Tsetang and Ali, where the budget hotels are not permitted to accept foreigners.

PRACTICALITIES

- Electricity is 220V, 50 cycles AC. Plugs come in at least four designs: three-pronged angled pins (like in Australia); three-pronged round pins (like in Hong Kong); two flat pins (US style but without the ground wire) or two narrow round pins (European style); and three rectangular pins (British style).
- Note that electronics such as laptops and iPods are often affected by altitudes above 4500m and may stop working.
- The metric system is widely used in Tibet. Traders measure fruit and vegetables by the *jin* (500g).
- CCTV 9 is China's only English TV channel (if you are desperate). CCTV 6 occasionally has movies in English.

SLEEPING BAGS

The question of whether you need a sleeping bag or not depends entirely on where you plan to go and how you plan to travel. Those who aim to spend time in Lhasa and then head down to Nepal via the sights of Tsang could do without one, although they are always a nice comfort, especially in budget hotels. Anyone planning on trekking or heading out to remoter areas, such as Nam-tso, Everest or western Tibet, should definitely bring one along. See also p282.

Camping

Camping out is well understood by Tibetans, many of whom still spend their summers herding livestock in mountain valleys. You probably run the risk of an unpleasant run-in with the PSB if you attempt to set up a tent in Lhasa, but get 20km or so out of town and the nearest patch of turf is yours for the picking. Always ask permission if camping near a settlement or encampment, watch out for the dogs (see p317), and expect an audience.

Guesthouses & Hotels

In Lhasa there are several clean, well-run Tibetan-style guesthouses. Similar set-ups can be found in Shigatse, Sakya and Tingri. Tibetan-style guesthouses tend to be much more friendly and homey than Chinese hotels, and they are also much cheaper. Midrange and top-end hotels in Lhasa are 30% more expensive than elsewhere, though standards are 40% higher.

Some monasteries, such as Samye, Ganden, Drigung Til, Dorje Drag, Mindroling, Tidrum and Reting, also have their own guesthouses, normally a bank of carpeted seats that double as beds (bring a sleeping bag). Remoter monasteries often have a spare room, or even a chapel, which they may be willing to let out. Expect to pay around Y20 per person; if no fee is asked, leave a donation in the prayer hall.

Most of the larger hotels are anonymous Chinese-style places that share several traits: the plumbing is often dodgy, the carpets are dotted with a mosaic of cigarette burns, and all offer a ratty pair of flip-flops so you don't have to touch the bathroom floor, but you're better off bringing your own.

Rooms are generally divided into *biaozhun* (标准; standard), which come with an at-

tached bathroom, and *putong* (普通; ordinary). Standard rooms are often divided into *jingji* (经济; economy) and *haohua* (豪华; deluxe) rooms.

Some hotels (generally the cheaper ones) price their accommodation per bed rather than per room, which can work out well for solo travellers. To guarantee that you have the room to yourself you would theoretically have to pay for all beds (and a few hotel owners will try to force you to do so), but usually that's not necessary. If you are alone in a double room or are a couple in a triple room, staff will not normally put others in the room, although they have the right to. They may possibly put other foreigners in the room, but it is rare for a hotel to mix foreigners and Chinese or Tibetans in one room. This depends largely on your negotiations.

ACTIVITIES

Tibet offers the type of topography to delight mountaineers, white-water rafters, horse riders and others, though the problem, as always, is the confusing travel permit system, which many authorities manipulate to their own financial advantage.

Cycling

Tibet offers some of the most extreme and exhilarating mountain biking in the world. If you are fit and well equipped, it's possible to visit most places in this book by bike, although the most popular route is the rollercoaster ride along the Friendship Hwy from Lhasa down to Kathmandu. Shorter excursions could include trips to Ganden and the Gyama Valley, or to the Lhundrub Valley. Mountain bikes can be hired in Lhasa.

Thaizand Bicycle Tours (see p128) in Lhasa offer route information and can provide bikes and logistical support for all kinds of trips. A 10-day ride to Zhangmu for four people,

DISCOUNTS

In many areas of Tibet, and notably in Lhasa, accommodation prices vary seasonally. Throughout this book, we list high-season rates (May to September), followed by the range of discounts you can expect in April and October. Prices will be lower still in winter. In reality some kind of discount is almost always available when the hotel is not full, so always ask.

with jeep support, costs around US\$400 per person.

For information on long-distance touring, see p342.

Horse Riding

There's something romantic about travelling across Tibet on horseback. The easiest place to arrange this is in the Kham region of western Sichuan, but even here it's just a matter of coming to an agreement with local herdsman. A kora of Lake Manasarovar (p229) on horseback is a great idea and a few travellers have managed to arrange this.

Tibet Wind Horse Adventure (www.windhorsetibet.com) offers day trips on horseback in the Tolung-chu and Drigung Valleys and can customise longer adventures (for details, see p117). Contact Chris Jones.

Foreign travel companies, such as **Hidden Trails** (www.hiddentrails.com) and **Boojum Expeditions** (www.boojum.com), offer expensive horse-riding tours in Kham (western Sichuan).

Mountaineering

There are some huge peaks in Tibet, including the 8000m-plus giants of Cho Oyu, Shishapangma and, of course, Everest, which are enough to send a quiver of excitement through vertically inclined explorers. Unfortunately, the Chinese government charges exorbitant fees for mountaineering permits, which puts mountaineering in Tibet out of the range of most individuals or groups devoid of commercial sponsorship.

A few individuals have succeeded in getting to Advanced Everest Base Camp and even beyond but the authorities are clamping down on this (see p209).

Foreign travel companies, such as **Alpine Ascents** (www.alpineascents.com) and **Jagged Globe** (www.jagged-globe.co.uk), arrange for mountaineering trips to Cho Oyu and Shishapangma in Tibet, but these don't come cheap.

Rafting

Tibet Wind Horse Adventure (www.windhorsetibet.com) offers rafting trips in central Tibet, ranging from one to five days, and are absolutely the people to contact if you want to arrange a kayaking trip in Tibet. See p117 for details.

Trekking

One of the remarkable things about Tibet, considering the difficulties placed in the way

of those heading up there by Chinese authorities, is that once you are up on the high plateau there is considerable freedom to strike off on foot and explore the Tibetan valleys and ranges. Of course no-one at China International Travel Service (CITS) or any other Chinese organisation will tell you this, but nevertheless it is the case. Experienced and hardy trekkers have the opportunity to visit places that are almost impossible to reach any other way, and are unlikely to find any official obstacles. For detailed information on the most popular trekking routes, see p281.

BATHHOUSES

Cheaper hotels often don't have hot showers but staff can normally direct you a simple bathhouse (淋浴; *linyū*; *soog-po tru-ya* in Tibetan), where you can get a hot shower for around Y8. These are purely functional places, and sometimes a bit grotty, but after a few days on the road you'll be glad for the wash. Staff normally provide a towel and flip-flops, but bring your own if you have them.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks, offices, government departments and the PSB are generally open Monday to Friday, with perhaps a half-day on Saturday. Most open from around 9.30am to 1pm and 3pm to 6.30pm. Opening hours listed in this guide are for summer; winter hours generally start half an hour later and finish half an hour earlier.

Most smaller monasteries have no set opening hours and will open up chapels once you've tracked down the right monk. Others, such as Samye, are notorious for only opening certain rooms at certain times. In general it's best to try to tag along with pilgrims or a tour group.

CHILDREN

Be especially careful with children as they won't be on the lookout for signs of altitude sickness. Children don't get on with Tibetan food or toilets any better than grown ups. They also tire more easily from an endless round of visiting monasteries. Bring along a copy of *Tintin in Tibet* for when morale flags. In Kathmandu several bookshops sell Tibetan thangka (religious paintings) and mandala colouring books.

On the upside children can be a great ice-breaker and generally generate a lot of interest. Many hotels have family rooms, which

normally have three or four beds arranged in two connected rooms.

Tibet is probably not a great place to bring a very small child. You should bring all supplies (including nappies and medicines) with you. Small spoons can be useful as most places have only chopsticks. There's plenty of boiling water to sterilise bottles etc. It's possible to make a cot from the copious numbers of duvets supplied with most hotel rooms.

CLIMATE CHARTS

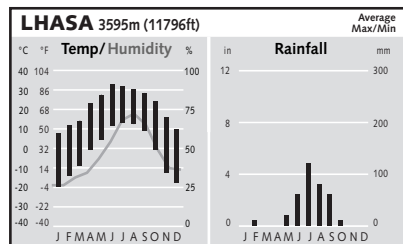
Tibet has similar seasons to China, though with lower temperatures due to the higher altitudes. Winters (November to March) are cold (the average temperature in January is -2°C) but there isn't all that much snow. Summers (May to September) have warm days with strong sunshine and cool nights. At higher elevations (ie above 4000m) even summer days can be chilly. During spring and autumn you need to be prepared for four seasons in one day, including the possibility of snowfall.

There are some regional variations; northern and western Tibet are generally higher and colder. The monsoon affects parts of Tibet (particularly eastern Tibet) from mid-July to the end of September (July and August bring half of Tibet's annual rainfall).

For suggestions on when to visit Tibet, see p15.

COURSES

It is possible to enrol in a Tibetan-language course at Lhasa's Tibet University. Tuition costs US\$1000 per semester; semesters run from March to July and September to January. There are two hours of classes a day and around 70 foreign students currently attend (including some undercover missionaries). For an application form contact the **Foreign Affairs Office** (☎ 0891-634 3254; fsd@utibet.edu.cn; Tibet University, Lhasa 850000, Tibetan Autonomous Region).



Once you are accepted the university will help arrange a student ('X') visa and, after three months, residency status in Lhasa. Students have to stay in campus accommodation. It should also be possible to hire a private tutor from the university for around Y20 per hour.

Many travellers find it more convenient to study at Dharamsala or Kathmandu, although students say that the mix of dialects and high levels of English make them less effective places to study. Courses offered there include Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, Tibetan language and Tibetan performing arts.

Kopan Monastery (www.kopan-monastery.com) outside Kathmandu, in Nepal, is a particularly popular place to study aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.

The various Tibetan organisations across the world offer courses and meditation retreats. The **Tibet Foundation** (☎ 020-7930 6001; www.tibet-foundation.org) in London, for example, offers a 10-week Tibetan-language course for around UK£130.

CUSTOMS

Chinese border crossings have gone from being severely traumatic to exceedingly easy for travellers. You are unlikely to be even checked when flying in or out of the country.

You can legally bring in or take out only Y6000 in Chinese currency and must declare any cash amount exceeding US\$5000 or its equivalent. You are allowed to import a maximum of 72 rolls of film. It's also officially forbidden to bring more than 20 pieces of underwear into the PRC (we kid you not!).

It is illegal to import any printed material, film, tapes etc 'detrimental to China's politics, economy, culture and ethics'. This is a particularly sensitive subject in Tibet, but even here it is highly unusual to have Chinese customs officials grilling travellers about their reading matter. Maps and political books printed in Dharamsala, India, could cause a problem.

It is currently illegal to bring into China pictures, books, videos or speeches of or by the Dalai Lama. Moreover, you may be placing the recipient of these in danger of a fine or jail sentence from the Chinese authorities. Images of the Tibetan national flag are even 'more' illegal.

Be very circumspect if you are asked to take any packages, letters or photos out of Tibet for anyone else, including monks. If caught, you'll

most likely be detained, interrogated and then probably expelled.

Anything made in China before 1949 is considered an antique and needs a certificate to take it out of the country. If it was made before 1795, it cannot legally be taken out of the country.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bookjacking

Tibetans are a curious and devout people and so the slightest glimpse of a photo of a monastery or even a mention of a Dalai Lama picture will result in the temporary confiscation of your Lonely Planet guide. For many Tibetans this is their only chance to see other parts of their country, so try to be patient, even after the 10th request in five minutes. A good deed like this can often open hitherto locked doors (literally) in the monastery you are visiting.

Dogs

Clean-up campaigns in Lhasa and Shigatse have largely done away with packs of rabid-looking dogs that used to make catching a predawn bus a frightening, and even a life-threatening experience. Dogs can still be a problem in smaller towns, though, and you should be especially vigilant when exploring back streets or seeking out an obscure monastery.

The most dangerous dogs belong to remote homesteads or nomad encampments and should be given a very wide berth. Travelling with a walking pole or stick is recommended. Some cyclists and trekkers even carry pepper spray or Chinese fireworks to scare off the brutes. See p350 for information on what to do if you are bitten.

Staring Squads

It is very unusual to be surrounded by staring Tibetans and Chinese in Lhasa, unlike other remote parts of China, but visiting upcountry is another matter. Trekkers will soon discover that it is not a good idea to set up camp beside Tibetan villages. The spectacle of a few foreigners putting up tents is probably the closest some villagers will ever come to TV.

Theft

Tibet is very poor and there is a small risk of theft when travelling here. Trekkers in the Everest region have reported problems with petty theft, and pickpockets work parts of Lhasa. That said, Tibet is much safer than other provinces of China.

Small padlocks are useful for backpacks and some dodgy hotel rooms. Bicycle chain locks come in handy not only for hired bikes but for attaching backpacks to railings or luggage racks.

If something of yours is stolen, you should report it immediately to the nearest foreign affairs branch of the PSB. They will ask you to fill in a loss report, which you will also need to claim the loss on your travel insurance.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Chinese Embassies

For embassies not listed below consult the Chinese Foreign Ministry website at www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng and click on 'Missions Overseas'.

Australia (☎ 02-6273 4783, 6273 7443; http://au.china-embassy.org; 15 Coronation Dr, Yarralumla, Canberra, ACT 2600); Sydney consulate (☎ 02-8595 8000; http://sydney.chinaembassy.org/eng); Melbourne consulate (☎ 03-9822 0604; http://melbourne.china-consulate.org/eng); Perth consulate (☎ 08-9222 0302)

Canada (☎ 613-789 3434; www.chinaembassycanada.org; 515 St Patrick St, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 5H3); Toronto consulate (☎ 416-964 7260); Vancouver consulate (☎ 604-736 3910); Calgary consulate (☎ 403-264 3322)

France (☎ 01-53 75 89 25; www.amb-chine.fr; 20 rue Washington, 75008 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-2758 8532; www.china-botschaft.de; Brückenstraße 10, 10179 Berlin)

Japan (☎ 03-3403 3389, 3403 3065; www.china-embassy.or.jp; 3-4-33 Moto-Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo)

Consulates in Fukuoka, Osaka and Sapporo.

Nepal (☎ 01-4411740; www.chinaembassy.org.np; Baluwater, Kathmandu; ☎ 9.30-11am Mon, Wed & Fri)

Netherlands (☎ 070-355 1515; Adriaan Goekooplaan 7, 2517 JX, The Hague)

New Zealand (☎ 04-472 1382; www.chinaembassy.org.nz; 2-6 Glenmore St, Wellington) Consulate in Auckland.

UK (☎ 020-7299 4049, 24hr visa information 0891-880 808, visa section 020-7631 1430; www.chinese-embassy.org.uk; 31 Portland Pl, London; ☎ visa section open Mon-Fri 9am-noon); Manchester consulate (☎ 0161-224 7478); Edinburgh consulate (☎ 0131-337 3220)

USA (☎ 202-338 6688; www.china-embassy.org; Room 110, 2201 Wisconsin Ave NW, Washington DC); Chicago consulate (☎ 312-803 0098; www.chinaconsulatechicago.org/eng); Houston consulate (☎ 713-524 4311; www.houston.china-consulate.org/eng); Los Angeles consulate (☎ 213-380 2508; www.losangeles.china-consulate.org/eng); New York consulate (☎ 212-330 7410; www.ny-consulate.prchina.org/eng); San Francisco consulate (☎ 415-563 9232; www.chinaconsulatesf.org/eng)

Note that Chinese embassies in the USA no longer accept main-in applications, so unless you live in a major city you'll have to use an agent such as the recommended **China Visa Service Center** (☎ 1-800-799 6560; www.my.chinavisas.com).

Consulates in Tibet

The only diplomatic representation in Tibet is the **Nepali Consulate-General** (Nipoer Lingshiguan; Map p96; ☎ 0891-683 0609; mcglx@public.lx.x.cn; Luobulinka Beilu; ☎ 10am-noon Mon-Fri) in Lhasa. Visas are issued the next day at 4.30pm, though you can sometimes get your passport back the same day. It's located on a side street between the Lhasa Hotel and the Norbulingka.

Visa fees change frequently, but at the time of research a 30- to 60-day visa cost Y255. Bear in mind that if this is your second trip to Nepal in the calendar year and you stayed more than 15 days on your first trip, then your second visa is currently free. All visas are valid for six months from the date of issue. Bring one visa photo. Visits of less than three days are currently visa free.

It is also possible to obtain a Nepali visa for US\$30 (in cash US dollars) at Kodari, the Nepali border town, although it would be sensible to check first that this has not changed.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Tibetan cultural heritage took such a hammering during the Cultural Revolution that traditional festivals, once important highlights of the Tibetan year, are only now starting to revive.

GOVERNMENT TRAVEL ADVICE

The following government websites offer travel advisories and information on current hot spots.

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (☎ 1300 139 281; www.smarttraveller.gov.au)

British Foreign & Commonwealth Office (☎ 0845-850-2829; www.fc.gov.uk/country advice)

Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade (☎ 800-267 6788; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca)

US State Department (☎ 888-407 4747; http://travel.state.gov)

Tibetan festivals are held according to the Tibetan lunar calendar, which usually lags at least a month behind our Gregorian calendar. Ask around for the exact dates of many festivals because these are often only fixed by monasteries a few months in advance. To check Tibetan lunar dates against Western Gregorian dates, try www.kalachakranet.org/ta_tibetan_calendar.html.

The following are just some of the more important festivals:

January

Shigatse New Year Festival Held in the first week of the 12th lunar month.

February/March

Year End Festival Dancing monks can be seen on the 29th day of the 12th lunar month at Tsurphu, Mindroling and Tashilhunpo in this festival, which is held to dispel the evil of the old year and auspiciously usher in the new one. Families clean their houses in preparation for the new year. A huge thangka is unveiled the following day at Tsurphu Monastery.

Losar (New Year Festival) Taking place in the first week of the first lunar month, Losar is a colourful week of activities; Lhasa is probably the best place to be. There are performances of Tibetan drama and pilgrims making incense offerings, and the streets are thronged with Tibetans dressed in their finest. New prayer flags are hung in monasteries and homes.

Chotrül Düchen (Butter Sculpture Festival) Huge yak-butter sculptures are traditionally placed around Lhasa's Barkhor circuit on the 15th day of the first lunar month. The festival is not currently celebrated in Lhasa, though it is in Labrang Monastery in Gansu province.

Mönlam Chenmo (Great Prayer Festival) Held mid-way through the first lunar month (officially culminating on the 25th). Monks from Lhasa's three main monasteries used to assemble in the Jokhang and an image of Jampa (Maitreya) was borne around the Barkhor circuit. The festival was first instituted by Tsongkhapa in 1409 at Ganden Monastery but was outlawed after political demonstrations ended in violence during the 1988 celebrations.

May/June

Birth of Sakyamuni The seventh day of the fourth lunar month is sees large numbers of pilgrims visiting Lhasa and other sacred areas in Tibet. Festivals are held around this time at Tsurphu (see next entry), Ganden, Reting and Samye Monasteries.

Tsurphu Festival Cham dancing (ritual dancing carried out by monks), processions and the unfurling of a great thangka are the highlights of this festival, from the 9th to 11th days of the fourth lunar month.

Saga Dawa (Sakyamuni's Enlightenment) The 15th day of the fourth lunar month (full moon) marks the date of Sakyamuni's conception, enlightenment and entry into nirvana. Huge numbers of pilgrims walk Lhasa's Lingkhör circuit and visit Mt Kailash, where the Tarboche prayer pole is raised each year.

June/July

Gyantse Horse-Racing Festival Currently held from the 15th to 18th of the fifth month (ie around Saga Dawa), though authorities are trying to fix the date in the Gregorian calendar to boost tourism. The fun and games include dances, yak races, archery and equestrian events. A large 480-year old thangka is unfurled at sunrise.

Worship of the Buddha During the second week of the fifth lunar month, the parks of Lhasa, in particular the Norbulingka, are crowded with picnickers.

Dorje Drak Festival Cham dancing is performed on the 10th day of the fifth Tibetan month at this small monastery **Tashilhunpo Festival** From the 14th to 16th days of the fifth lunar month, Shigatse's Tashilhunpo Monastery becomes the scene of three days of festivities. A huge thangka is unveiled and cham dances are performed.

Samye Festival Held from the 15th day of the fifth lunar month (full moon) for two or three days. Special ceremonies and cham dancing in front of the Ütse are the main attractions. The monastery guesthouse is normally booked out at this time, so bring a tent. Incense is also burnt on this day throughout Tibet.

August/September

Chökor Düchen Festival Held in Lhasa on the fourth day of the sixth lunar month, this festival celebrates Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath near Varanasi in India. Many pilgrims climb Gephel Ri (Gambo Ütse), the peak behind Drepung Monastery, and also the ridge from Pabonka to the Dode Valley, to burn juniper incense. The festival is also called Drukwa Tsezi.

Guru Rinpoche's Birthday Held on the 10th day of the sixth lunar month, this festival is particularly popular in Nyingmapa monasteries.

Ganden Festival On the 15th day of the sixth lunar month, Ganden Monastery displays its 25 holiest relics, which are normally locked away. A large offering ceremony accompanies the unveiling.

Drepung Festival The 30th day of the sixth lunar month is celebrated with the hanging at dawn of a huge thangka at Drepung Monastery. Lamas and monks perform opera in the main courtyard.

Shötun (Yogurt Festival) Held in the first week of the seventh lunar month, this festival starts at Drepung (see previous entry) and moves down to the Norbulingka. Lhamo (Tibetan opera) and masked dances are held, and locals take the occasion as another excuse for more picnics.

September/October

Bathing Festival The end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth lunar months sees locals washing away the grime of the previous year in an act of purification that coincides with the week-long appearance of the constellation Pleiades in the night sky.

Horse-Racing Festival Held in the first week of the eighth lunar month, this festival featuring horse racing, archery and other traditional nomad sports takes place in Damxung and Nam-tso. A similar and even larger event is held in Nagchu a few weeks earlier, from 10 to 16 August. **Onkor** In the first week of the eighth lunar month Tibetans in central Tibet get together and party in celebration of the upcoming harvest.

Tashilhunpo More cham dances, from the ninth to 11th days of the eighth month, at Shigatse's Tashilhunpo Monastery.

November/December

Lhabab Düchen Commemorating Buddha's descent from heaven, the 22nd day of the ninth lunar month sees large numbers of pilgrims in Lhasa. Ladders are painted afresh on rocks around many monasteries to symbolise the event.

Palden Lhamo The 15th day of the 10th lunar month sees a procession in Lhasa around the Barkhor bearing Palden Lhamo (Shri Devi), protective deity of the Jokhang. **Tsongkhapa Festival** Respect is shown to Tsongkhapa, the founder of Gelugpa order, on the anniversary of his death on the 25th of the 10th lunar month; monasteries light fires and carry images of Tsongkhapa in procession. Check for cham dances at the monasteries at Ganden, Sera and Drepung.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality has historical precedents in Tibet, especially in Tibetan monasteries, where male lovers were known as *trap'i kedmen*, or 'monk's wife'. The Dalai Lama has sent mixed signals about homosexuality, describing gay sex as 'sexual misconduct', 'improper' and 'inappropriate', but also by saying 'There are no acts of love between adults that one can or should condemn'.

The official attitude to gays and lesbians in China is also ambiguous, with responses ranging from Draconian penalties to tacit acceptance. Travellers are advised to act with discretion. Chinese men routinely hold hands and drape their arms around each other without anyone inferring any sexual overtones.

Canada-based company **Footprints Travel** (☎ 1-888-962 6211, 416-962 8111; www.footprintstravel.com) and American-based **Hanns Ebensten Travel** (☎ 866-294 8174; www.hetravel.com/gay/travel/tibet_gay.htm) organises gay and lesbian group trips

to Tibet, the latter including the train trip to Lhasa.

Utopia (www.utopia-asia.com/tipschin.htm) has a good website and publishes a guide to gay travel in China, though with little specific to Tibet.

HOLIDAYS

The PRC has nine national holidays. These are mainly Chinese holidays and mean little to many Tibetans, but government offices and banks will be closed on many of these dates.

New Year's Day 1 January

Chinese New Year Falls on 7 February in 2008, 26 January in 2009 and 14 February in 2010

International Women's Day 8 March

International Labour Day 1 May, a week-long holiday

Youth Day 4 May

Children's Day 1 June

Anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China 1 July

Anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army 1 August

National Day 1 October, a week-long holiday

National Day 1 October, a week-long holiday

Chinese New Year, otherwise known as the Spring Festival, officially lasts only three days but many people take a week off from work. Be warned: this is definitely not the time to travel around China, cross borders (especially the Hong Kong one) or to be caught short of money.

You should be aware that 10 March is a politically sensitive date, as it is the anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising and flight of the Dalai Lama. Also, 23 May marks the signing of the *Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet*, while 1 September marks the anniversary of the founding of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). Other politically sensitive dates marking political protests are 5 March, 27 September, 10 December and 1 October. It may be difficult for travellers to fly into Tibet for a few days before these dates.

Many Tibetan businesses, restaurants, shops and travel agencies are closed on the days of Losar and Saga Dawa (see p318)

INSURANCE

Travel insurance is particularly recommended in a remote and wild region like Tibet. Check particularly that the policy covers ambulances or an emergency flight home, which is essential in the case of altitude sickness. Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities' such as kayaking and even trekking.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made. Note that collect (reverse charge) calls are not possible in Tibet.

See the Health chapter (p346) for further information on health insurance

Worldwide travel insurance is available at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services. You can buy, extend and claim online anytime – even if you're already on the road.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés (网吧; wangba in Chinese) are available in almost every town in Tibet, though locals use them more to play computer games and smoke cigarettes than to surf the web. Most charge around Y3 per hour, though places in western Tibet costs up to Y8. A surprising number operate 24 hours.

Some websites (eg those of the BBC and Dalai Lama) have been blacklisted by the Chinese government and are unavailable inside China.

LEGAL MATTERS

Most crimes are handled administratively by the PSB, which acts as police, judge and executioner.

China takes a particularly dim view of opium and all its derivatives. It's difficult to say what attitude the Chinese police will take towards foreigners caught using marijuana – they often don't care what foreigners do if it's not political and if Chinese or Tibetans aren't involved. Then again the Chinese are fond of making examples of wrongdoings and you don't want to be the example.

Public Security Bureau (PSB)

The Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gong'anju) is the name given to China's police, both uniformed and plain clothed. The foreign affairs branch of the PSB deals with foreigners. This branch (also known as the 'entry-exit branch') is responsible for issuing visa extensions and Alien Travel Permits.

In Tibet it is fairly unusual for foreigners to have problems with the PSB, though making an obvious display of pro-Tibetan political sympathies is guaranteed to lead to problems.

Photographing Tibetan protests or military sites will lead to the confiscation of your film and possibly a brief detention.

Attempting to travel into or out of Tibet without a travel permit (mainly through Sichuan or Yunnan) is likely to end in an encounter somewhere en route. If you are caught in a closed area without a permit, you face a fine of Y200 to Y600, which can often be bargained down. Some officers have been known to offer a 'student discount' on fines! See p323 for more on this.

If you do have a serious run-in with the PSB, you may have to write a confession of guilt and pay a fine. In the most serious cases, you can be expelled from China (at your own expense).

MAPS

It shouldn't come as a surprise that good mapping for Tibet is not easy to come by. Stock up on maps before you leave.

Specialist online map retailers include **Stanfords** (www.stanfords.co.uk), the **Map Shop** (www.themapshop.co.uk), **Mapland** (www.mapland.com.au) and **Map Link** (www.maplink.com).

MAPS OF TIBET

Chinese provincial atlases to Tibet are available in bookshops throughout China. They show the most detail, but are of little use if you or the person you are asking doesn't read Chinese characters. Most locals know place names in Tibetan only, not Chinese.

The English-language map *China Tibet Tour Map*, by the Mapping Bureau of the Tibet Autonomous Region, is the best locally produced English-language map and is OK if you are just travelling around Tibet by road.

PASS HEIGHTS

Elevations in Tibet, especially for passes, are notoriously inconsistent, with maps and road signs rarely agreeing over the correct elevation. In this book we have tried to use composite measurements, incorporating the most accurate maps, the most consistently agreed figures and on-the-spot GPS readings (which have their own inconsistencies and inaccuracies). Most figures should be accurate within 100m or so, but use the elevations in this book as a guideline only.

Road maps available in Kathmandu include *Tibet – South-Central* by Nepa Maps; *Latest Map of Kathmandu to Tibet* by Mandala Maps; the *Namaste Trekking Map*; and *Lhasa to Kathmandu*, which is a mountain-biking map by Himalayan Map House. They are marginally better than Chinese-produced maps but still aren't up to scratch.

Gecko Maps (www.geckomaps.com; former Karto Atelier) produce an excellent general *Himalaya-Tibet* map, as well as trekking and panoramic maps of Mt Kailash. The Nelles Verlag *Himalaya* map covers the entire range and has good detail of central Tibet. **ITMB** (www.itmb.com) publish a fairly recent (and, usefully, waterproof) *Tibet* map (1:1,850,000; 2006).

Tibet and Adjacent Areas under Chinese Communist Occupation, published by the **Amnye Machen Institute in Dharamsala** (www.amnyemachen.org) is an unusual map that covers the entire Tibetan world. It uses traditional Tibetan place names, which not everyone in Tibet (certainly not the many Chinese immigrants) will know.

For detailed and downloadable online maps of Tibet, try the **Tibet Map Institute** (www.tibetmap.com).

Google Earth (<http://earth.google.com>) offers fascinating detail on Tibet, including many monasteries and several treks. Be warned; it's utterly addictive.

MAPS OF LHASA

Gecko Maps produce *The Lhasa Map*, with awesome architectural detail of the old town. More offbeat, and quite dated these days (published in 1995), is the Amnye Machen Institute *Lhasa City* (1:12,500).

On This Spot – Lhasa, published by the **International Campaign for Tibet** (ICT; www.savetibet.org) in 2001, is a unique political map of the Lhasa region, pinpointing the location of prisons, demonstrations, human-rights abuses and more. It's a really fascinating read, but it's too politically subversive to take into Tibet. It can be ordered from ICT.

MONEY

For your trip to Tibet bring a mix of travellers cheques (say 60%), cash in US dollars (40%) and a credit card. Consult the inside front cover for a table of exchange rates and refer to p15 for information on costs.

ATMs

Several ATMs in Lhasa and Shigatse accept foreign cards. The Bank of China accepts Visa, MasterCard, Diners Club, American Express and Plus. The Agricultural Bank accepts Visa, Plus and Electron. Check before trying your card as many ATMs can only be used by domestic account holders.

The maximum amount you can withdraw per transaction is Y2000 with the Bank of China and Y1000 with the Agricultural Bank. Cards are occasionally eaten, so try to make your transaction during bank hours.

For those without an ATM card or credit card, a PIN-activated **Visa TravelMoney card** (☎ US 1-877-3942247) will give you access to pre-deposited cash through the ATM network.

Credit Cards

You'll get very few opportunities to splurge on the plastic in Tibet, unless you spend a few nights in a top-end hotel. Most local tours (including FIT), train tickets and even flights out of Lhasa still can't be paid for using a credit card. The few shops that do accept credit cards often charge a 4% surcharge.

The Lhasa central branch of the Bank of China is the only place in Tibet that provides credit card advances. A 3% commission is deducted.

Currency

The Chinese currency is known as Renminbi (RMB) or 'people's money'. The basic unit of this currency is the yuan, and is designated in this book by a 'Y'. In spoken Chinese, the word *kuai* is almost always substituted for the yuan. Ten *jiao* (commonly known as *mao*) make up one yuan.

RMB comes in paper notes in denominations of one, two, five, 10, 20, 50 and 100 yuan; and one, two and five *jiao*. Coins are in denominations of one yuan and five *jiao*.

China has a problem with counterfeit notes. Very few Tibetans or Chinese will accept a Y100 or Y50 note without first subjecting it to intense scrutiny, and many will not accept old, tattered notes or coins. Check the watermark when receiving any Y100 note.

Exchanging Money

In Tibet, the only place to change foreign currency and travellers cheques is the Bank of China. Top-end hotels in Lhasa have exchange services but only for guests. Outside of Lhasa,

the only other locations to change money are in Shigatse, Zhangmu, Purang (cash only) and Ali, and at the airport on arrival. If you are travelling upcountry, try to get your cash in small denominations: Y100 and Y50 bills are sometimes difficult to get rid of in rural Tibet.

The currencies of Australia, Canada, the US, the UK, Hong Kong, Japan, the euro zone and most of the rest of Western Europe are acceptable at the Lhasa Bank of China. The official rate is given at all banks and most hotels, so there is little need to shop around for the best deal. The standard commission is 0.75%.

The only place in Tibet to officially change RMB back into foreign currency is the central Lhasa branch of the Bank of China. You will need your original exchange receipts. You cannot change RMB into dollars at Gongkar airport.

Moneychangers at Zhangmu (by the Nepal border) will change yuan into Nepali rupees and vice versa. Yuan can also easily be reconverted in Hong Kong and, increasingly, in many Southeast Asian countries.

International Transfers

Getting money sent to you in Lhasa is possible but it can be a drag. One option is by using the Bank of China's central office in Lhasa. Money should be wired to the Bank of China, Tibet/Lhasa branch, 28 Linkuo Xilu, bank account No 90600668341, SWIFT code BKCHCNBJ900. Double-check wiring instructions with the bank beforehand.

The second option is via **Western Union** (www.westernunion.com), which can wire money via the Express Mail Service (EMS; see p325) at Lhasa's main post office.

Security

A moneybelt or pockets sewn inside your clothes is the safest way to carry money.

Keeping all your eggs in one basket is not advised – you should keep an emergency cash stash of small-denomination notes in US dollars apart from your main moneybelt, along with a record of your travellers cheque serial numbers, emergency contact numbers and passport number.

Taxes

Although big hotels may add a tax or 'service charge' of 10% to 15%, all other taxes are included in the price tag, including airline departure tax (see p331).

Tippling & Bargaining

Tibet is one of those wonderful places where tipping is not done and almost no-one asks for a tip. If you go on a long organised trip out to eastern or western Tibet, your guide and driver will probably expect a tip at the end of the trip, assuming all went well. Figure on around Y100 per person.

Basic bargaining skills are essential for travel in Tibet. You can bargain in shops, hotels, street stalls and travel agencies, and with pedicab drivers and most people – but not everywhere. In small shops and street stalls, bargaining is expected, but there is one important rule to follow: be polite.

Tibetans are no less adept at driving a hard deal than the Chinese and, like the Chinese, aggressive bargaining will usually only serve to firm their conviction that the original asking price is the one they want. Try to keep smiling and firmly whittle away at the price. If this does not work, try walking away. They might call you back, and if they don't there is always somewhere else.

Travellers Cheques

Besides the advantage of safety, travellers cheques are useful to carry in Tibet because the exchange rate is higher (by about 3%) than it is for cash. The Bank of China charges a 0.75% commission to cash travellers cheques. Cheques from the major companies such as Thomas Cook, Citibank, American Express and Bank of America are accepted.

PERMITS

There are three levels of bureaucracy you need to jump through to travel in Tibet: a visa to enter China, a Tibet Tourism Bureau (TTB) permit to get into Tibet and an Alien Travel Permit to travel to certain regions of Tibet.

Beware that the permit situation is subject to rapid and unpredictable change by the Chinese government, so it's worth checking the current situation with other travellers in Lhasa or Chengdu. Don't trust travel agencies on this one, as they have a vested interest in booking you on one of their tours.

Tibet Tourism Bureau (TTB) Permit

A TTB permit is officially required to get into the Tibet Autonomous Province (TAR). Without one you will not be able to board a flight to Tibet and, *if checked*, you may not be allowed to continue on your bus or train trip.

THE IMPERMANENCE OF TRAVEL

With the arrival of the railway to Tibet, rumours were rife that the illogical and inconsistent permit system would be disbanded. In the event, in 2007 the permit system was actually tightened. Shows what we know!

There's still a good chance that the permit system will be overhauled before too long, perhaps in the wake of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Don't be surprised if the permit system is radically different from that described in this guide. In fact, expect it. One of the best places for updated information is the Thorn Tree at www.lonelyplanet.com.

How these rules are interpreted depends on the political climate in Tibet. When things are relaxed you can just buy a permit for around Y500 from one of the many budget travel agencies in China, especially Chengdu. The actual permit costs Y50, the rest goes to agency fees and middle men. When restrictions are tighter you will need to book some kind of tour, ranging from a three-day tour of Lhasa to a full tour, depending on the agency.

Whether you need the TTB permit once you get to Lhasa is currently in flux. Up until recently you didn't need it but a tightening of restrictions in 2007 meant that you technically needed it to book a tour to visit other areas of Lhasa.

See p333 for more information on buying air and bus tickets into Tibet from Kathmandu, Chengdu or elsewhere. The amount of time you can stay in Tibet is normally determined by the length of time on your visa, not the TTB permit.

TTB permits are also needed by groups travelling by Land Cruiser, but this will be arranged by the travel agency organising the trip.

Since 2003 Chinese residents of Hong Kong and Macau no longer require a TTB permit to enter Tibet, though foreigners resident in China do. Journalists and embassy staff will find it impossible to get a TTB permit as a tourist. Visitors on a business or resident visa don't seem to have a problem.

TTB permits generally take two or three days to process and are not available during weekends.

Alien Travel Permit

Once you have a visa and have managed to wangle a TTB permit, you'd think you were home dry. Think again. You'll probably need to arrange an alien travel permit for much of your travels outside central Tibet.

At the time of research, travel permits were *not* needed for the towns of Lhasa, Shigatse and Tsetang, or for places in Lhasa prefecture (not just Lhasa city). This includes such places as Ganden, Tsurphu, Nam-tso, Drigung Til and Reting, giving you quite a lot of scope.

All other areas technically require permits, though you are unlikely to be checked in places like the Yarlung Tsangpo Valley (with the possible exception of Samye Monastery) or most places along the Friendship Hwy (with the exception of the Everest region and one checkpoint along the road). You are likely to be checked in the major towns in eastern and western Tibet. See the individual chapter intros for more details on localised requirements.

Lhasa PSB will not issue travel permits to individuals and will direct you to a travel agency. Agencies can arrange a travel permit to most places frequented by tourists but only if you book a Land Cruiser, driver and guide.

Travellers have had mixed experiences with the Ali PSB. Many have written of being given a travel permit to the sights in the Ali prefecture (ie Mt Kailash, Guge Kingdom) on payment of a fine of around Y300. Others have been fined and sent back to Lhasa.

Permits cost Y50 and can list any number of destinations. If you get caught by the PSB without a permit (most likely when you check into a hotel), you theoretically face a fine of between Y200 and Y600, though many travellers have paid lower fines or no fines at all by playing dumb and claiming anything from student poverty to sickness or road closures. The key is to act dumb and obsequious, with lots of time on your hands but no money. Even if you do pay a fine, you've got away with paying less than you would on a tour. Get a receipt to make sure you don't get fined a second time during your return to Lhasa.

You should give your agency an absolute minimum of four working days to arrange your permits, longer if military or other permits are required (see p323). If you are arranging a Land Cruiser trip from abroad, the travel agency may ask for up to one month to arrange permits.

Other Permits

Sensitive border areas, such as Mt Kailash, the road to Kashgar and the Nyingtri region of eastern Tibet, also require a military permit and a foreign-affairs permit.

For Thöling and Tsaparang in western Tibet you may also need a permit from the local Cultural Affairs Bureau. These will be arranged by the tour agency if you book a tour. Dungkar in western Tibet requires a permit from the Ali PSB (see p224).

For remote places such as the Yarlung Tsangpo gorges in southeastern Tibet, or for any border area, you may not be able to get permits even if you book a tour through an ordinary travel agency. For this you will need an agency that has tight military connections.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Film & Equipment

Tibet is one of the most photogenic countries in the world and you should bring twice as much film or memory as you think you'll need.

China has thoroughly embraced digital photography and shops in Lhasa stock a decent range of memory cards and rechargeable batteries. As a guide, a 1GB Sandisk card costs around Y300. Internet cafés or photo shops in Lhasa, Shigatse, Chamdo and Ali can burn your photos onto a CD for around Y20. Opt for brand-name CDs rather than the cheaper Chinese-made versions.

Battery life plummets at Tibet's higher elevations and lower temperatures. Keep your batteries warm and separate from your camera overnight and during cold weather. Just heating up batteries in your pocket or the sun can draw some extra juice from them. Chinese batteries are invariably useless.

Print film is easily available in major towns, though slide film is only available in Lhasa. It is possible to process print film and make digital prints in Lhasa, with fairly good results but there's nowhere to process slide film in Tibet. Even in Kathmandu, with the exception of a couple of professional outfits, it is a risky proposition.

Restrictions

Photographs of airports and military installations are prohibited; bridges are also a touchy subject. Don't take any photos or especially video footage of civil unrest or public demonstrations. The Chinese are paranoid about

foreign TV crews filming unauthorised documentaries on Tibet.

Restrictions on photography are also imposed at most monasteries and museums. This is partly an attempt to stop the trade of antiquities out of Tibet (statues are often stolen to order from photos taken by seemingly innocuous 'tourists'). In the case of flash photography, such restrictions protect wall murals from damage. Inside the larger monasteries, a fee of Y20 to Y50 is often imposed in each chapel for taking a photograph. Video fees can be up to Y800 (US\$100!) in some monasteries. You are free, however, to take any photos of the exteriors of monasteries.

Technical Tips

Bear in mind, when taking photographs in Tibet, that special conditions prevail. For one, the dust gets into everything – make a point of carefully cleaning your lenses as often as possible. The high altitudes in Tibet mean that the best time to take photographs is when the sun is low in the sky: early in the morning and late in the afternoon. At other times getting a good exposure becomes more difficult – you are likely to end up with a shot full of dark shadows and bright points of light.

One useful accessory to cope with Tibet's harsh light conditions is a polarising filter. When using it, turn the filter until the contrast improves; if there are any clouds in the sky, they will become whiter as the sky itself becomes a deeper shade of blue. Lonely Planet's full-colour *Travel Photography: A Guide to Taking Better Pictures*, written by internationally renowned travel photographer Richard l'Anson, is full of handy hints and is designed to take on the road.

POST

China's post service is pretty efficient and airmail letters take around a week to reach most destinations. Writing the country of destination in Chinese can speed up the delivery.

An airmail letter of up to 20g costs Y6 to any country, plus Y1.8 per additional 10g. Postcards cost Y4.50 and aerograms Y5.20.

Rates for parcels vary depending on the country of destination and seem quite random. As a rough guide, a 1kg airmail package costs around Y144/158.50/162 to Australia/USA/UK. A 1kg packet to the UK costs Y469 by airmail, Y126 by surface mail and Y108 by sea mail. Surface takes around one month,

sea mail can take from two to three months; a good compromise is Sea, Air and Land (SAL), which takes about six weeks to the USA. The maximum weight you can send or receive is 30kg. Lhasa is the only place in Tibet from where it is possible to send international parcels.

Post offices are very picky about how you pack things; do not finalise your packing until the parcel has its last customs clearance. If you have a receipt for the goods, then put it in the box when you are mailing it, since it may be opened again by customs further down the line. Lhasa's main post office has a poste restante service, for the time being at least.

Express Mail Service (EMS), a worldwide priority mail service, can courier documents to most foreign countries in around five days. Documents up to 500g cost Y160/220/180 to Australia/Europe/US, with each additional 500g costing from Y55 (Australia) to Y75 (US and Europe). Documents to Hong Kong cost Y90, plus Y30 each additional 500g. Packages cost slightly more. There are charges of Y2.30 for recorded delivery and Y6.50 for registered mail. DHL has an office in Lhasa (see p99). A 500g document couriered to the USA costs Y228 (depending on the fuel surcharge) and a 10kg jumbo box costs Y1126.

SHOPPING

Tibet is not a bad place for souvenir hunting, although much of the stuff you see in markets, particularly the bronzes, has been humped over the high passes from Nepal and can probably be bought cheaper in Kathmandu, where you will have a better selection of quality goods.

For an overview of possible purchases in Tibet, the best place to look is the Barkhor in Lhasa. Prayer flags, shawls, prayer wheels and daggers are all popular buys. Itinerant pilgrims may also come up to you with things to sell – proceeds will often finance their trip home.

Most of the stalls on the Barkhor circuit seem to be selling jewellery and most (some would say all) of it is fake. The vast majority of the jewellery on offer is turquoise and coral; Tibetans believe that turquoise is good for the liver and coral for the heart. Locals will tell you that the turquoise comes from the mountains and the coral from the lakes of Tibet – more likely sources are Taiwan and China (if it doesn't come from a factory, that is).

It is easy to tell fake turquoise (or 'new turquoise' as the stall holders call it) from the real thing ('old turquoise'). The fake stuff is bluer and is flawless; beware of a string of identically shaped and rounded beads – nature did not intend them to be this way. The final test is to scratch the surface with a sharp metal object, the fake turquoise will leave a white line, the real stuff won't show a thing. When you've established what you're buying have a closer look at the stone to make sure it's all in one piece. Unscrupulous stall holders glue together tiny bits of turquoise with black glue to make larger pieces of stone.

You'll also see Buddha eye beads, known as *dzi* – black or brown oblong beads with white eye symbols. These are replicas of natural fossils found in rocks in the mountains containing auspicious eye symbols thought to represent the eyes of the Buddha. The real things pass hands for tens of thousands of dollars; copies are more affordable. The more eyes the higher the price.

Be prepared to bargain hard for any purchase, especially in the Barkhor. You can probably reckon on at least halving the price, but there are no hard-and-fast rules. Shop around for a while and get a feel for prices.

Other good buys are Tibetan ceiling drapes and *thangkas*. Some ceiling drapes and door curtains are very tasteful and can be bought in Lhasa and Shigatse. Most *thangkas* for sale are gaudy – good ones do not come cheap. There are several workshops in Lhasa's old quarter where you can see *thangkas* being painted.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Solo travellers shouldn't be too put off by the seeming official insistence on 'group travel'. For the purposes of getting permits and a group visa, a group can be as small as one person. It's common for travellers to band together in Lhasa to share transport costs and you'll see lots of notices from people looking to find temporary travel or trekking companions.

Single rooms in a hotel are normally the same price (or even more expensive!) than a double room, though you can often pay per bed in a triple or quad – see p314.

TELEPHONE

China's phone system has been rapidly modernised, and long-distance and international direct dialling is available almost everywhere.

International rates have fallen in recent years. China Unicom and private telephone booths offer the cheapest rates: around Y2.40 per minute to the US and Y3.60 or Y4.20 to most other countries. 'Domestic' long-distance calls cost Y1.50 per minute to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan and Y0.30 elsewhere in China. Local city calls cost Y0.2 per minute.

Lines are amazingly clear considering where you are. (The biggest problem will probably be the guy yelling in the booth next door on a local call to Shigatse.) Mobile phone coverage is generally excellent, even in Everest Base Camp!

Most hotels in Lhasa have International-Direct-Dial (IDD) telephones but levy a hefty 30% surcharge on calls.

It is still impossible to make collect calls (reverse-charge calls) or to use foreign telephone debit cards. The best you can do is give someone your number and get them to call you back.

Local area codes are given at the start of each town's entry within this guidebook.

TIME

Time throughout China – including Tibet – is set to Beijing time, which is eight hours ahead of GMT/UTC. When it is noon in Beijing it is also noon in far-off Lhasa, even if the sun only indicates around 9am or 10am. See also the World Time map (pp390–1).

TOILETS

Chinese toilets might be fairly dismal, but Tibetan toilets make them look like little bowers of heaven. The standard model is a deep hole in the ground, often without partitions, that bubbles and gives off noxious vapours. Many Tibetans (including women with long skirts) prefer to urinate in the street.

On the plus side there are some fabulous 'toilets with a view'. Honours go to the Samye Monastery Guesthouse, the Sakya Guesthouse, the public toilets in the Potala and the small village of Pasum on the way to Everest Base Camp.

With the exception of midrange and top-end hotels, hotel toilets in Tibet are of the squat variety – as the clichés go, good for the digestion and character building, too. Always carry a small stash of toilet paper or tissues with you.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tibet is officially a province of China and does not have tourist offices as such. Similarly, the

FINDING OUT MORE

The following organisations do excellent work to help the people of the Tibetan plateau and foster greater awareness of all aspects of Tibetan culture.

- Braille Without Borders – www.braillewithoutborders.org
- Jinpa – www.jinpa.org
- Kham Aid Foundation – www.khamaid.org
- Tendol Gyalzur Orphanage – www.tendol-gyalzur-tibet.ch
- Tibet Foundation – www.tibet-foundation.org
- The Tibet Fund – www.tibetfund.org
- Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund – www.tpaf.org
- Tibetan Village Project – www.tibetanvillageproject.org

Pro-Tibetan organisations abroad have good news services and often cultural coverage. The **Tibet Support Group** (www.tibet.org) offers online links to most pro-Tibet organisations.

- Australia Tibet Council – www.atc.org.au
- Canada Tibet Committee – www.tibet.ca
- Free Tibet Campaign (UK) – www.freetibet.org
- International Campaign for Tibet – www.savetibet.org
- Students for a Free Tibet – www.studentsforafreetibet.org
- Tibet Foundation (UK) – www.tibet-foundation.org
- Tibet House – www.tibethouse.org
- Tibet Information Network – www.tibetinfo.net
- Tibet Society – www.tibetsociety.com
- Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy – www.tchrd.org

Tibetan government-in-exile does not provide information specifically relating to travel in Tibet. Several of the pro-Tibetan organisations abroad offer travel advice (see above).

Tibet Tourism Bureau

The main function of the state-sponsored **Tibet Tourism Bureau** (TTB; Luobulinka Lu, Lhasa; ☎ 8.30am–1.30pm & 3–5.30pm) is to direct travellers into group tours in Tibet. It issues the permits necessary to enter Tibet (see p323), although very few travellers deal with it directly.

In Chengdu there is a **TTB branch office** (☎ 028-8555 1719; 3 Wuhou Hengjie). The TTB branches in Shanghai (www.tibet-tour.com) and Beijing (www.tibettour.net.cn/en) operate like normal travel agencies.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Tibet can be a hard place for disabled travellers. The high altitudes, rough roads and lack of access make travelling difficult. Monasteries

in particular often involve a hike up a hillside or steep, very narrow steps. Few of the hotels offer any facilities for the disabled.

Braille Without Borders (☎ 0891-633 1763; www.braillewithoutborders.org) Blind visitors can contact this excellent organisation based in Lhasa. It developed the first Tibetan Braille system and runs a school for blind Tibetan kids. The founder, Sabriye Tenberken, is the author of the book *My Path Leads to Tibet: The Inspiring Story of How One Young Blind Woman Brought Hope to the Blind Children of Tibet* and stars alongside blind climber Erik Weihenmayer in the documentary film *Blindsight* (www.blindsightthemovie.com).

Navyo Nepal (☎ 01-428 0056; www.navyonepal.com; Kathmandu, Nepal) This Nepal-based company has some experience in running tours for the disabled to Tibet and Nepal.

VISAS

Visas for individual travel in China are easy to get from most Chinese embassies, though it's important not to mention Tibet on your visa application. The Chinese government has

been known to stop issuing individual visas in summer or the run-up to sensitive political events, as a control of tourist numbers.

Most Chinese embassies and consulates will issue a standard 30- or 60-day, single-entry tourist (an 'L' category) visa in three to five working days. The 'L' means *lǚxíng* (travel). Fees vary according to how much your country charges Chinese citizens for a visa. At the time of writing, a standard 30-day visa cost A\$30 in Australia, €30.50 in France, UK£25 in the UK and US\$50 in the USA. Fees must be paid in cash at the time of application and you'll need two passport-sized photos. It's possible to download an application form at embassy or visa agency websites. Express services cost double the normal fee. Your application must be written in English, and you must have one entire blank page in your passport for the visa.

Some Chinese embassies (not the US) offer a postal service for a fee, but this takes around three weeks. If you live in the US but not near an embassy, you'll have to use a visa agent, such as the recommended **China Visa Service Center** (☎ 1-800-799 6560; www.mychinavisa.com; 10700 Richmond Ave, Ste 211, Houston, TX 77042).

The visa application form asks you a lot of questions (your entry and exit points, travel itinerary, means of transport etc), but once in China you can deviate from this as much as you like. When listing your itinerary, pick the obvious contenders: Beijing, Shanghai and so on. Don't mention Tibet, don't list your occupation as journalist and don't mention bicycles (otherwise you may be told erroneously that you have to take a tour to travel by bike).

Visas valid for more than 30 days can be difficult to obtain anywhere other than Hong Kong, although some embassies abroad (in the US and UK, for example) often give you 60 or even 90 days if you ask nicely. This saves you the considerable difficulty of getting a visa extension in Tibet. Most agencies in Hong Kong can arrange a 90-day visa.

It's now possible to travel in Tibet with a resident or business visa. This means you could get a six-month business visa (easily obtained in Hong Kong) and stay in Tibet for most of that time!

A standard single-entry visa is activated on the date you enter China, and must be used within three months from the date of issue. There is some confusion over the valid-

ity of Chinese visas. Most Chinese officials look at the 'valid until' date, but on most 30-day visas this is actually the date by which you must have *entered* the country, not the visa's expiry date. Longer-stay visas are often activated on the day of issue, not the day you enter the country, so there's no point in getting one too far in advance of your planned entry date. Check with the embassy if you are unsure.

If you want more flexibility to enter and leave China several times, most Chinese embassies will issue a double-entry visa.

Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the cheapest 30-day visas can be obtained from the **visa office** (☎ 3413 2300; 7th fl, Lower Block, China Resources Centre, 26 Harbour Rd, Wan Chai; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri). Visas processed here in one/two/three days cost HK\$400/300/150. Double/six-month multiple/one-year multiple visas are HK\$220/400/600 (plus HK\$150/250 for express/urgent service). US citizens face an additional surcharge. You'll have to queue but you'll save a few dollars. You must supply two passport photos. From Tsim Sha Tsui on the Kowloon side, the cheapest and easiest way to get there is to take the Star Ferry to Wanchai Pier (not to Central), one block away from the China Resources Building.

China Travel Service (CTS; ☎ 2315 7188; 1st fl, Alpha House, 27-33 Nathan Rd, Tsim Sha Tsui, enter from Peking Rd) is a more convenient and very popular place to get a visa, as is **Forever Bright Trading Limited** (☎ 852-2369 3188; www.fbt-chinavisa.com.hk; Room 916-917, Tower B, New Mandarin Plaza, 14 Science Museum Rd, Tsim Sha Tsui East, Kowloon).

Kathmandu

Regulations at the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu change frequently. At the time of writing the embassy was not issuing visas to individual travellers, only to those travellers booked on a tour (see p335) and even then only group visas. If you turn up with a Chinese visa already in your passport, it will be cancelled (and, no, you won't get a refund).

A group visa is a separate sheet of paper with all the names and passport numbers of the group members. It's important to get your own individual 'group' visa (a 'group' can be as small as one person!), as otherwise, come the end of your tour in Lhasa, you will either have to exit China with your fellow group members or split from this group visa, at

considerable cost and hassle. Splitting from a group visa can only officially be done by the Chinese partner of the Nepali travel agency that arranged your travel into Tibet. It is a *real pain* to be avoided at all costs.

Group visas are generally issued for between 21 and 28 days. Note that it is very difficult to extend the duration of a group visa, regardless of what agents in Kathmandu may tell you. It's easier to split from a group visa (ie convert this into a normal tourist visa) and then extend that.

In the past the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu has allowed travellers to travel on their existing individual visas, so there's always the possibility that the situation will change.

Note that if you are flying from Kathmandu directly to Chinese cities outside Tibet (ie Chengdu or Shanghai), you can enter China on an individual tourist visa issued from abroad.

Visa Extensions

The *waishike* (foreign affairs) section of the local PSB handles visa extensions. Extensions of one week are generally obtainable in Lhasa (see p100) but are only processed the day or so before your visa expires, so it's a bit of a gamble. It is far easier to extend your visa in Chengdu, Leshan, Zhongdian, Xining or Xi'an, where a 30-day extension is commonplace.

Travel agencies in Lhasa can arrange a visa extension for the number of days you are on one of their tours. Extensions are also theoretically possible in Ali or Chamdo, as long as you are on a legitimate tour.

Fees vary according to your nationality but generally cost around Y160, except for American citizens who pay around Y400.

VOLUNTEER

There are limited opportunities for volunteer work in the TAR. There are considerable more opportunities outside the TAR, in Tibetan areas of Sichuan and Qinghai, and especially in Dharamsala (see www.volunteertibet.org), and you can always volunteer at any of pro-Tibet organisations (see the boxed text, p327).

The following organisations offer volunteer placements:

Global Crossroad (USA ☎ 1-800-413-2008,

UK ☎ 0800-310-1821; www.globalcrossroad.com)

Teaching English and work in an orphanage in Lhasa.

Rokpa (www.rokpauk.org/volunteering.html) Teaching in Tibetan areas of Sichuan and Qinghai.

United Planet (www.unitedplanet.org/quest/tibet.html) Teaching in Yushu in Qinghai.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Sexual harassment is extremely rare in Tibet and foreign women seem to be able to travel here with few problems. Naturally, it's worth noticing what local women are wearing and how they are behaving, and making a bit of an effort to fit in, as you would in any other foreign country. Probably because of the harsh climate, Tibetan women dress in bulky layers of clothing that mask their femininity. It would be wise to follow their example and dress modestly, especially when visiting a monastery. Several women have written of the favourable reactions they have received from Tibetan women when wearing Tibetan dress; you can get one made in Lhasa (see p125).

Women are generally not permitted to enter the *gönkhang* (protector chapel) in a monastery, ostensibly for fear of upsetting the powerful protector deities inside.

Transport

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TRANSPORT

Tibet has never been all that accessible, which has always been part of the thrill of finally getting here. For better or worse, huge improvements in Tibet's transport infrastructure over the last few years have removed much of the discomfort of getting onto the high plateau.

For most international travellers, getting to Tibet will involve at least two legs: the first to the gateways of Kathmandu (Nepal) or Chengdu (China) and the second from these cities into Tibet. The first section of this chapter details long-haul options to/from China and Nepal, while the second section details the practicalities of actually getting into and around Tibet. The Gateway Cities chapter (p87) offers basic information for travellers transiting through Kathmandu or Chengdu.

Once you are within the region, the most popular options into Tibet are flights from Kathmandu, Chengdu, Zhongdian or Beijing;

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. The current pace of change in Tibet means that travel options are changing monthly. Tibet's permit requirements in particular change like the wind and there is always the hope that they'll be removed completely. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

the new train link from Qinghai to Lhasa; or the overland drive from Kathmandu to Lhasa along the Friendship Hwy.

At the time of writing, bureaucratic obstacles to entering Tibet (a potentially more insurmountable barrier than even the Himalaya) were in flux. Whichever way you enter Tibet from China you will likely have to join some kind of nominal 'tour' in order to get to Lhasa, though after that you can break off on your own. The situation from Nepal is trickier because of ever-changing visa requirements.

Political events, both domestic and international, can change overnight the regulations for entry into Tibet. It would be wise to check on the latest developments in Tibet before setting out. Note also that it can be very hard to get hold of air and train tickets to Lhasa around the Chinese New Year and the week-long holidays around 1 May and 1 October.

Flights, hotels and tours can be booked online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

GETTING THERE & AWAY – GATEWAY CITIES

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Arriving in China is pretty painless these days. All travellers fill in a health declaration form on arrival in China. You can expect closer scrutiny of your group documents and luggage when crossing into Tibet/China from Nepal at Zhangmu, where some travellers have on occasion had Tibetan-related books and images confiscated.

Passports

Chinese embassies will not issue a visa if your passport has less than six months of validity remaining.

AIR

There are no direct long-haul flights to Tibet. You will probably have to stop over in Kathmandu, Chengdu, Beijing or Hong Kong, even if you are making a beeline for Lhasa.

Airports & Airlines

To China, you generally have the choice of flying first to Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong, although there are a small but growing number of flights direct to Chengdu or Kunming (see below). The new terminal at **Beijing Capital Airport** (www.bcia.com.cn) is the world's largest. Hong Kong's **Chek Lap Kok Airport** (www.hkairport.com) is also new. There's little difference in fares to these airports, though a stopover in Hong Kong allows you to get a longer-stay visa for China/Tibet (see p328).

Full-fare flights to Chengdu from other Chinese cities include Beijing (Y1570), Shanghai (Y1660), Guangzhou (Y1300), Kunming (Y700) and Hong Kong (Y2200), though discounts of up to 40% are common on Chinese domestic airfares. Chengdu–Beijing flights can be discounted to as low as Y600.

If you are heading straight to Chengdu (www.cdairport.com), you can fly direct from Amsterdam, Bangkok, Singapore, Tokyo, Fukuoka, Osaka and Seoul (flights from Vienna and Macau are planned). **KLM** (www.klm.com) flies direct from Amsterdam to Chengdu three times a week and offers connections from many cities.

Generally speaking, fares to/from Kathmandu are not all that cheap as there is a limited number of carriers operating out of the Nepali capital. The main carriers into Kathmandu are Gulf Air, Indian Airlines, Qatar Airways and THAI. The national carrier, Royal Nepal Air, is to be avoided if possible. Depending on where you are coming from, it may be cheaper to fly to Delhi and make your way overland from there.

Tickets

If you want to get to Tibet as quickly as possible (perhaps to get the maximum use from your visa), consider buying a domestic Air China ticket to Chengdu as part of your international ticket. Some Air China offices will give you a discount on the domestic leg if you buy the long-haul leg through them. Airfares to China peak between June and September.

Another ticket worth looking into is an open-jaw ticket. This option might involve, for example, flying into Hong Kong and then flying out of Kathmandu, allowing you to travel overland across Tibet.

Buying domestic Chinese tickets abroad is possible but at relatively high fares. Bet-

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure tax in China is worked into the price of both domestic and international tickets, so there's nothing additional to pay at the airport.

ter value online Chinese ticket agencies such as **Elong** (www.elong.net) and **CITS Anhui** (www.china.ticketmaster.com) sell discounted domestic flights in the form of e-tickets, meaning you can transfer directly onto a domestic flight once you enter China.

Online travel agents can save you money if you have the time to invest in them, though in general you'll always get the best fares from travel agencies that cater to expat Chinese travellers (often based in Chinatowns in larger cities). The following online ticket agencies book flights originating in the USA but have links to specific country websites across the world:

- Cheapflights.com** (www.cheapflights.com)
- Expedia** (www.expedia.com)
- Last Minute.com** (www.lastminute.com)
- Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) Click on Booking and Services to book flight tickets.
- Priceline** (www.priceline.com) Aims to match the ticket price to your budget.
- STA Travel** (www.statravel.com)
- Travelocity** (www.travelocity.com)

Australia & New Zealand

The cheapest flights from Australia to China generally route via one of the Southeast Asian capitals, such as Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok or Manila. **Singapore Airlines** (www.singaporeair.com) in particular offers good connections to Chengdu five times a week from major Australian cities.

Low-season return fares to Shanghai or Beijing from the east coast of Australia start at around A\$1000, with fares to Hong Kong starting from A\$910. Flights from New Zealand cost from around NZ\$1380 during the low season.

Return fares to Kathmandu from the east coast of Australia range from around A\$1300 to A\$1500, depending on the season. A one-way ticket costs around A\$1000 with Thai Airways (this requires an overnight in Bangkok). Return flights from New Zealand cost from around NZ\$1800 to NZ\$2200.

Flight Centre (www.flightcentre.com); Australia ☎ 133 133; New Zealand ☎ 0800 24 35 44

TRANSPORT

STA Travel (www.statravel.com; Australia ☎ 1300 733 035; New Zealand ☎ 0508 782 872)

Trailfinders (☎ 1300 780 212; www.trailfinders.com.au) In Australia only.

Travel.com.au (www.travel.com.au) Online website.

Continental Europe

Air fares to the Indian subcontinent and China are generally cheaper in the UK than they are in the rest of Europe. Return fares to Beijing from major Western European cities start at around €900 with Lufthansa, Air France and KLM.

STA Travel (www.statravel.com; Paris ☎ 01 43 59 23 69; Frankfurt ☎ 69-430 1910) has dozens of offices across Europe, as does **Nouvelles Frontières** (www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr).

In Germany try **Just Travel** (☎ 089-747 3330; www.justtravel.de); in Italy try **CTS Viaggi** (☎ 06-462 0431; www.cts.it); in the Netherlands try **Airfair** (☎ 0900-7717 717; www.airfair.nl); in Spain try **Barcelo Viajes** (☎ 902 200 400; www.barcelo.viajes.com).

In France try **Voyages Wasteels** (☎ 01 42 61 69 87; www.wasteels.fr) and **Voyageurs du Monde** (☎ 01 40 15 11 15; www.vdm.com).

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is part of the People's Republic of China, though most nationalities don't need a visa for the city. Many travellers make their way from Hong Kong into China by train or ferry, but there are also daily direct flights from Hong Kong to Chengdu for around HK\$2000.

Note that it is considerably cheaper to fly to Chengdu from neighbouring Shenzhen or Guangzhou. From Shenzhen it costs around Y1420, often discounted to Y900; fares from Guangzhou are sometimes even cheaper.

The Shenzhen airport is just an hour-long TurboJet hydrofoil ride (HK\$200) from Hong Kong's Tsim Sha Tsui district (see www.turbojet.com.hk for schedules), or a 40-minute ride from Hong Kong airport (www.turbojetsexpress.com.hk; HK\$230).

Buses operated by CTS Express Coach (http://ctsbus.hkcts.com) and other companies run from Hong Kong International Airport to Guangzhou (HK\$250).

A flight from Hong Kong to Kathmandu costs around US\$400 one way.

China Travel Service (CTS; ☎ 2315 7188; www.ctshk.com; 1F, Alpha House, 27-33 Nathan Rd, Tsim Sha Tsui) Can book domestic air tickets and offers a discount deal on hydrofoil tickets booked in conjunction with a flight out of Shenzhen.

Phoenix Services Agency (☎ 2722 7378; info@phoenixtrvl.com; Rm 1404-5, 14th fl, Austin Tower, 22-26a Austin Ave, Tsim Sha Tsui) A recommended travel agency.

Southeast Asia

There are direct flights from Bangkok and Singapore to Chengdu and from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Yangon (Rangoon), Vientiane and Singapore to Kunming.

Bangkok is a popular place to pick up air tickets, and prices are generally very competitive. The best place to shop around is the Bangkok backpacker ghetto of Khao San Rd. Flights from Bangkok to Chengdu/Kunming cost around US\$230/190 one way. From Singapore it's slightly more expensive. It's also possible to fly direct twice weekly from Chiang Mai to Kunming for around US\$150 (Y1345 in Kunming). Flights to Kathmandu can be picked up for around US\$400.

STA Travel (☎ 02-236 0262; www.statravel.co.th; Room 1406, 14th fl, Wall Street Tower, 33/70 Surawong Rd, Bangkok) Also operates branches in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.

UK

Those looking at travelling via the Indian subcontinent and shaving costs wherever possible may find it cheapest to fly to Delhi and then travel overland to Nepal. Fares to India generally start from UK£400 return. The cheapest high-season return fares to Kathmandu are around UK£600 with Qatar or Gulf Air. The cheapest one-way fares from Kathmandu to London cost around US\$400, also with Gulf Air.

Summer peak-season fares to Beijing cost around UK£300 one way and UK£500 return, although low-season return flights can be as little as UK£350. Cheap flights (often with Middle Eastern Airlines) to Hong Kong cost around the same price.

Several specialist agencies in London can book both international and Chinese domestic tickets, including **China Travel Service and Information Centre** (☎ 020-7388 8838; www.chinatravel.co.uk; 124 Euston Rd, London NW1 2AL).

Travel agents in London's Chinatown that deal with flights to China include **Jade Travel** (☎ 0870-898 8928; www.jadetravel.co.uk; 5 Newport Place, London) and **Sagitta Travel Agency** (☎ 0870-077 8888; www.sagitta-tvl.com; 9 Little Newport St, London).

Flightbookers (☎ 0870-814 4001; www.ebookers.com)

Flight Centre (☎ 0870-499 0040; www.flightcentre.co.uk)

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

FLYING & CLIMATE CHANGE

Pretty much every form of motorised travel generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

CARBON OFFSET SCHEMES

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, support the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: www.lonelyplanet.com.

North-South Travel (☎ 01245-608 291; www.northsouthtravel.co.uk) Donates part of its profit to projects in the developing world.

STA Travel (☎ 0870-163 0026; www.statravel.co.uk)

Trailfinders (☎ 0845-058 5858; www.trailfinders.co.uk)

USA & Canada

It is far cheaper to fly to Hong Kong or Beijing from the USA or Canada than it is to fly to India. This might work out quite well if your ultimate destination is India. Overland travel from Hong Kong to Nepal and India through Tibet is reasonably time-consuming – but what a trip!

From the US west coast, low-season return fares to Hong Kong or Beijing start at around US\$850, rising to around US\$1000 in summer. Fares from New York are around 15% more expensive.

A useful website with information about international flights and domestic airfares in China is www.flychina.com.

Tickets from the US west coast cost around US\$1700 return to Kathmandu. From the east coast you are looking at around US\$1000 return to Delhi. From Kathmandu, a one-way ticket with Northwest or THAI to the west coast costs US\$700.

The cheapest tickets to Hong Kong are offered by bucket shops run by ethnic Chinese

in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. Online agencies include www.cheaptickets.com and www.orb.itz.com.

Reliable, long-running agencies:

Gateway Travel (☎ 800-441 1183, 214-960 2000)

STA Travel (☎ 24hrs 800-781 4040; www.statravel.com)

China Travel Service (☎ 1-800-899 8618; www.china-travelservice.com) Flights and independent tours.

Canadian prices are similar to those available in the USA. Try **Travel Cuts** (☎ 1-866-246 9762; www.travelcuts.com) for excellent deals on tickets to Asia. The new budget airline **Oasis Hong Kong** (www.oasihongkong.com) flies six times a week from Vancouver to Hong Kong for as low as C\$300 one way.

GETTING THERE & AWAY – TIBET

This section details how to get into Tibet from Nepal or China.

AIR

Flights into Lhasa are shared by **Air China** (CA; www.airchina.com.cn), **China Southern** (CZ; www.csair.com), **Sichuan Airlines** (3U; www.scal.com.cn), **Hainan Airlines** (HU; www.hnair.com) and **China Eastern** (MU; www.ce-air.com).

There are flight connections to Lhasa from half a dozen Chinese cities but most travellers fly from Chengdu because arranging a permit is generally easier from there. Flights from Lhasa to Shenzhen and Hong Kong (around Y4200 one way) are expected to start before long, as is a Kunming–Nyingtri flight. Airport tax (Y50) and a fuel surcharge (around Y80) are figured into the cost of domestic airfares.

In 2006 Tibet's third airport opened south of Nyingtri, though it's of very limited use to tourists. The Ngari Kunsha airport in Ali is scheduled to open in 2010.

The Bank of China beside Lhasa's Gongkar airport changes US dollars into yuan but will not change Chinese currency back into US dollars – see p164.

Permits are very rarely checked on arrival at or departure from Lhasa's Gongkar airport, though they are checked when checking in for your flight to Lhasa.

While it can be difficult to get a ticket into Tibet, once there you face no restrictions on buying air tickets out of the province.

Note that flights to and from Lhasa are sometimes cancelled or delayed in the winter months, so if you are flying at this time give yourself a couple of days' leeway if you have a connecting flight.

Baggage allowance on domestic flights to Lhasa is 20kg in economy class and 30kg in 1st class, so you'll have to limit your gear to that to avoid penalties, regardless of what you are allowed to bring on your international flight into China.

Nepal

Flights between Kathmandu and Lhasa run four times a week in the high summer season and twice a week in the low winter season.

Individual travellers can't buy air tickets from the Air China office in Kathmandu without a Tibet Tourism Bureau (TTB) permit. To get a ticket you'll have to purchase a three- to eight-day package tour through a travel agency.

At the time of research, the cheapest air package was a three-day tour for around US\$510. This includes the flight ticket (around US\$330), airport transfers, TTB permit and accommodation for three nights in Lhasa. With this package you'll probably only get a 15-day group visa. For a list of travel companies in Kathmandu, see p87.

The Chinese embassy in Kathmandu does not give Chinese visas to individual travellers and will even cancel any existing Chinese visa you have. See p328 for more on visa headaches in Kathmandu.

It is possible to buy air tickets from Kathmandu to destinations in China such as Chengdu, Shanghai and Hong Kong. You don't need a TTB permit to take these flights.

Chengdu

Flights between Chengdu and Lhasa cost around Y1600, but you'll be very lucky if this is all you end up paying for the flight. In Chengdu, as in other cities, Air China will not sell you a ticket to Lhasa unless you already have a TTB permit.

To get around this, many travel agencies will sell you a 'tour' that allows them to arrange a ticket for you. What the tour consists of depends largely upon the political climate in Lhasa. Out of the high tourist season (July to September) you can normally get away with booking only a ticket and a TTB permit. At the height of summer, agencies may have to book airport transfers, three nights' dormitory accommodation and a simple tour in Lhasa in order to get the TTB permit.

In 2007 the cheapest Tibet package, consisting of one airport transfer and a one-way flight, cost around Y2000. In other years three-day packages have reached Y2400. Packages are generally cheaper in March and April and start rising by May, reaching a peak in August. Agencies normally need at least two days to procure the TTB permit.

In past years travellers never even saw their TTB permit but at the time of research you needed a physical copy of the permit to show at check-in and customs in Chengdu.

On a clear day the views from the plane are stupendous so try to get a window seat. In general the best views are from the left side of the plane from Chengdu to Lhasa and on the right side from Lhasa to Chengdu.

Zhongdian & Kunming

China Eastern operates a useful daily flight from Kunming to Lhasa via Zhongdian in northwest Yunnan (also rather ridiculously called Diqing Shangri-La, or Xi'anggelila, by the Chinese). China Southern also flies from Lhasa to Zhongdian en route to Guangzhou. As with other flights to Lhasa, foreigners need to sign up on a 'tour' to get a ticket.

REGIONAL AIR ROUTES

All of the following flights operate in both directions. Fares given are one way.

From	To	Flights per week	Fare (Yuan)
Lhasa	Beijing (via Chengdu)	7	2560
Lhasa	Chamdo (Bamda/Bangda)	1	930
Lhasa	Chengdu	60-70	1630
Lhasa	Chongqing	7	1760
Lhasa	Guangzhou (via Zhongdian)	2	2630
Lhasa	Kathmandu	3-4	2920
Lhasa	Kunming (via Zhongdian)	7	2090
Lhasa	Lanzhou	7	1600
Lhasa	Shanghai Pudong (via Xi'an)	2	2890
Lhasa	Xi'an	4	1780
Lhasa	Xining (sometimes via Chengdu)	4	1740
Lhasa	Zhongdian	7	1510
Chamdo (Bamda/Bangda)	Chengdu	3	930
Nyingtri	Chengdu	3	1510

The cheapest tour package from Zhongdian costs around Y2610 (including the air ticket and TTB permit), though they can go as low as Y1800 if flights are discounted. Flight packages from Kunming start at about Y2700.

LAND

Many individual travellers make their way to Tibet as part of a grand overland trip through China, Nepal, India and onwards. In many ways, land travel to Tibet is the best way to go, not only for the scenery en route but also because it can help spread the altitude gain over a few days.

Road

In theory there are several land routes into Tibet. The bulk of overland travellers take the Friendship Hwy between Kathmandu to Lhasa. Other possible routes (officially closed to permitless travellers) are the Sichuan–Tibet Hwy, the Yunnan–Tibet Hwy and the Xinjiang–Tibet Hwy.

If you decide to try these latter routes on your own (ie not in a Land Cruiser tour), you'll stand a better chance of getting through if you keep a low profile in towns, avoid hotels and bus stations in towns such as Chamdo and Bayi, and cross checkpoints into Tibet during the evening. Know that you have a fairly good chance of being caught, fined and sent back in the direction you came. If you do get stopped by the Public Security Bureau (PSB), always claim to be heading in the opposite direction.

Then you'll be sent 'back' in the direction in which you actually want to travel!

Even if you don't make it to Lhasa you can still get to see something of the region. If you are caught in Chamdo, for example, the PSB will fine you between Y200 and Y500 and then put you on bus back to Derge or Zhongdian. If you've come from Derge but tell them you came from Zhongdian then you'll at least get to travel along the Chamdo–Markham road. Be patient whenever dealing with the PSB; try not to be belligerent and always get a receipt for fines paid so that you don't have to pay again later.

See p344 for advice on hitching through Tibet.

FRIENDSHIP HIGHWAY (NEPAL TO TIBET)

The 865km stretch of road between Kathmandu and Lhasa is known as the Friendship Hwy. The journey is without a doubt one of the most spectacular in the world.

From Kathmandu (elevation 1300m) the road travels gently up to Kodari (1873m), before leaving Nepal to make a steep switchback ascent to Zhangmu (2250m), the Tibetan border town, and then Nyalam (3750m), where most people spend their first night. The road then climbs to the top of the Tong-la (4950m), continuing to Tingri (4250m) for the second night. Most of the road is now paved.

It is essential to watch out for the effects of altitude sickness during the early stages of

CONTACTS FOR PERMITS AND AIR/TRAIN TICKETS

The following companies can arrange air and train tickets to Lhasa alongside a TTB permit. All update prices and services frequently according to the changing regulations. A TTB permit generally costs around Y500 in Chengdu but can cost twice this elsewhere (for example in Zhongdian).

If you want to limit the time you spend waiting for permits you can normally get the bureaucratic ball rolling by emailing a scan of your passport and Chinese visa and wiring a deposit.

Beijing

- **Far East International Youth Hostel** (☎ 10-5195 8811; www.fareastyh.com; 90 Tieshu Xiejie, Xuanwu District)
- **Leo Hostel** (☎ 10-8660 8923; www.leohostel.com; Guangjuyuan Binyuan, 52 Dazhulan Xijie, Qianmen) Can arrange tickets and permits only but you may need to pay a Y500 deposit, refundable in Lhasa.

Chengdu

- See p91.

Kunming

- **Mr Chen's Travel** (☎ 0871-318 8114; www.kmcamelliahotel.com; qijia_chen@yahoo.com.cn; Room 3116, No 3 Bldg Camellia Hotel, 154 Dongfeng Lu) Better for air tickets than overland trips.

Xining

- **Tibetan Connections** (☎ 0971-820 3271; www.tibetanconnections.com; Guojia Cun Gongyu Bldg 5, 15th flr, Lete Youth Hostel) Train tickets to Lhasa and overland trips, especially good in Amdo.
- **Qinghai Tibet Adventures Company** (☎ 0971-824 7377; www.cqta.com; 13 Beida Jie, Xining) Permit alone Y200 to Y400.

Zhongdian

- **Khampa Caravan** (☎ 0887-828 8648; www.khampacaravan.com; Heping Lu)
- **Tibet Café** (☎ 0887-823 0019; www.tibetcafeinn.com; Changzheng Lu)
- **Tibet Tourism Bureau** (☎ 0887-822 9028; yunnantibetour@yahoo.com.cn; Room 2206, Shangbala Hotel, 36 Changzheng Lu)

this trip (see p351). If you intend to head up to Everest Base Camp (5150m) you really need to slip in a rest day at Tingri or Nyalam. See the Tsang chapter (p180) for details of sights and landmarks en route.

This highway is very well travelled nowadays and is a pleasant journey, except for one major problem – the Chinese authorities will not let individual travellers enter Tibet from Nepal without a TTB permit and tour.

Because of this, several of Kathmandu's travel agencies (p87) offer 'budget' tours of Tibet to get you into Lhasa. At the time of research the cheapest of these tours cost from around US\$400 to US\$450 per person for a basic eight-day trip to Lhasa, stopping in Zhangmu/Nyalam, Lhatse, Shigatse, Gyantse

and then Lhasa for three days. These trips generally run every Tuesday and Saturday. A nine-day trip that adds on a visit to Everest Base Camp costs US\$650 per person but these are harder to find. Prices include transport, permits, a Chinese group visa, dormitory accommodation for the first two nights and then shared twins, a fairly useless guide and admission fees.

Bear in mind that most agencies are just subcontractors and normally pool clients, so you could find yourself travelling in a larger group than expected and perhaps on a bus instead of the promised Land Cruiser. Other potential inconsistencies may include having to share a room when you were told you would be given a single, or paying a double

room supplement and ending up in a dorm. We do get a fair number of complaints about the service of some of these tours; it's best just to view it as the cheapest way to get to Tibet.

For more information about the visa snags involved in a trip from Kathmandu, see p328.

Headed in the other direction, a private Land Cruiser tour from Lhasa to the Nepali border costs around Y6000 for a four- or five-day trip, which works out around US\$200 per person. This includes a guide, permits and transport only.

A direct bus runs twice a week from Lhasa's Northern Bus Station to Kathmandu and back but foreigners are currently not allowed on this.

If you are going direct to Nepal you might be able to find a Land Cruiser heading down to the border to pick up groups arriving from Kathmandu. Check out the notice boards in Lhasa and ask at the various FIT agencies (see p100). These Land Cruisers generally drive nonstop through the night.

See p214 for details of the border crossing to Nepal. China is 2¼ hours ahead of Nepali time.

QINGHAI-TIBET HIGHWAY

The 1115km road journey between Golmud and Lhasa is the subject of an ancient Chinese curse: 'May you travel by Chinese bus from Golmud to Lhasa.' Actually, we made that one up – but it deserves to be. Now that you can make the journey by train, it's hard to see why anyone would want to make the 20-hour journey in a cramped, smoky sleeper bus, especially as you are forced to buy bus tickets from the local **CITS** (☎ 0979-413 003; 2nd fl, Golmud Hotel) at a massive mark-up.

A few hardy souls make the trip by bike, crossing into Tibet over the 5180m Tangu-la pass. A checkpoint 30km south of Golmud checks for permits.

An unusual, way-off-the-beaten-track route into Tibet is the back-door route from Yushu (Jyekundo) in southeastern Qinghai to Chamdo in eastern Tibet, via the towns of Nangchen and Riwoche. Yushu itself is a 20-hour sleeper-bus ride from Xining, though an airport is scheduled to open here in 2009. From Yushu you can get a seat in a Land Cruiser (Y40, three hours) along the paved road to Nangchen, a former Tibetan kingdom. From Nangchen it's a remote and rough

245km trip to Riwoche. The first 100km is on a dirt road that can be impassable during heavy rains. You may find a Land Cruiser making the trip if there are enough passengers (Y100 per seat), otherwise you'll have to hitch (see p344) and lay low as you cross the border. You'll face difficulties travelling independently through the rest of Eastern Tibet – see p242.

SICHUAN-TIBET HIGHWAY

The road between Chengdu and Lhasa is an epic 2400km or 2100km, depending on whether you take the northern or southern route.

The Sichuan section of the Sichuan-Tibet Hwy is open to foreigners as far as the Tibetan border. Beyond this, the road is closed to individual travellers, although the occasional tour group and renegade explorer passes along it. Hitchhikers should budget from 10 days to two weeks for the trip.

For coverage of the sights along the route, see the Overland Routes from Sichuan (p267) and Eastern Tibet (p241) chapters. For an overview of routes, see p23. Long-distance public buses run along the main highways but permitless foreigners are more likely to get on the private minibuses that run between most towns in Eastern Tibet.

The 780km stretch of road between Markham and Bayi is likely to be the biggest hurdle for travellers making their way to Lhasa. Markham is where the Yunnan-Tibet Hwy joins the Sichuan-Tibet Hwy and so the local PSB is pretty vigilant about making sure that no travellers continue on to Lhasa. Nyingtri, Bayi and Chamdo also have pretty strict PSB offices.

A Land Cruiser tour from Lhasa to Chengdu costs from Y16,000 to Y20,000.

YUNNAN-TIBET HIGHWAY

The Yunnan-Tibet Hwy is a wonderful way to approach Tibet, though once again the route is officially limited to organised groups. From loved-to-death Lijiang a road heads up to the Tibetan towns and monasteries of Zhongdian (Gyeltang), Benzalin and Deqin (Jol), from where there are public buses north across the Tibetan border (and checkpoint) 112km to Yanjing. From here it's 111km to Markham, where the road joins the Sichuan southern route (see p279). For details on the Tibetan areas of northwest Yunnan, see Lonely Planet's *China* or *China's Southwest* guides.

OVERLAND TRAVEL AGENCIES IN CHINA

A few Chinese adventure travel agencies specialise in travel in western Sichuan and northwest Yunnan, including organised overland trips to Lhasa through remote Kham.

- **China Minority Travel** (0872-267 7824; www.china-travel.nl) Dutch-Chinese operation based at Jim's Tibetan Guesthouse in Dali; runs a nine-day overland trip from Zhongdian to Lhasa for US\$680 per person.
- **Forbidden Frontier** (☎ 021-6445 9937; www.forbiddenfrontier.com; Suite 504, Bldg 2, 298 Anfu Rd, Shanghai) Trips throughout Kham.
- **Haiwei Trails** (☎ 0887-828-9239; www.haiweitrails.com; 19 Beimen Jie, Zhongdian) US-British company that runs 4WD trips and charters into central and eastern Tibet.
- **Khampa Caravan** (☎ 0887-828 8648; www.khampacaravan.com; 117 Beimen Jie, Zhongdian) Overland trips from Zhongdian to Lhasa, with an emphasis on sustainable tourism and local communities. Contact Dakpa or Yeshi.
- **Tibetan Connections** (☎ 0971-820 3271; www.tibetanconnections.com; Guoji Cun Gongyu Bldg 5, 15th fl, Lete Youth Hostel, Xining) Excellent for tours to Amdo and Kham, specialising in Qinghai province. Contact Lobsang.
- **Tibetan Trekking** (☎ 028-8675 1783; www.tibetantrekking.com; Room 1614, Zhufeng Hotel, 288 Shuncheng Lu, Chengdu) Contact Gao Liqiang for treks and 4WD trips in western Sichuan.
- **Wild China** (☎ 010-6465 6602; www.wildchina.com; Room 801, Oriental Place, 9 Dongfang Donglu, North Dongsanhuan Rd, Chaoyang District, Beijing) Professionally run trips in Yunnan and Sichuan regions of Kham.

The Yunnan route is officially closed to independent (ie permitless) travellers but increasing numbers of people are getting through. Markham (see p279) is the place where most permitless travellers get caught and sent back. A few travel companies are starting to organise nine- or 10-day overland tours on this route, including the excellent Khampa Caravan in Zhongdian (see the boxed text above). TTB permits take around five days to arrange so contact these agencies in advance.

The Zhongdian **TTB office** (☎ 887-822 9028; yunnantibetour@yahoo.com.cn; Room 2206, Shangbala Hotel, Chengzheng Lu) can organise eight- to 10-day overland trips to Lhasa for about US\$625 per person in a group of four and can also arrange budget packages.

Travellers can get the permit process rolling in advance through the **MCA Guesthouse** (☎ 0872-267 3666; mcaguesthouse@hotmail.com; Wen Xi'an Lu) in Dali, before travelling on to Zhongdian.

FIT in Lhasa (see p100) charges from Y12,000 to Y15,000 for an eight-day Lhasa-Bayi-Pomi-Pomda-Markham-Deqin Land Cruiser trip, which works out at about US\$500 per person. Prices can be as low as Y8000 when they have a Land Cruiser returning empty to Zhongdian. From Zhongdian figure on between Y15,000 to Y20,000 to Lhasa.

Surprisingly, the Zhongdian bus station will sell foreigners bus tickets to Lhasa (Y580, three days), though you face a good chance of being fined and sent back once you get into the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

XINJIANG-TIBET HIGHWAY

The Xinjiang-Tibet Hwy is officially off limits without travel permits, but interestingly, at the time of research, there were quite a number of travellers who were managing to get through, even on bicycles. Approximately 1350km of road separates Kashgar from Ali in western Tibet and for the adventurous this can form a wild extension to a trip along the Karakoram Hwy.

With at least two passes more than 5400m, the Xinjiang-Tibet Hwy is the highest road in the world. It can be bitterly cold and closes down for the winter months from December to February. The whole trip takes at least four days of travel, depending on how lucky you are with lifts. There are truck stops along the way, about a day's travel apart, but it's wise to bring food and a sleeping bag. A tent can be useful in emergencies. Coming from Kashgar, you have to be particularly careful about altitude sickness as the initial rate of altitude gain is dramatic.

There are buses every half-hour from Kashgar to Karghilik (Ye Cheng; Y29, four hours), and a sleeper bus run by the Tibetan Antelope Travel and Transportation Co (藏羚羊旅游有限公司; see p226) makes the journey between Ye Cheng and Ali (Y500, 50 hours) twice a week. The Tibetan Antelope bus station is hard to find but bus 2 runs there.

If you're hitching from Ye Cheng to Ali, the truck stop 4km southeast of Ye Cheng is the best place to sniff out a lift. Accommodation is available here and trucks depart in the early morning. Expect to pay Y150 to Y500 for a lift, depending on the road conditions.

FIT in Lhasa (see p100) offers a three-week Mt Everest-Kailash-Guge-Kingdom-Ye Cheng-Kashgar Land Cruiser trip for about Y25,000, which works out at around US\$800 per person for four sharing.

Caravan Café (☎ 0998-298 1864; www.caravancafe.com; 120 Seman Lu) in Kashgar can arrange transport from Kashgar to Lhasa.

John's Café (www.johncafe.net), with branches in Lhasa and Kashgar, can arrange 15- to 18-day vehicle hire along this route from €3000.

The Route

Leaving Ye Cheng, the road climbs past Akmeqit village to Kudi Pass (kilometre marker 113; 3240m) then follows a narrow gorge to the truck stop and checkpoint at **Kudi** (kilometre 161, 2960m). From Kudi it's 80km over the Chiragsaldi Pass (kilometre marker 217; 4960m) to the village of **Mazar** (kilometre marker 241; 3700m), which has some shops and restaurants. The road turns east and climbs over the Kirgizjangan Pass (kilometre marker 09; 4930m) to the large village of **Xaidulla** (kilometre marker 363; 3700m), the largest town en route, with shops and restaurants. The road climbs again over the 4250m Koshbel Pass to the truck stop of **Dahongliutan** (kilometre marker 488; 4200m), which offers basic food and lodging.

From here the road turns south, and climbs to the Khitai Pass (kilometre marker 535; 5150m), past the military base of Tianshuihai. About 100km from the pass you cross another 5180m pass (kilometre marker 670) to enter the remote region of Aksai Chin. For the next 170km road conditions are bad and progress is slow. The construction of the road here, through a triangle of territory that India claimed as part of Ladakh, was a principal cause of the border war between India and China in 1962. The fact that the Chinese managed to

build this road without India even realising that it was under construction is an indication of the utter isolation of the region!

The road passes Lungma-tso, shortly afterwards entering the Changtang Nature Preserve, and 15km later reaches the small village of **Sumzhi (Songxi)** (kilometre marker 720; 5200m), which has basic accommodation and a restaurant. Finally at kilometre marker 740 you come to the edge of the Aksai Chin region and climb up to the **Jieshan Daban pass** (5200m). From here, Ali is around 420km away via the village of Domar (kilometre marker 828; 4440m), the eastern end of **Pangong-tso** (Palgon-tso; 4270m) and **Rutok Xian** (kilometre marker 930; p237). From here it is 130km south to Ali.

OTHER ROUTES INTO TIBET

Since 1994 another route into Tibet has been open, to trekking groups only, passing through Purang (Nepali: Taklakot). Special visas are required for this trip. Trekkers start by travelling by road or flying from Kathmandu to Nepalganj, then flying from there to Simikot in the far west of Nepal. From Simikot it's a five- or six-day walk to the Tibetan border, crossing the Humla Karnali. You can then drive the 28km to Purang and 107km on to the Mt Kailash area via Lake Manasarovar. See Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* for details of the trek. For details on the route from the Nepali border to Mt Kailash, see p238.

Indian travellers can cross into Tibet's Yadong region from Gangtok in Sikkim via the 4310m Nathu-la, tracing the former trading routes between Lhasa, Kalimpong and Calcutta, and the path taken by Younghusband's invasion of Tibet in 1903. The route opened to locals in 2006 but is not scheduled to open to third-party nationals until 2011.

There is talk of opening the Kyirong-la (Kerong-la) to organised tour groups headed to/from the Langtang region of Nepal but there are no definite plans as yet. Roads are in place on both sides of the border.

Indian pilgrims on a quota system travel to Purang via the Lipu Lekh pass from Pithoragarh.

Train

For years an impossible dream, the new 1956km train line from Golmud to Lhasa was finally inaugurated in July 2006 and at least four passenger trains trundle up onto

THE WORLD'S HIGHEST TRAIN RIDE

There's no doubt the Qinghai-Tibet train line is an engineering marvel. Topping out at 5072m, it is the world's highest railway, snatching the title from a Peruvian line. The statistics speak for themselves: 86% of the line is above 4000m, and half the track lies on permafrost, requiring a cooling system of pipes driven into the ground to keep it frozen year-round and avoid a rail-buckling summer thaw. Construction of the line involved building 160km of bridges and elevated track, seven tunnels (including the world's highest) and 24 hyperbaric chambers, the latter to treat altitude-sick workers.

Aside from the environmental concerns (see p85), Tibetans are most deeply concerned about the cultural impact of the train. While the highly subsidised line will doubtless boost the Tibetan economy, decreasing transport costs for imports by up to 75%, the trains also unload 2500 Chinese tourists and immigrants into Lhasa every day. Trains to Lhasa habitually arrive full and depart half-empty.

The authorities like to stress the economic benefits of the line but Tibetans remain economically marginalised. More than 90% of the 100,000 workers employed to build the line came from other provinces and few, if any, Tibetan staff actually work on the trains. The US\$4.1 billion cost of building the line is greater than the amount Beijing has spent on hospitals and schools in Tibet over the last 50 years combined.

As with most of Beijing's epic engineering projects, the results are as much symbolic as real, connecting China's rail network to the only province in China lacking a rail link and forging Tibet and China together in an iron grip. It did a similar thing with the 1999 railway line to Kashgar in Xinjiang; now it's the turn of its other troublesome border province.

the high plateau every day. The engineering marvel is not without controversy (see the boxed text, above) but there's no doubt that the line has quickly become one of the world's classic train trips.

Trains run daily from Beijing, Chengdu and Xining, and every other day from Guangzhou and Shanghai. Trains also run every other day from Chongqing (via Xi'an) and Lanzhou, which link up with the Chengdu and Xining trains respectively. See p341 for schedules and fares. Train services alternate between daily and every other day, according to the month. A 250km extension line to Shigatse is due to open by 2009.

All trains cross the Tibetan plateau during daylight, guaranteeing you great views (the scenery is impressive in scale rather than beautiful). From Golmud the train climbs through desert into the jagged caramel-coloured mountains of Nanshankou (Southern Pass), passing what feels like a stone's throw from the impressive glaciers beside Yuzhu Feng (Jade Pearl Peak; 6178m). Other highlights include the nearby tunnel through the 4776m Kunlun Pass, where you can see the prayer flags at the top of the pass, and Tsanak Lake, 9½ hours from Golmud near Amdo, claimed to be the highest freshwater

lake in the world at 4608m. Keep your eyes peeled throughout the journey for antelope, fox and wild asses, plus the occasional impressed-looking nomad. The train crosses into Tibet over the 5072m Tangu-la (Tanggula Shankou) Pass, the line's high point.

For more details on the train, services and schedules see the following:

China Highlights (www.chinahighlights.com/china-trains/index.htm) Searchable timetables.

China Tibet Train (www.chinatibettrain.com) Good background info.

Lulutong (www.railway.com.cn) Chinese-language website.

Seat 61 (www.seat61.com) General info on trains in China.

Travel China Guide (www.travelchinaguide.com/china-trains/) Searchable timetables.

Tibet Train Travel (www.tibettraintravel.com) Background info and mini-tours.

A luxury joint-venture train, the Tangula Express (www.tangula.com.cn) is due to start operation in 2008 from Beijing to Lhasa, with glass observation cars, fine dining and luxury cabins provided by the Kempinski hotel group. The US\$1000 per day (!) tariff gets you butler service, showers, fine dining and on-board internet access.

PRACTICALITIES

At the time of writing, foreigners needed a TTB permit (see p323) to buy a ticket and board the train, though some travellers have managed to take the train without one. Golmud and Xi'an seem to be the most difficult places to buy tickets without a TTB permit. Several agencies such as Leo's Hostel in Beijing and Sim's Cozy Guesthouse in Chengdu (see the boxed text, p336) sell tickets and TTB permits, though sleeper berths can be hard to secure from Beijing, Chengdu and Xi'an. You can buy tickets up to 10 days in advance.

The online agency www.china-train-ticket.com sells train tickets and will deliver them to your hotel in China, for a fairly hefty 40% mark-up on the ticket price. Chinese sites such as www.piao.com/train are cheaper, if you read Chinese. Either way you face complications getting a TTB permit this way.

Once aboard the train you have to fill out a health card. The carriages are much better than your average Chinese train and are more like the express trains that link Beijing with Shanghai. All passengers have access to piped-in oxygen through a special socket beside each seat or berth and all carriages are nonsmoking after Golmud. There are power sockets by the window seats, though beware that laptops and MP3 players often stop working at points during the trip, due to the altitude. Each train has a small but decent dining car (mains Y15 to Y25).

Hard-sleeper (硬卧; *ying wo*) carriages are made up of doorless six-berth compartments with bunks in three tiers, and sheets, pillows

and blankets are provided. There is a small price difference between berths, with the lowest bunk the most expensive and the top-most bunk the cheapest. Four-bed soft-sleeper (软卧; *ruan wo*) berths come with individual TVs and doors that close and lock. Hard seats (硬座; *ying zuo*) are just that.

GETTING AROUND

Tibet's transport infrastructure is poorly developed and, with the exception of the Friendship Hwy and the Qinghai-Tibet Hwy, most of the roads are in rough condition. Work is being undertaken to improve this situation – a vital aspect of Chinese plans to develop Tibet – but it is unlikely that travel in large parts of Tibet will become comfortable or easy in the near future.

The main problem for travellers short on time is the scarcity of public transport. There are no internal flights (except to Chamdo, a closed area) and only a handful of buses and minibuses plying the roads between Lhasa and other major Tibetan towns such as Shigatse and Tsetang.

Most travellers band together to hire a Land Cruiser to get around Tibet but this isn't absolutely necessary. Minibuses run to most monasteries around Lhasa, and to Shigatse, Gyantse, Sakya and Lhatse. Hitching is another possibility; you will still have to pay, but only a fraction of the amount for a Land Cruiser. You'll need to be more self-sufficient and prepared to wait perhaps for

TRAIN SCHEDULES TO LHASA

Train No	To/From	Departure	Distance	Duration	Hard seat/hard sleeper/ soft sleeper
T27/8	Beijing	daily 9.30pm	4064km	48 hr	Y389/813/1262
T22/3	Chengdu	daily 6.18pm	3360km	48 hr	Y331/712/1104
T223/4	Chongqing	7.20pm	3654km	48 hr	Y355/754/1168
T264/5	Guangzhou	1.07pm	4980km	58 hr	Y451/923/1434
T164/5	Shanghai	4.11pm	4373km	52 hr	Y406/845/1314
K917/8	Xining	daily 4.45pm	1972km	27 hr	Y226/523/810
K917/8	Lanzhou	4.45pm	2188km	30 hr	Y242/552/854
**	Xi'an	-	2864km	27 hr	Y296/650/1008*
**	Golmud	-	1135km	14 hr	Y143/377/583

NB Sleeper fares are for lower berth. Unless noted, services run every other day.

* Fares slightly more expensive on the Chongqing train

** Multiple train options

hours for a ride. Hitching in Tibet can be the best way to get around but it can also be very frustrating, and there are risks (see p344).

Those with more time can, of course, trek or cycle their way around the high plateau. A combination of hiking and hitching is the best way to get to many off-the-beaten-track destinations.

By 2009 you may even be able to take the train from Lhasa to Shigatse.

BICYCLE

Long-distance cyclists are an increasingly frequent sight on the roads of Tibet, especially along the Friendship Hwy, though also increasingly through eastern Tibet. In theory cyclists face the same travel and permit restrictions as other travellers, though local authorities often turn a blind eye to travellers on bikes, unsure of what to do with them.

You can rent Taiwanese-made mountain bikes in Lhasa for around Y30 per day, which are fine for getting around town. Test the brakes and tyres before taking the bike out onto the streets. An extra padlock is a good idea, as there is a problem with bicycle theft in the capital.

Most long distance cyclists bring their own bikes to Tibet, though a few buy mountain bikes in China or Lhasa. Nowadays it is possible to buy a Chinese-made or (better) Taiwanese-made mountain bike in Lhasa for about Y500 or, if you are lucky, a good quality Thai bike for around Y2000. Standards aren't all that bad, although you should check the gears in particular. Do not expect the quality of such bikes to be equal to those you might buy at home – bring plenty of spare parts. Bikes have a relatively high resale value in Kathmandu and you might even make a profit if the bike is in good shape (which is unlikely after a trip across Tibet!).

Touring

Tibet poses unique challenges to individual cyclists. The good news is that the main roads are in surprisingly good condition (the Friendship Hwy was recently upgraded and roads everywhere are under improvement) and the traffic is fairly light. The main physical challenges come from the climate, terrain and altitude: wind squalls and dust storms can make your work particularly arduous; the warm summer months can bring flash flooding; and then there is the question of your fitness in the face of Tibet's high-altitude mountainous terrain.

A full bicycle-repair kit, several spare inner tubes, and a spare tyre and chain are essential. Preferably bring an extra rim and some spare spokes. Extra brake wire and brake pads are useful (you'll be descending 3000m from Lhasa to Kathmandu!). Other useful equipment includes reflective clothing, a helmet, a dust mask, goggles, gloves and padded trousers.

You will also need to be prepared with supplies such as food, water-purifying tablets and camping equipment, just as if you were trekking. Most long-distance cyclists will probably find formal accommodation and restaurants only available at two- or three-day intervals. It may be possible to stay with road repair camps (known as *daoban* in Chinese) in remote places.

The Trailblazer guidebook *Tibet Overland: A Route and Planning Guide for Mountain Bikers and Other Overlanders*, by Kym McConnell, has useful route plans and gradient charts aimed at mountain bikers, with a notice board at www.tibetoverland.com.

There are several good accounts of cycling in Tibet in the 'Travelogues' section of the website www.bikechina.com.

Obviously you need to be in good physical condition to undertake road touring in Tibet. Spend some time acclimatising to the altitude and taking leisurely rides around Lhasa (for example) before setting off on a long trip.

On the plus side, while Tibet has some of the highest-altitude roads in the world, gradients are usually quite manageable. The Tibetan roads are designed for low-powered Chinese trucks, and tackle the many high passes of the region with its low-gradient switchback roads.

Touring Routes

The most popular touring route at present is Lhasa to Kathmandu, along the Friendship Hwy. It is an ideal route in that it takes in most of Tibet's main sights, offers superb scenery and (for those leaving from Lhasa) features a spectacular roller-coaster ride down from the heights of the La Lung-la into the Kathmandu Valley. The trip will take a minimum of two weeks, although to do it justice and include stopovers at Gyantse, Shigatse and Sakya, budget for 20 days. The entire trip is just over 940km, although most people start from Shigatse. The roadside kilometre mark-

ers are a useful way of knowing exactly how far you have gone and how far you still have to go. For a rundown of the route and its markers, see p198.

If you are travelling via Kathmandu, Nepali mountain bike agencies such as **Massif Mountain Bikes** (www.massifmountainbike.com), **Himalayan Mountain Bikes** (www.bikeasia.info) and **Dawn Til Dusk** (www.nepalbiking.com) can offer tips, equipment and also organised biking tours in Tibet. It's currently not possible to cycle independently from Kathmandu to Lhasa due to the fact that you have to enter Tibet on an organised tour; you'll have to take your bike to Lhasa and cycle back.

Keen cyclists with good mountain bikes might want to consider the detour to Everest Base Camp as a side trip on the Lhasa-Kathmandu route. The 108km one-way trip starts from the Shegar turn-off, and it takes around two days to Rongphu Monastery – less once the road is paved in 2008.

Other possibilities are endless. Tsurphu, Ganden and Drigung Til Monasteries are relatively easy trips and good for acclimatisation (though the road to Tsurphu is rough and Ganden has a fierce final 10km uphill section). The Gyama Valley is an easy detour on a bike if you are headed to Ganden. Cycling in the Yarlung Valley region would be a wonderful option if it were not for permit hassles. Some cyclists even tackle the paved road to Nam-tso, although the nomads' dogs can be a problem here.

Hazards

Cycling in Tibet is not to be taken lightly. Dogs are a major problem, especially in more remote areas. You may have to pedal like mad to outpace them. Children have been known to throw stones at cyclists. Erratic driving is another serious concern.

Wear a cycling helmet and lightweight leather gloves and, weather permitting, try to keep as much of your body covered with protective clothing as possible. It goes without saying that cyclists should also be prepared with a comprehensive medical kit (see p347).

BUS

Bus travel in Tibet is limited but with some time and a little effort you can get to most places in this book by bus or minibus. Most services originate in Lhasa or Shigatse and

run to any town that has a sizeable Chinese presence. Smaller towns may have just one daily bus that runs to Lhasa in the morning and returns in the afternoon.

Many bus stations in Tibet will not sell bus tickets to foreigners, which leaves you in the hands of private or pilgrim bus services. Even the larger private buses may be reluctant to take foreigners (notably between Lhasa and Shigatse) because they don't have government permission and/or insurance to take foreigners. Accidents do sometimes happen: in 2007, 13 tourists were killed when their tourist bus crashed between Lhasa and Shigatse.

On a long-distance bus you will probably be required to stow your baggage on the roof if you have a bulky backpack. If possible, check that it is tied down properly (bus drivers normally do a good job of checking such details), lock your pack as a precaution against theft and make sure you have all you might need for the trip (food, water, warm clothes etc). Try to see what everyone else is paying for the fare before you hand over your cash. You can expect to spend a lot of time sitting around waiting for minibuses to fill up.

CAR

Renting a Land Cruiser (plus driver) and splitting the cost among a band of travellers has become the most popular way of getting around in Tibet. Tourists are not permitted to drive rental vehicles in Tibet.

Prices depend largely on the kilometres driven (roughly Y3.50 per km) not the time taken, meaning that you can often add an extra day to your itinerary for minimal extra cost. Prices are higher on trips where a permit and both guide and driver are needed. Guide fees are normally calculated at around Y150 per day and permits generally cost around Y150 per person.

Land Cruisers have room for four passengers (plus a guide) and their luggage. Even then, someone will have to sit on a fold-up seat in the back. The guides provided on budget tours are normally useless. The best learned their English in Dharamsala but don't have a formal guide licence (the government won't give licences to Tibetans who have travelled to Dharamsala).

The best place to hire vehicles is Lhasa. Before organising a vehicle, check the notice boards at the main budget hotels. The most popular destinations are the Nepali border,

Nam-tso and Mt Kailash, but there will probably be a few notices about more-obscure destinations. The availability of vehicles has improved recently, but in the peak months of May, August and September there can still be a squeeze and prices can rise. For an idea of prices, see p127.

Hiring a vehicle is subject to a few pitfalls (see Organising a Land Cruiser Trip, opposite, for some guidelines) and we get many complaints from travellers over the quality of the car, the guide and problems relating to reimbursements after an unsuccessful trip. If possible, it is a good idea to reach an agreement that payment be delivered in two instalments: one before setting off and one on successful completion of the trip. This gives you more leverage in negotiating a refund if your trip was unsuccessful (one reason why agencies are loathe to do this).

Drawing up a contract in English as well as Tibetan or Chinese can be a good idea and your agent may already have one. List your exact itinerary, the price and method of payment and pin down in writing any detours or monasteries you want to visit. Once you are on the road your driver will be reluctant to detour even a few kilometres off the listed itinerary.

Above all, get together with the driver before the trip and go through the main points of the agreement verbally. You are likely to have far fewer problems if you can reach friendly terms with your driver by treating him with respect – giving him some cigarettes or some kind of small gift – rather than waving a contract in his face.

Remember, it may be worth spending a few hundred yuan extra (it's not much spread between four people) to hire a vehicle from a bigger and more reliable agency. Note that most higher-end agencies can only arrange your trip if you book it from outside Tibet, so that they provide the original TTB permit to get you into Tibet.

HITCHING

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the world, and we don't necessarily recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. That said, in Tibet hitching is often the only alternative to hiring an expensive Land Cruiser and so has become a fairly established practice.

Few foreigners travel long distances by truck these days. The authorities impose heavy fines

on truck drivers caught transporting foreign travellers and may even confiscate their licence. Sometimes you can get a lift on a pilgrim truck or an organised passenger truck.

If you are headed out to fairly remote destinations you should be equipped to camp out for the night if you don't get a ride. One guy we heard of waited so long for a lift to Mt Kailash that he built a chörten from stones out of boredom. By the time he got a ride it was more than 1m tall!

There are also plenty of half-empty Land Cruisers heading down the Friendship Hwy to pick up a group, or returning after having dropped one off. It's a wonderful feeling to finally get a lift in an empty Land Cruiser after being rejected all day by a stream of dilapidated trucks travelling at 30km/h!

Normally you will be expected to pay for your lift, especially in a Land Cruiser. The amount is entirely negotiable, but in areas where traffic is minimal, drivers will often demand quite large sums.

It's a good idea to start hitching a few kilometres out of town because then you know that traffic is going in your direction and is not about to turn off after 400m. This is especially important if there is a checkpoint nearby. It's best to walk through the checkpoint yourself and wait for a lift out of sight on the other side.

The most common hitching gesture is to stick out one or two fingers towards the ground and wave them up or down.

If you are hitching long distances without a permit you'll have to lay low at checkpoints. Perhaps your best chance is to hook up with a truck that is itself slightly illegal and therefore inclined to drive through the checkpoints at night. Apart from the checkpoints, the likeliest place to be caught is at a hotel.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

Local city transport only really operates in Lhasa and Shigatse. Minibuses run on set routes around Lhasa and Shigatse and they charge a fixed fare of Y2.

Pedicabs (pedal-operated tricycles transporting passengers) are available in Lhasa, Gyantse, Shigatse and Bayi, but require some extensive haggling.

A couple of towns in eastern Tibet have motorised three-wheeler rickshaws that take passengers around town or to destinations (eg monasteries) just outside of town. Negotiate the fare before you set off.

ORGANISING A LAND CRUISER TRIP *Andre Ticheler*

When dealing with an agency to rent a vehicle, you need to establish a few ground rules. First, work out a detailed itinerary for your trip. This will allow the agency to give you a firm quote based on distance covered and number of days on the road.

You'll need to fix the rate for any extra days that may need to be tacked onto an itinerary. For delays caused by bad weather, blocked passes, swollen river crossings and so on, there should be no extra charge for jeep hire. At the very least the cost for extra days should be split 50% between your group and the agency. For delays caused by vehicle breakdowns, driver illness etc, the agency should cover 100% of the costs and provide a backup vehicle if necessary.

Second, ask the agency about its policy on refunds for an uncompleted trip. Some agencies refuse any kind of refund, others are more open to negotiation.

Third, clarify whether the price you agree on covers all permit costs, and establish which costs are not covered in the price (for example, the Y405 vehicle fee to drive to Everest Base Camp and Y40 vehicle fee at Peiku-tso).

Finally, be aware that the vehicle you receive has probably been subcontracted from outside the agency; you should verify that the agency will take responsibility in the event of a vehicle breakdown. Some reputable agencies will calmly refuse to take any role in disputes between you and the owner of the vehicle. Find out where you stand in advance.

Once you are sorted with the agency, it's a good idea to organise a meeting between your group and the driver(s) and guide a day or two before departure. Make sure the drivers are aware of your itinerary (it may be the first time they have seen it!). Ensure that the guide speaks fluent Tibetan, good Chinese and useable English. Strong personality clashes would suggest a change of personnel.

Unless you are a qualified mechanic, inspecting the soundness of the vehicle may prove to be difficult, but you should carry out the following basic checks. First make sure that the 4WD can at least be engaged (not just that the stick moves!) and that the 'diff lock' can be locked and unlocked (this is usually done via tabs on the front wheel hubs). For longer trips, make sure that at least one shovel and a long steel tow cable (rope cables are useless) are supplied. Tyres and spares should be in reasonable condition (by Tibetan standards). Check that fuel cans don't leak and that there's rope to tie baggage to the roof rack.

The only other predeparture issues to consider for long trips are warm clothing, a good sleeping bag, plenty of food and perhaps a small stove. A tent is an excellent backup. A few plastic barrels or sacks (available in most markets) are useful to protect your gear and food from the dust and general thrashing it will get in the back of the truck. Some travellers invest in a decent piece of foam mattress to save their backside from the worst punishments of the road (a square big enough to sit on costs Y10). Jerry cans to carry water (and even *chang*, or Tibetan barley beer!) are always a good idea.

One result of China's economic infusion into Tibet is the large number of taxis now available in most towns, even Ali in western Tibet (you have to wonder how they got there!). Taxis in Lhasa, Shigatse and Ali charge a standard Y10 to anywhere in the city; for longer trips negotiate a fare. Fixed-route passenger taxis (which you can pay for by the seat) run between several cities, including Lhasa and Tsetang.

Tractors can be an option for short trips in rural areas, especially in the Yarlung Valley. For a few yuan, drivers are normally quite happy to have some passengers in the back. Rides of anything over 10 minutes quickly become seriously uncomfortable unless on a tarmac road.

TOURS

Most travellers to Tibet hire a Land Cruiser, with a driver and often a guide, to effectively arrange their own do-it-yourself tour within Tibet. For detailed information on 'do-it-yourself' tours, see p343 and above.

If you want a fully organised tour into and around Tibet, an internet search will trawl up hundreds of companies offering upper-end package tours. Travellers have recommended **Shangrila Tours** (www.shangrilatours.com), **Shigatse Travels** (www.shigatsetravels.com), **Visit Tibet Travel and Tours** (www.visittibet.com) and Nepali-based **Roger Pfister** (www.snowjewel.com), the latter for trips to Mt Kailash.

Health

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Tibet poses particular risks to your health, although for the large part these are associated with the high average altitude of the plateau.

There is no need to be overly worried; very few travellers are adversely affected by the altitude for very long, and greater risks are present in the form of road accidents and dog bites. Insect-borne and infectious diseases are quite rare because of the high altitude.

Sensible travellers will rely on their own medical knowledge and supplies when travelling throughout Tibet. It is a very isolated place, and outside the city of Lhasa there is not much in the way of expert medical care available.

BEFORE YOU GO

Make sure you're healthy before you start travelling. If you are going on a long trip, make sure your teeth are OK. If you wear glasses, take a spare pair and your prescription.

If you require a particular medication take a good supply, as it may not be available in Tibet. Take along part of the packaging showing the generic name rather than the brand to make getting replacements easier. To avoid problems, it's a good idea to have a legible prescription or letter from your doctor to show that you legally use the medication.

INSURANCE

Keep in mind that Tibet is a remote location, and if you become seriously injured or very sick, you may need to be evacuated by air. Under these circumstances, you don't want to be without adequate health insurance. Be sure your policy covers evacuation.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

China doesn't officially require any immunisations for entry into the country; however, the further off the beaten track you go, the more necessary it is to take all precautions. The World Health Organization (WHO) requires travellers who have come from an area infected with yellow fever to be vaccinated before entering the country. Record all vaccinations on an International Health Certificate, available from a doctor or government health department.

Plan well ahead and schedule your vaccinations because some require more than one injection, while others should not be given together. Note that some vaccinations should not be given during pregnancy or to people with allergies.

It is recommended that you seek medical advice at least eight weeks before travel. Note that there is a greater risk of all kinds of disease with children and during pregnancy.

Discuss your requirements with your doctor, but vaccinations you should consider for this trip include the following:

Diphtheria & Tetanus Vaccinations for these two diseases are usually combined and are recommended for everyone. After an initial course of three injections (usually given in childhood), boosters are necessary every 10 years. **Hepatitis A** The vaccine for Hepatitis A (eg Avaxim, Havrix 1440 or VAQTA) provides long-term immunity (at least 20 years) after an initial injection and a booster at six to 12 months. Hepatitis A vaccine is also available in a combined form, Twinrix, with hepatitis B vaccine. Three injections over a six-month period are required, the first two providing substantial protection against hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B China (although not so much Tibet) is one of the world's great reservoirs of hepatitis B infection, a disease spread by contact with blood or by sexual activity. Vaccination involves three injections, the quickest course being over three weeks with a booster at 12 months.

Polio This serious, easily transmitted disease is still prevalent in many developing countries, including Tibet's

neighbouring countries, India, Pakistan and Nepal. Everyone should keep up-to-date with this vaccination, which is normally given in childhood. One adult booster is then needed (as long as the full childhood course was completed), particularly if travelling to a country with recent polio activity. This should be discussed with your doctor.

Rabies China has a significant problem with rabies, which is worsening. Rabies is now the most common infectious disease cause of death in China. Only India reports more human cases annually. The vaccination is strongly recommended for those spending more than a month in Tibet, especially if you are cycling, handling animals, caving or travelling in remote areas, and for children. Pretravel vaccination means you do not need to receive Rabies Immuno Globulin (RIG) after a bite. RIG is very unlikely to be available in Tibet, and there is such a worldwide shortage that for the first time the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu reports that it cannot source any (at the time of writing). If you are pre-vaccinated and then bitten, you need only get two further shots of vaccine, as soon as possible, three days apart. If not pre-vaccinated, you require RIG plus five shots of vaccine over the course of 28 days. Thus the management of any bite or scratch is greatly simplified if you have been vaccinated. Current expert opinion is that the full series of vaccination does not require any boosters unless a bite occurs.

Tuberculosis The risk of tuberculosis (TB) to travellers is usually very low, unless you'll be living with or closely associated with local people in high-risk areas. As most healthy adults don't develop symptoms, a skin test before and after travel to determine whether exposure has occurred may be considered. Recommendations for BCG vaccination vary considerably around the world. Discuss with your doctor if you feel you may be at risk. It is strongly recommended for children under five who are spending more than three months in a high-risk area.

Typhoid This is an important vaccination to have for Tibet, where hygiene standards are low. It is available either as an injection or oral capsules. A combined hepatitis A-typhoid vaccine was launched recently but its availability is still limited. Check with your doctor to find out its status in your country.

Yellow Fever This disease is not endemic in China or Tibet and a vaccine is only required if you are coming from an infected area. These areas are limited to parts of South America and Africa.

Measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) All travellers should ensure they are immune to these diseases, either through infection or vaccination. Most people born before 1966 will be immune, those born after this date should have received two MMR vaccines in their lifetime.

Chickenpox (Varicella) Discuss this vaccine with your doctor if you have not had chickenpox.

Influenza The flu vaccine is recommended for anyone with chronic diseases, such as diabetes, lung or heart

disease. Tibet has a high rate of respiratory illness, so all travellers should consider vaccination.

Pneumonia A vaccine is recommended for anyone over 65 or those over 55 with certain medical conditions.

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Following is a list of items you should consider including in your medical kit for travelling – consult your pharmacist for brands available in your country.

- Antibiotics – useful for everyone travelling to Tibet to avoid risks of receiving poorly stored local medications; see your doctor, as antibiotics must be prescribed, and carry the prescription with you
- Antifungal cream or powder – for fungal skin infections and thrush
- Antihistamine – for allergies, eg hay fever; to ease the itch from insect bites or stings; and to prevent motion sickness
- Antiseptic (such as povidone-iodine) – for cuts and grazes
- Bandages, Band-Aids (plasters) and other wound dressings
- Calamine lotion, sting-relief spray or aloe vera – to ease irritation from sunburn and insect bites or stings
- Cold and flu tablets, throat lozenges and nasal decongestant
- Homeopathic medicines – useful homeopathic medicines include gentiana for altitude sickness, echinacea for warding off infections, and tea-tree oil for cuts and scrapes
- Insect repellent, sunscreen, lip balm and eye drops
- Loperamide or diphenoxylate – 'blockers' for diarrhoea
- Multivitamins – for long trips, when dietary vitamin intake may be inadequate
- Paracetamol (acetaminophen in the USA) – for pain or fever
- Prochlorperazine or metaclopramide – for nausea and vomiting
- Rehydration mixture – to prevent dehydration, which may occur, for example, during bouts of diarrhoea; particularly important when travelling with children
- Scissors, tweezers and a thermometer – note that mercury thermometers are prohibited by airlines
- Sterile kit – in case you need injections in a country with medical hygiene problems; discuss with your doctor
- Water purification tablets or iodine

INTERNET RESOURCES

There are a number of excellent travel-health sites on the internet. From the Lonely Planet website (www.lonelyplanet.com) there are links to the WHO and the US Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel – Asia & India* is a handy pocket size and packed with useful information, including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information, and what to do if you get sick on the road. *Travel with Children* from Lonely Planet also includes advice on travel health for younger children.

Other detailed health guides that you may find useful:

Complete Guide to Healthy Travel provides recommendations for international travel from the US Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

Medicine For Mountaineering by James Wilkerson is still the classic text for trekking first aid and medical advice.

Pocket First Aid and Wilderness Medicine by Jim Duff and Peter Gormly is a great pocket-sized guide that's easily carried on a trek or climb.

Staying Healthy in Asia, Africa & Latin America by Dirk Schroeder is a detailed and well-organised guide.

The High Altitude Medicine Handbook by Andrew J Pollard and David R Murdoch is a small-format guide full of valuable information on prevention and emergency care.

Travellers' Health by Dr Richard Dawood is comprehensive, easy to read, authoritative and highly recommended, although it's rather large to lug around.

Where There Is No Doctor by David Werner is a very detailed guide intended for people going to work in a developing country.

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. Although most of these blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some of them may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain

and difficulty in breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids, and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

MOTION SICKNESS

Eating lightly before and during a trip will reduce the chances of motion sickness. If you are prone to motion sickness, try to find a place that minimises movement – near the wing on aircraft, near the centre on buses. Fresh air usually helps; reading and cigarette smoke don't.

Commercial preparations for motion sickness, which can cause drowsiness, have to be taken before the trip commences. Ginger (available in capsule form) and peppermint (including mint-flavoured sweets) are natural preventatives.

IN TIBET

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

Self-diagnosis and treatment can be risky, so you should always seek medical help where possible. Although we do give drug dosages in this section, they are for emergency use only. Correct diagnosis is vital.

Top-end hotels can usually recommend a good place to go for advice. Standards of medical attention are so low in most places in Tibet that for some ailments the best advice is to go straight to Lhasa, and in extreme cases get on a plane to Chengdu or Kathmandu.

Global Doctor Chengdu Clinic (☎ 8522 6058, 24hr emergency number 139-8225 6966; www.globaldoctor.com.au; Ground fl, Kelan Bldg, Bangkok Garden Apts, Section 4, 21 Renmin Nanlu) offers pre-Tibet medical examinations and a Tibet Travellers Assist Package that can be useful if you are worried about an existing medical condition. See the website for details. In Kathmandu, the **CIWEC Clinic Travel Medicine Center** (www.ciwec-clinic.com; Lazimpat) near the British embassy, has a lot of experience with altitude-related illnesses and is a good resource if on the way to or coming from Tibet. The website also offers useful medical advice.

Antibiotics should ideally only be administered under medical supervision; however, this may not always be possible. Ensure you have been given clear instructions by your prescribing doctor. Take only the recommended dose at the prescribed intervals and use the whole course, even if the illness seems to be cured before the medication is finished. Stop immediately if there are any serious reactions and don't use the antibiotic at all if you are unsure that you have the correct one. Some people are allergic to commonly prescribed antibiotics such as penicillin; carry this information (eg on a bracelet) when travelling.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)

Influenza A (H5N1) or 'Bird flu' is a subtype of the type A influenza virus. This virus typically infects birds and not humans. There have been some cases of bird-to-human transmission, although this does not easily occur. Very close contact with dead or sick birds is the currently principal source of infection.

Symptoms include high fever and typical influenza-like indicators, with rapid deterioration leading to respiratory failure and, in many cases, death. The early administration of antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu is recommended to improve the chances of survival. Immediate medical care should be sought if bird flu is suspected.

There is currently no vaccine available to prevent bird flu. For up-to-date information check these two websites:

- www.who.int/en/
- www.avianinfluenza.com.au

Hepatitis

A general term for inflammation of the liver, hepatitis is a common disease worldwide. There are several different viruses that cause hepatitis, and they differ in the way that they are transmitted. The symptoms are similar in all forms of the illness and include fever, chills, headache, fatigue, feelings of weakness and aches and pains, followed by loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, light-coloured faeces, jaundiced (yellow) skin and yellowing of the whites of the eyes. People who have had hepatitis should avoid alcohol for some time after the illness, as the liver needs quite a while to recover.

Hepatitis A is transmitted by contaminated food and drinking water. You should

seek medical advice if symptoms present, but there is not much you can do apart from resting, drinking lots of fluids, eating lightly and avoiding fatty foods.

Hepatitis A is most often spread in China and Tibet as a result of the custom of sharing food from a single dish rather than using separate plates and a serving spoon. It is wise to use the disposable chopsticks now freely available in most restaurants in Tibet, or else buy your own chopsticks and spoon. Hepatitis E is transmitted in the same way as hepatitis A; it can be particularly serious for pregnant women.

There are almost 300 million chronic carriers of hepatitis B in the world, and China has more cases than any other country; almost 20% of the population are believed to be carriers. It is spread through contact with infected blood, blood products or body fluids, for example through sexual contact, unsterilised needles and blood transfusions, or contact with blood via small breaks in the skin. Other risk situations include contaminated medical equipment or having a shave, tattoo or body piercing with contaminated tools. The symptoms of hepatitis B may be more severe than those for type A, and the disease can lead to long-term problems such as chronic liver damage, liver cancer or a long-term carrier state. Hepatitis C and D are spread in the same way as hepatitis B and can also lead to long-term complications.

There are vaccines against hepatitis A and B, but there are currently no vaccines against the other types. Following the basic rules about food and water (hepatitis A and E) and avoiding risk situations (hepatitis B, C and D) are important preventative measures.

HIV & AIDS

Infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) may lead to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), which is a fatal disease if untreated. Any exposure to blood, blood products or body fluids may put the individual at risk. The disease is often transmitted by sexual contact or dirty needles. Vaccination, acupuncture, tattooing and body piercing can be potentially as dangerous as intravenous drug use. HIV/AIDS can also be spread through infected blood transfusions; some developing countries cannot afford to screen blood used for transfusions.

HIV cases in Tibet are on the rise, and anyone who intends to work or study in Tibet for

longer than 12 months is required by the Chinese authorities to undergo an AIDS test.

If you do need an injection, ask to see the syringe unwrapped in front of you, or take a needle and syringe pack with you when travelling. Fear of HIV infection should never preclude treatment for serious medical conditions.

Rabies

This fatal viral infection is found in many countries. Many animals (such as dogs, cats, bats and monkeys) can be infected and it is their saliva that is infectious. Any bite, scratch or even lick from an animal should be cleaned immediately and thoroughly. Scrub gently with soap and running water, and then apply alcohol or iodine solution. Prompt medical help should be sought to receive a course of injections to prevent the onset of symptoms and save the patient from death.

At the time of writing, no treatment for rabies was available anywhere in Tibet. If you have any potential exposure to rabies, seek medical advice in Lhasa (or ideally Kathmandu or Chengdu) as soon as possible in order to receive post-exposure treatment. Even in these centres full treatment may not be available and you may need to travel to Bangkok or Hong Kong.

Respiratory Infections

Upper respiratory tract infections (like the common cold) are frequent ailments all over China, including Tibet. Why are they such a serious problem in China? Respiratory infections are aggravated by the high altitude, the cold weather, air pollution, chain smoking and overcrowded conditions, all of which increase the opportunity for infection. Another reason is that Chinese people tend to spit a lot, thereby spreading the disease.

Some of the symptoms of influenza include a sore throat, fever and weakness. Any upper-respiratory-tract infection, including influenza, can lead to complications such as bronchitis and pneumonia, which may need to be treated with antibiotics. Seek medical help in this situation.

The Chinese treat bronchitis, which can be a complication of flu, with a powder made from the gall bladder of snakes – a treatment of questionable value, but there is no harm in trying it.

No vaccine offers complete protection, but there are vaccines against influenza and

pneumococcal pneumonia that might help. The influenza vaccine is highly recommended for travellers to China and Tibet, and is good for up to one year.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

While HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B can be transmitted through sexual contact, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) include gonorrhoea, herpes and syphilis. Sores, blisters or rashes around the genitals and discharges or pain when urinating are common symptoms. In some STIs, such as wart virus or chlamydia, symptoms may be less prominent or go completely unobserved, especially in women. Syphilis symptoms eventually disappear but the disease continues and can cause severe problems in later years. Although abstinence from sexual contact is the only 100% effective prevention, using condoms is also effective in the prevention of some infections. Gonorrhoea and syphilis are treated with antibiotics. Different STIs each require specific antibiotics. There is no cure for herpes or AIDS.

Condoms are available in China – the word is *baotao* (保套), which translates literally as 'insurance glove'.

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

Simple things like a change of water, food or climate can all cause a mild bout of diarrhoea (*la duzi* – spicy stomach – in Chinese), but a few rushed toilet trips with no other symptoms are not indicative of a major problem. Even Marco Polo got the runs.

Dehydration is the main danger with any diarrhoea, particularly in children or the elderly as it can occur quite quickly. Under all circumstances, fluid replacement (at least equal to the volume being lost) is the most important thing to remember. Weak black tea with a little sugar, soda water, or soft drinks allowed to go flat and diluted 50% with clean water are all good. With moderate to severe diarrhoea a rehydrating solution is preferable to replace lost minerals and salts. Commercially available oral rehydration salts (ORS) are very useful; add them to boiled or bottled water. In an emergency you can make up a solution of six teaspoons of sugar and half a teaspoon of salt to a litre of boiled or bottled water. You need to drink at least the same volume of fluid that you are losing in bowel movements and vomiting. Urine is the best guide to the adequacy of replacement –

if you have small amounts of concentrated urine, you need to drink more. Keep drinking small amounts often. Stick to a bland diet as you recover.

Loperamide or diphenoxylate can be used to bring relief from the symptoms, although they do not actually cure the problem. However, neither is available in China. A good Chinese alternative treatment is berberine hydrochloride (*huang lian su*; 黄连素). Only use these drugs if you do not have access to toilets, eg if you *must* travel. These drugs are not recommended for children under 12 years. Do not use these drugs if you have a high fever, are severely dehydrated or have blood in the bowel motions.

In certain situations antibiotics may be required: diarrhoea with blood or mucus (dysentery), any diarrhoea with fever, profuse watery diarrhoea, persistent diarrhoea not improving after 24 hours and severe diarrhoea. These suggest a more serious cause, in which case gut-paralysing drugs should be avoided without seeking medical advice.

In these situations, a stool test may be necessary to diagnose what bug is causing your diarrhoea, so you should seek medical help urgently. Where this is not possible the recommended drugs for bacterial diarrhoea (the most likely cause of severe diarrhoea in travellers) are norfloxacin 400mg twice daily for three days or ciprofloxacin 500mg twice daily for three days. These are not recommended for children or pregnant women. There can be resistance to these medications for some of the bacterial causes of diarrhoea; in those cases, azithromycin, 500mg once a day, is recommended. This is also the drug of choice for children with dosage dependent on weight. A three-day course is given. Azithromycin may be considered under medical supervision in pregnancy. There is a new oral cholera vaccine that offers some protection against travellers diarrhoea, but only about 20% for three months. It may be suggested if you are at high risk of complications from diarrhoea.

Two other causes of persistent diarrhoea in travellers are giardiasis and amoebic dysentery.

Amoebic Dysentery

Caused by the protozoan *Entamoeba histolytica*, amoebic dysentery is characterised by a gradual onset of low-grade diarrhoea, often with blood and mucus. Cramping abdominal pain and vomiting are less likely than in

other types of diarrhoea, and fever may not be present. It will persist until treated and can recur and cause other health problems.

You should seek medical advice if you think you have giardiasis or amoebic dysentery, but where this is not possible, tinidazole or metronidazole are the recommended drugs. The better option of the two is tinidazole, which is not easily obtained in Tibet. If you are going to be travelling in high mountain areas, it might be a good idea to keep your own stock with you.

Cholera

This is the worst of the watery diarrhoeas. Outbreaks of cholera are generally widely reported, so you can avoid problem areas. Fluid replacement is the most vital treatment: the risk of dehydration is severe, as you may lose up to 20L a day. If there is a delay in getting to hospital, begin taking Doxycycline. This may help shorten the illness, but adequate fluids are required to save lives. Seek medical advice if you think you may have this disease.

Giardiasis

Known as giardia, giardiasis is a type of diarrhoea that is relatively common in Tibet and is caused by a parasite, *Giardia lamblia*. Mountaineers often suffer from this problem. The parasite causing this intestinal disorder is present in contaminated water. Many kinds of mammals harbour the parasite, so you can easily get it from drinking 'pure mountain water' unless the area is devoid of animals. Simply brushing your teeth using contaminated water is sufficient to get giardiasis, or any other gut bug. Symptoms include stomach cramps, nausea, a bloated stomach, watery, foul-smelling diarrhoea and frequent gas. Giardiasis can appear several weeks after you have been exposed to the parasite. The symptoms may disappear for a few days and then return; this can go on for several weeks. Treatment is with tinidazole, 2g in a single dose for one to two days.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS Acute Mountain Sickness

Acute mountain sickness (AMS, also known as altitude sickness) is common at high elevations; relevant factors are the rate of ascent and individual susceptibility. The former is the major risk factor. On average, one tourist

a year dies in Tibet from AMS. Make sure that it is not you. Any traveller who flies or buses into Lhasa, where the elevation is just over 3600m, is likely to experience some symptoms of AMS. Take care to acclimatise slowly and take things easy for the first couple of days. Lack of oxygen at high altitudes (over 2500m) affects most people to some extent. The effect may be mild or severe and it occurs because less oxygen reaches the muscles and the brain at high altitude, requiring the heart and lungs to compensate by working harder.

AMS is a notoriously fickle affliction and can also affect trekkers and walkers accustomed to walking at high altitudes. It has been fatal at 3000m, although 3500m to 4500m is the usual range.

ACCLIMATISATION

AMS is linked to low atmospheric pressure. Those who travel up to Everest Base Camp, for instance, reach an altitude where atmospheric pressure is about half of that at sea level.

With an increase in altitude, the human body needs time to develop physiological mechanisms to cope with the decreased oxygen. This process of acclimatisation is still not fully understood, but is known to involve modifications in breathing patterns and heart rate induced by the autonomic nervous system, and an increase in the blood's oxygen-carrying capabilities. These compensatory mechanisms usually take about one to three days to develop at a particular altitude. You are unlikely to get AMS once you are acclimatised to a given height, but you can still get ill when you travel higher. If the ascent is too high and too fast, these compensatory reactions may not kick into gear fast enough.

SYMPTOMS

Mild symptoms of AMS are very common in travellers visiting high altitudes, and usually develop during the first 24 hours at altitude. Most visitors to Tibet will suffer from some symptoms; these will generally disappear through acclimatisation in several hours to several days.

Symptoms tend to be worse at night and include headache, dizziness, lethargy, loss of appetite, nausea, breathlessness and irritability. Difficulty sleeping is another common symptom, and many travellers have trouble for the first few days after arriving in Lhasa.

AMS may become more serious without warning and can be fatal. Symptoms are caused by the accumulation of fluid in the lungs and brain, and include breathlessness at rest, a dry irritative cough (which may progress to the production of pink, frothy sputum), severe headache, lack of coordination (typically leading to a 'drunken walk'), confusion, irrational behaviour, vomiting and eventually unconsciousness.

The symptoms of AMS, however mild, are a warning; be sure to take them seriously! Trekkers should keep an eye on each other as those experiencing symptoms, especially severe symptoms, may not be in a position to recognise them. One thing to note is that while the symptoms of mild AMS often precede those of severe AMS, this is not always the case. Severe AMS can strike with little or no warning.

PREVENTION

If you are driving up from Kathmandu, you will experience rapid altitude gain. An itinerary that takes you straight up to Everest Base Camp is unwise; plan to see it on your way back if possible. The best way to prevent AMS is to avoid rapid ascents to high altitudes. If you fly or bus into Lhasa, take it easy for at least three days; this is enough for most travellers to get over any initial ill-effects. At this point you might step up your programme by visiting a few sights around town. Within a week you should be ready for something a bit more adventurous, but do not push yourself to do anything that you are not comfortable with.

To prevent acute mountain sickness:

- Ascend slowly. Have frequent rest days, spending two to three nights at each rise of 1000m. If you reach a high altitude by trekking, acclimatisation takes place gradually and you are less likely to be affected than if you fly directly to high altitude.
- Trekkers should bear in mind the climber's adage of 'climb high, sleep low'. It is always wise to sleep at a lower altitude than the greatest height that's reached during the day. High day climbs followed by a descent back to lower altitudes for the night are very good preparation for high-altitude trekking. Also, once above 3000m, care should be taken not to increase the sleeping altitude by more than

400m per day. If the terrain won't allow for less than 400m of elevation gain, be ready to take an extra day off before tackling the climb.

- Drink extra fluids. Tibet's mountain air is cold and dry, and moisture is lost as you breathe. Evaporation of sweat may occur unnoticed and result in dehydration.
- Eat light, high-carbohydrate meals to keep up energy.
- Avoid alcohol as it may increase the risk of dehydration, and don't smoke.
- Avoid sedatives.
- When trekking, take a day off to rest and acclimatise if feeling overtired. If you or anyone else in your party is having a tough time, make allowances for unscheduled stops.
- Don't push yourself when climbing up to passes; rather, take plenty of breaks. You can usually get over the pass as easily tomorrow as you can today. Try to plan your itinerary so that long ascents can be divided into two or more days. Given the complexity and unknown variables involved with AMS and acclimatisation, trekkers should always err on the side of caution and ascend mountains slowly.

TREATMENT

Treat mild symptoms by resting at the same altitude until recovery, usually a day or two. Take paracetamol or acetaminophen for headaches. If symptoms persist or become worse, however, *immediate* descent is necessary. Even 500m can help.

The most effective treatment for severe AMS is to get down to a lower altitude as quickly as possible. In less severe cases the victim will be able to stagger down with some support; in other cases they may need to be carried down. Whatever the case, any delay could be fatal.

AMS victims may need to be flown out of Tibet as quickly as possible, so make sure you have adequate travel insurance.

The drug acetazolamide (Diamox) is recommended for the prevention of AMS – take 125mg twice a day as a preventive dose. Be aware that even when you are on Diamox, you should not ignore any symptoms of AMS.

However, the use of Diamox is controversial. It can reduce the symptoms, but may also mask warning signs; severe and fatal AMS has

occurred in people taking this drug. Travellers should discuss the use of Diamox with a travel health expert. Diamox should be avoided in those with a sulphur allergy, but you can discuss taking a trial of the medication at home if necessary.

Drug treatments should never be used to avoid descent or to enable further ascent (although they can help get people well enough to descend).

Several hotels in Lhasa sell a Tibetan herbal medicine recommended by locals for easing the symptoms of mild altitude sickness. The medicine is known as *solomano* in Tibetan and *hongjingtian* (红景天) in Chinese, though locals also recommend *gaoyuanning* (高原宁) and *gaoyuankang* (高原康). A box of vials costs around Y20 to Y35; take three vials a day.

Cuts, Bites & Stings

CUTS & SCRATCHES

Wash any cut well and treat it with an antiseptic such as povidone-iodine.

BEDBUGS & LICE

Bedbugs live in various places, but particularly in dirty mattresses and bedding, evidenced by spots of blood on bedclothes or on the wall. Bedbugs leave itchy bites in neat rows. Calamine lotion or a sting-relief spray may help.

All lice cause itching and discomfort. They make themselves at home in your hair (head lice), in your clothing (body lice) or in your pubic hair (crabs). You catch lice through direct contact with infected people or by sharing combs, clothing and the like. Powder or shampoo treatment will kill the lice. Infected clothing should then be washed in very hot, soapy water and left in the sun to dry.

LEECHES

In the damper, low-lying areas of eastern Tibet, leeches may be present. They attach themselves to your skin to suck your blood.

Trekkers often get them on their legs or in their boots. Salt or a lighted cigarette end will make them fall off; however, the shock may cause the leech to regurgitate its stomach contents into the bite. This may lead to infection or just make the wound more difficult to heal quickly. Do not pull them off, as the bite is then more likely to become infected. It's often best to let them fall off naturally. Clean and apply pressure if the point of attachment

is bleeding. An insect repellent may help keep them away.

Food

There is an old colonial adage: 'If you can cook it, boil it or peel it you can eat it...otherwise forget it.' Vegetables and fruit should be washed with purified or bottled water or peeled where possible. Beware of ice cream that is sold in the street or anywhere it might have been melted and refrozen; if there's any doubt (eg a power cut in the last day or two) steer well clear. Undercooked meat should be avoided.

If a place looks clean and well run, and the vendor also looks clean and healthy, then the food is probably safe. In general, places that are packed with travellers or locals will be fine, while empty restaurants are questionable. Chinese food in particular is cooked over a high heat, which kills most germs.

Frostbite

This is the freezing of extremities, including fingers, toes and nose. Signs and symptoms of frostbite include a whitish or waxy cast to the skin, or even crystals on the surface, plus itching, numbness and pain. Warm the affected areas by immersing them in warm (not hot) water or with blankets or clothes, only until the skin becomes flushed. Note: frostbitten areas should only be rewarmed if there is not a likelihood they can be frostbitten again prior to reaching medical care. Frostbitten parts should not be rubbed. Pain and swelling are inevitable. Blisters should not be broken. Get medical attention right away.

Heat Exhaustion

Dehydration and salt deficiency can cause heat exhaustion. Take time to acclimatise to high temperatures, be sure to drink sufficient liquids and do not do anything too physically demanding.

Salt deficiency is characterised by fatigue, lethargy, headaches, giddiness and muscle cramps; salt tablets may help, but adding extra salt to your food is better.

Hypothermia

Tibet's cold climate must be treated with respect. Subfreezing temperatures mean there is a risk of hypothermia, even during the summer season. Even in midsummer, passes and high areas around northern Tibet and the

Changtang can be hit without warning by sudden snow storms. Exposed plains and ridges are prone to extremely high winds and this significantly adds to the cold. For example, on a 5000m pass in central Tibet in July, the absolute minimum temperature is roughly -4°C, but regularly occurring 70km/h winds plunge the wind-chill factor or apparent temperature to -20°C.

The message is that you should always be prepared for cold, wet or windy conditions, especially if you're out walking, hitching or trekking at high altitudes or even taking a long bus trip over mountains (particularly at night).

Hypothermia occurs when the body loses heat faster than it can produce it and the core temperature of the body falls. It is surprisingly easy to progress from very cold to dangerously cold through a combination of wind, wet clothing, fatigue and hunger, even if the air temperature is above freezing.

It is best to dress in layers. Silk, wool and some of the new artificial fibres are all good insulating materials. A hat is important, as a lot of heat is lost through the head. A strong, waterproof outer layer and a 'space' blanket for emergencies are essential. Carry basic supplies, including food that contains simple sugars to generate heat quickly and fluid to drink.

Symptoms of hypothermia are exhaustion, numb skin (particularly toes and fingers), shivering, slurred speech, irrational or violent behaviour, lethargy, stumbling, dizzy spells, muscle cramps and violent bursts of energy. Irrationality may take the form of sufferers claiming they are warm and trying to take off their clothes.

To treat mild hypothermia, first get the person out of the wind and rain, remove their clothing if it's wet and replace it with dry, warm clothing. Give them hot liquids (not alcohol) and some high-energy, easily digestible food. Do not rub victims; instead, allow them to slowly warm themselves. This should be enough to treat the early stages of hypothermia. The early recognition and treatment of mild hypothermia is the only way to prevent severe hypothermia, which is a critical condition.

Sunburn

It's very easy to get sunburnt in Tibet's high altitudes, especially if you're trekking. Sun-

burn is more than just being uncomfortable. Among the undesirable effects (apart from the immediate pain and agony) are premature skin ageing and possible skin cancer in later years. Wear sunglasses, loose-fitting clothes that cover your arms, legs and neck, and a wide-brimmed hat like the ones Tibetans wear. Calamine lotion is good for treating mild sunburn.

Choose sunscreen with a high sun protection factor (SPF). Those with fair complexions should bring reflective sunscreen (containing zinc oxide or titanium oxide) with them. Apply the sunscreen to your nose and lips (and especially the tops of your ears if you are not wearing a hat).

Water

The number-one rule is be careful of the water, especially ice. If you don't know for certain that the water is safe, assume the worst. In urban centres Tibetans, like the Chinese, boil their drinking water making it safe to drink hot or cooled. In the country and while trekking you should boil your own water or treat it with water-purification tablets, as livestock contaminate many of the water sources. Milk should be treated with suspicion as it will be unpasteurised in the countryside, although boiled milk is fine if it is kept hygienically. Soft drinks and beer are always available wherever there is a shop, and these are always safe to drink, as is tea. Locally brewed beer, *chang*, is another matter. It is often made with contaminated well water and there is always some risk in drinking it.

WATER PURIFICATION

The simplest way to purify water is to boil it thoroughly. At Tibet's high altitude water boils at a lower temperature and germs are less likely to be killed, so make sure you boil water for at least 10 minutes.

Consider purchasing a water filter for a long trip. There are two main kinds of filters. Total filters take out all parasites, bacteria and viruses, and make water safe to drink. They are often expensive, but can be more cost-effective than buying bottled water. Simple filters (which can even be a nylon mesh bag) take out dirt and larger foreign bodies from the water so that chemical solutions work much more effectively; if water is dirty, chemical solutions may not work at all. It's very important when buying a filter to read the

specifications, so that you know exactly what it removes from the water and what it doesn't. Simple filtering will not remove all dangerous organisms, so if you cannot boil water it should be treated chemically.

Chlorine tablets (eg Puritabs or Steritabs) will kill many pathogens, but not giardia and amoebic cysts. Iodine is more effective for purifying water and is available in tablet form (eg Potable Aqua). Follow the directions carefully and remember that too much iodine can be harmful.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Pregnancy

It is not advisable to travel to some places while pregnant as some vaccinations normally used to prevent serious diseases (eg yellow fever) are not advisable during pregnancy. In addition, some diseases are much more serious for the mother (and may increase the risk of a stillborn child) in pregnancy.

Most miscarriages occur during the first three months of pregnancy. Miscarriage is not uncommon and can occasionally lead to severe bleeding. The last three months should also be spent within reasonable distance of good medical care. A baby born as early as 24 weeks stands a chance of survival, but only in a good modern hospital. Pregnant women should avoid all unnecessary medication, although vaccinations should still be taken where needed. Additional care should be taken to prevent illness and particular attention should be paid to diet and nutrition. Alcohol and nicotine, for example, should be avoided.

TIBETAN MEDICINE

The basic teachings of Tibetan medicine share much with those of other Asian medical traditions, which, according to some scholars, made their way to the East via India from ancient Greece. While the Western medical tradition treats symptoms that indicate a known medical condition (measles or mumps, for example), the Eastern medical tradition looks at symptoms as indications of an imbalance in the body and seeks to restore that balance.

It is not correct to assume, however, that Tibetan medicine was practised by trained doctors in clinics scattered across the land. The Tibetan medical tradition is largely textual. It derives from Indian sources and was studied in some monasteries in much

the same way that Buddhist scriptures were studied. When Tibetans needed medical help they usually went to a local 'apothecary' who sold concoctions of herbs; equally, help was sought in prayers and good-luck charms.

The theory of Tibetan medicine is based on an extremely complex system of checks and balances between what can be broadly described as three 'humours' (related to state of mind), seven 'bodily sustainers' (related to the digestive tract) and three 'eliminators' (related to the elimination of bodily wastes). And if the relationship between bodily functions and the three humours of desire, egoism and ignorance were not complex enough, there is the influence of harmful spirits to consider. There are 360 harmful female influences, 360 harmful male influences, 360 malevolent *naga* (water spirits) influences and finally 360 influences stemming from past karma. All these combine to produce 404 basic disorders and 84,000 illnesses!

How does a Tibetan doctor assess the condition of a patient? The most important skill is pulse diagnosis. A Tibetan doctor is attuned to 360 'subtle channels' of energy that run through the body's skin and mus-

cle, internal organs and bone and marrow. The condition of these channels can be ascertained through six of the doctor's fingers (the first three fingers of each hand). Tibetan medicine also relies on urine analysis as an important diagnostic tool.

If Tibetan diagnostic theory is mainly Indian in influence, the treatment owes as much to Chinese medicine as to Indian practices. Herbal concoctions, moxibustion and acupuncture are all used to restore balance to the body. Surgery was practised in the early days of Tibetan medicine, but was outlawed in the 9th century when a king's mother died during an operation.

Yuthok Yongten Gonpo (1182-1251), the physician of King Trisong Detsen, who was born near Ralung Monastery, is credited as the founder of the Tibetan medical system. For more on Tibetan medicine see the website www.tibetan-medicine.org.

If you get sick, you can get a diagnosis from Lhasa's **Mentsikhang** (Traditional Tibetan Hospital; Map p100; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-6pm) opposite the Barkhor. Two English-speaking doctors attend to foreigners on the 3rd floor.