



MONKS DEBATING AT SERA MONASTERY

# Potala and Pandas

*Maeve Macrory, one of Audley's China's experts, recently returned from a trip to western China and Tibet.*

The Tibetan Plateau – a vast area encompassing not just the Chinese Tibetan Autonomous Region but also large parts of Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan provinces – is one of the world's most beautiful and fascinating destinations while remaining well off the beaten track for the average traveller. The area boasts fabulous scenery, colourful minorities and remnants of a timeless spirituality that characterises Tibet, but travel here has been hindered in the past by poor infrastructure. However in recent years the Chinese government has been investing heavily in all these regions as part of the “Go West” project, and as a result the whole of the Tibetan Plateau is opening up as a viable destination. (For those who are ambivalent about travel to Tibet for political reasons, it is well worth noting that ethnic Tibetans also welcome foreign visitors and that greater openness to the outside world can only be a good thing for the people here.)

As part of a plan to raise the profile of its new air route into Tibet, Air China invited me on a visit to the Tibetan area. Our trip began in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province on the edge of the Heng Shan mountain range, which rises to the Tibetan plateau. Chengdu is a pleasant city to visit, with a relaxed

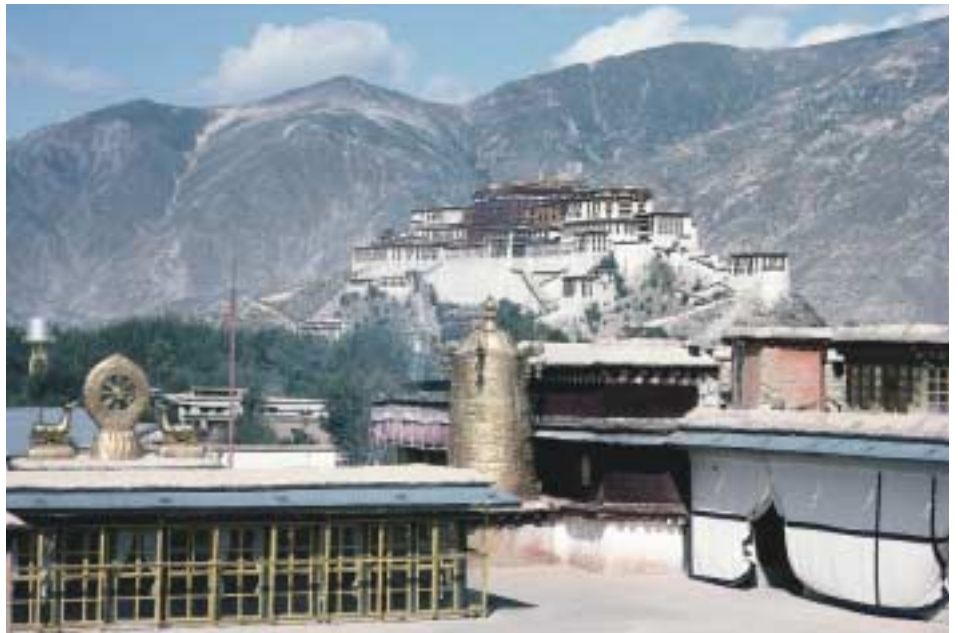


atmosphere, tea houses galore and the nearby Buddhist sites Emei Shan and Leshan. But the main focus of a trip here is to see the giant panda. Three hours out of Chengdu in a dramatic mountain setting is the Wolong Panda Reserve. The panda population have wide areas to roam free and the complex also has a nursery and a kindergarten. While most of the pandas here are bred in captivity, the reserve also takes in and nurses injured pandas which are then released back into the wild. Seeing such a potent symbol of China as the panda in a much more natural setting than the usual zoo was a wonderful experience and highly recommended.

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After a few days in relaxed Chengdu, it was on to the mysterious land of Tibet. Lhasa is the main focus for pilgrims and tourists alike, boasting the superb Potala Palace, home of the Dalai Lamas, which dominates the skyline. The Jokhang temple, at the edge of the old town, is Lhasa's most important temple and a fantastic place to soak up the atmosphere. Another must is Sera monastery, famous for the stylised debating of its monks. In fact the plethora of must-see sights in this fantastic city can leave many visitors feeling "temped out" in quite a short time. In order to avoid being overwhelmed the best advice is to take it slowly and build in plenty of time to simply wander and soak up the atmosphere, or get out into the countryside and do some walking in the spectacular scenery. The Drepung and Ganden monasteries are both good options for trips out of Tibet, as they are important monasteries which offer good opportunities for walking in the surrounding areas.

After the hurly burly of Lhasa, a trip to Tsetang can feel like a relaxing opportunity to visit a simpler Tibet. Tsetang was originally Tibet's capital but now it is largely out of the way of the main tourist trail. There are two main sights here, the first of which - the Yambulagang - was the seat of the first 32 kings of Tibet until the capital was moved to Lhasa, and is now a



POTALA PALACE



A GIANT PANDA AT THE WOLONG RESERVE

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monastery. Perched high on a rocky promontory the setting is spectacular and the tough walk up is worth it for the views. The other main attraction in Tsetang, and the highlight of my entire trip, is the Samye Monastery, Tibet's first Buddhist monastery. On this visit my group were the only foreigners here, and we revelled in the chance to mix properly with the friendly locals and pilgrims. The simple spirituality of this place was perhaps the closest we got

on this trip to finding the elusive essence of Tibet.

Sadly Lhasa and Tsetang were all we had time for on this trip to Tibet, and I regretted not having the chance to continue on to Gyantse, Shigatse and even undertake the fantastic overland journey into Nepal. But this is a place that gets under your skin and I'm sure it won't be too long before I'm back for another and longer visit.

### *Travel File*

The region can be visited as a complete tour or can be added on to a tour of China's best known sights. A 14-night tour of the region visiting the sites mentioned by Maeve would cost from £2,495 per person. For further details please call Maeve, Tom or Isabel on 01869 276 217.