



## The Hidden Monasteries of Tibet

19 day itinerary

*Kathmandu - Lhasa - Drigung Til Monastery  
Tidrum Nunnery- Reting Monastery - Lake Namtso  
Gyangtse - Shigatse - Kathmandu*

### Travel dates

Starts: Kathmandu - Saturday 3 September 2011  
Ends: Kathmandu - Wednesday 21st September 2011

### INTRODUCTION

For many centuries Tibet remained for westerners a mysterious and forbidden land cut off from the rest of the world by the mighty Himalayas in the south and the Kunlun Mountains to the north. Only a handful of brave and resourceful travellers ever managed to breach the country's snowy mountain fastness and reach its fabled capital Lhasa. Those that did returned with stories of an exotic and intriguing land of monastic cities and mountain passes, where nomads grazed huge herds of yaks, hermit monks spent years in meditation and pilgrims prostrated themselves over vast distances to achieve their religious goals. In recent years there have been many changes to the Tibetan world but its staggeringly rich, and easily misunderstood, culture remains resilient and continues to fire the imagination of the Western mind. Moreover Tibet is no longer the inaccessible land that it once was, and although travel there is by no means always comfortable, with all its rewards, it is well within the grasp of today's adventurous traveller.

This fascinating journey takes in all the most important sites in Tibet as well as going off-the-beaten-track for a glimpse into a magical Tibet of bygone days. After an unforgettable mountain flight across the Roof of the World we have ample time to explore the sights of Lhasa before setting off in search of the remote hot springs and hidden monasteries that lie in the beautiful countryside to the north of the capital. We then spend time amidst nomads and pilgrims on the shores of the vast and magical Lake Namtso. After more time to explore Lhasa we set off on one of the most incredible overland journeys in the world travelling south through the heart of the mighty Himalayas. With time to explore the important towns of Gyantse and Shigatse en route we then travel, in the shadow of Mount Everest, over majestic mountain passes back to the bustle of Kathmandu.



The Oriental Caravan



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## ITINERARY

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

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

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

**Day 4 Lhasa (3650m)** An early start, as today we travel to the airport and take a spectacular 1.5 hour flight over the Himalayas to Tibet. In clear weather there are amazing aerial views of Mts Everest, Shishipangma, Makalu and Kangchenjunga. After our arrival at Gongar Airport we continue to Lhasa (3,590m). As we approach the city, just as Colonel Younghusband, Heinrich Harrer and other early travellers did, we catch our first glimpse of the stately and surreal structure of the Potala Palace looming majestically over the Lhasa Valley and what is now a large modern Chinese city. By late afternoon, we will have established a base for the next 3 nights at our centrally located hotel in the Tibetan area of town. *Overnight – hotel*

**Days 5 - 6 Lhasa** We have two full days to explore this fascinating and dynamic city. For Tibetans all roads lead to the Jokhang Temple – the Vatican of Tibetan Buddhism. Inside, wildly garbed pilgrims from all over Tibet shuffle slowly through a maze of candlelit temples to the musical drone of softly chanting monks. The temple houses, among its many other treasures, the Jowo Rinpoche, the most revered image in Tibet. Some of the temple's carved wooden pillars, blackened and preserved by centuries of juniper smoke, date back over 1,400 years. The Barkhor, the pilgrim route that goes around the temple, is a great place to wander, shop and meet locals – each circuit is meant to bring religious merit to the circumambulator. Across town is the Potala Palace, the winter home of the conspicuously absent HH the Dalai Lama. Once one of the world's tallest buildings – until the early 20th century – the Potala is a town in itself, and historically served both political and religious functions. As well as several lavishly adorned chapels which still contain some priceless artefacts and antiquities, the rooms that are of particular interest are the former living quarters of the current Dalai Lama and the awe-inspiring tombs of several of his predecessors. From the rooftop it is possible to see far across the valley and observe the extent to which Lhasa has expanded over recent years. The Norbulingka, or Summer Palace, is slightly further to the west, and it is from here that the Dalai Lama began his journey into exile in 1959. On the outskirts of Lhasa are the great monasteries (once monastic cities) of Sera and Drepung, both strongholds of the *Gelugpa* (yellow hat) sect founded by Tsongkhapa. Near to Drepung is the Nechung Temple, home to the state Oracle. Time-permitting we will visit one or both of these monasteries, allowing also some free time for individual exploration of the city. There are bicycles for hire just a few minutes from our hotel, and many other places to explore including lesser-known temples and street markets. Anyone with an interest in alternative medicine may like to include a visit to the Tibetan Medical College. *Overnight – hotel*

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## ITINERARY *continued*

**Day 7 Drigung Til (4150m)** Leaving the city far behind, we head east on a journey of approximately 115km that takes us along the banks of the Kyi Chu (Laughing) river through small villages where the barley harvest is being taken in and past once mighty, but now ruined, Tibetan fortresses. Our destination is Drigung Til but en route we will visit Ganden Monastery, once the largest in Tibet. This Gelukpa (Yellow Hat) lamasery was founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the great Tsongkhapa. Today the number of monks is relatively small but in days gone by this monastic city was home to a population of over 5,000. In recent years, there has been substantial rebuilding after the entire complex was reduced to rubble during the Cultural Revolution. After visiting the main temples it is possible to complete a fascinating one hour clockwise hike (*kora*) around the monastery. Ganden occupies a breathtaking location overlooking the Kyi Chu valley, and at an elevation of 4,500m an excursion to Ganden is an excellent way to help acclimatise for our journey ahead. Descending from Ganden our next stop is Katsel Monastery where we pause briefly to view what is considered to be one of the ogress-subduing temples. Monasteries were built in significant places to pin down the wriggling subterranean ogress who was blamed for occasional earthquakes that hit the region. This temple is considered to be fixing down her right shoulder. Beyond Katsel we leave the main road and before too long arrive at our destination, perched on a high, steep ridge, the relatively well-preserved Drigung Til Monastery.

*Overnight – guesthouse*

**Day 8 Tidrum Nunnery (4320m)** This morning we will further explore Drigung Til perhaps first visiting the Tsogchen, the monastery's impressive main assembly hall. The main figure here is the monastery's founder Jigten Sumgon. Looking out from the temple the broad views over the Zhorong River valley are magnificent and the whole place exudes an unforgettable other worldly calm. Perhaps the reason is the sanctity of the site and the fact that higher up the hill is situated the most important Sky Burial site in all of Central Tibet. In this form of burial, no doubt practiced long before Buddhism came to Tibet, the deceased is cut up and fed to birds, usually vultures. Tibetans believe that these birds will help carry their dear departed up to the heavens. Other forms of burial are water, fire and earth burial but in many areas of the country this is definitely the most convenient. It is unlikely we will be allowed to witness an actual burial but if possible we will try to visit the site. In the afternoon we continue by car or, for those who wish, by foot (approx 13km) to Tidrum Nunnery. This nunnery is again in a delightful location at the confluence of two small rivers in a valley rich in fluttering prayer flags. There are some wonderful, and very welcome, hot springs at the nunnery and we will be able to make use of them during our stay – don't forget your swimming costume!

*Overnight – Camp or guesthouse*

**Day 9 Tidrum Nunnery** Despite its relatively small size this nunnery is considered very special in Tibet as it has strong associations with Yeshe Tsogyal who was consort of the great 8th century Tibetan saint Guru Rinpoche, also known as Padmasambhava. For those who wish, the day is free to either relax in and around this delightful location or alternatively short or longer walks in the vicinity will be arranged for those who wish to stride out. An easy 2 or 3 hour hike through a gorge brings us to Dranang Monastery or for a more ambitious hike it is possible to ascend to the Kiri Yangdzong holy caves situated at a lofty 5150m.

*Overnight – Camp or guesthouse*

**Day 10 Reting (4100m)** Leaving Tidrum behind we continue through strikingly scenic river valleys and small hamlets affording us a close up glimpse at off-the-beaten-track Tibetan rural life. In the afternoon we reach the historically important Reting Monastery, our home for the night. Reting is sited in an extremely attractive location on the lower slopes of Mount Gangi Rarwa on a hill surrounded by a juniper forest which is said to have sprouted from the fallen hair of the monastery's founder, Dromtumpa. The monastery, like Ganden, was badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution but nonetheless the current Dalai Lama, were he ever able to return to Tibet, is said to want make Reting his place of residence. It was from Reting that abbots were chosen to act as regent whilst the Dalai lama came of age and murky political shenanigans in the years before the Chinese invasion led to one of them being imprisoned in Lhasa in an affair that became known as the Reting Conspiracy. We will have time to explore the extant temples including the interesting Tsogchen.

*Overnight – Camp or guesthouse*

**Day 11 Namtso Lake (4730m)** Continuing along the beautiful Miggi Valley on rugged roads we reach the old settlement of Phongdo with its ruined fortress overseen by a remarkably conical peak. Here we head north along the Rongchu Valley eventually reaching Damxung on the main Lhasa-Golmud road. After a good lunch we continue another 60 or so kilometres to one Lake Namtso, the second largest salt lake in China, and one of the most beautiful and sacred places in Tibet. Over 70km long its unfathomable turquoise depths are surrounded by majestic snowy mountains and its shores speckled with nomad tents – it is a vista to take the breath away from even the most hard to please traveller. The area is dotted with chapels and holy sites including a couple of huge rocks which look uncannily as if they were hands in prayer. Not surprisingly the

area is a magnet for wildly dressed pilgrims muttering mantras and spinning prayer wheels. There are some lovely walks in the area, some of them in the footsteps of pilgrims as they circumambulate the holy sites. We will stay in a tent encampment near Tashi Monastery at a lovely site close to the shores of the lake.

*Overnight – tent encampment*

**Days 12 - 13 Lhasa** We have more time this morning to relax and explore this lakeside idyll before making our way back to Lhasa via the hot spring town of Yangbajian. We have a full day in Lhasa to further explore the town at leisure or for those who wish there will be an excursion arranged to the nearby Drak Yerpa cave hermitage, one of the holiest cave retreats in Tibet, a lovely, tranquil site frequented by historic greats including Guru Rinpoche, Atisha and King Songsten Gampo.

*Overnight – hotel*

**Day 14 Shigatse (3840m)** From Lhasa we head south on a journey that will eventually take us back across the Himalayas through some of the most magnificent mountain scenery in the world. After first recrossing the Yarlung Tsangpo we climb steeply to the Kamba La Pass (4,794m) and get our first stunning views of the clear, turquoise-blue waters of Scorpion Lake (Yamdruk Tso). After dropping down to the lake, and skirting the shoreline for a while, we soon climb again to Karo La pass, (5,011m) renowned for its unusual hanging glacier. From here the road to Gyangtse levels out and follows a line of slightly incongruous looking mud brick telegraph poles. We pause in Gyangtse which is a lovely rural town that has escaped much of the colonisation seen elsewhere in Tibet. There is a fine monastery here – home to the huge Kumbum Stupa – and also an impressive *dzong* or fortress. Anyone with an interest in Imperial history may be interested to know that the fortress was the scene of a relatively violent skirmish between the advancing Younghusband Expedition and the woefully ill-prepared Tibetan Army. The events are recorded in the fortress' interestingly named, 'Museum of Anti- British'. Later we set off through an almost bucolic landscape on the short drive to Shigatse (approx. 90km). Shigatse is Tibet's second city and is steadily growing in political importance and cultural significance. The city's main sight is undoubtedly its Tashilhunpo Monastery, traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, and one of the six largest in Tibet. Unusually, but not without good political reason, the monastery was spared significant damage during the Cultural Revolution, and consequently still comprises an impressive array of temples containing many original artefacts, not least Jamkhang Chenmo temple, where tomorrow we will come face to face with the world's largest gilded copper image, a huge 26m high statue of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future.

*Overnight – hotel*

**Day 15 Xegar** After visiting Tashilhunpo we travel out across Shigatse's broad plain, ascend to the Tsuo La Pass before continuing via Lhatse and the beautiful Lhakpa La Pass (5,220m) – watershed for the Eurasian and Indian subcontinents – to the less than salubrious town of Shelkar where we spend the night.

**Day 16 Nyalam (211km)** Back on the main road, we begin one of the most scenically astounding days of the trip, as we are confronted at various times throughout the day with the full grandeur of the Himalayas laid out before us, including fine views of Mount Everest. From the old town of Tingri we continue south eventually climbing to the summit of the Lalung Leh Pass, from where the views of the great monolith of Shishapangma (8,013m) are particularly impressive. From here the scenery begins to change again, as we make a steep descent through the Po Chu Gorge en route to Nyalam. As we lose altitude the temperature rises and, in marked contrast to the arid rather barren plateau, we find ourselves in an area of alpine vegetation. Just north of Nyalam we will, if time allows, pause to visit Milarepa's Cave, one of the many former meditation retreats of Tibet's best-loved poet and mystic. A little further on we come to Nyalam (3,750m) where we will spend our last night in Tibet in a simple but friendly guesthouse.

*Overnight – guesthouse*

**Day 17 Kathmandu (155km)** As the winding road continues its descent through densely forested hillsides, and the countryside around us begins to assume an almost tropical air, the rapid transition and marked difference between the high and low altitude worlds of Tibet and Nepal is difficult to ignore. Arriving at the architecturally chaotic Nepali/Chinese border town of Dram (Zhangmu in Chinese) we complete the Chinese border formalities, in order to exit Tibet, before continuing down the road (by vehicle or, if the road is impassable, by foot) to Friendship Bridge, and just beyond it the Nepali border post. After meeting our Nepali guide and driver we continue past the gushing Bhote and Sun Khosi rivers and on through rice terraces and woodland to arrive in Kathmandu in the late afternoon.

*Overnight – hotel*

**Day 18 Kathmandu** Presuming there have been no delays en route, today has been left free for relaxation, a little shopping or possibly even a short trek on the edges of the valley.

*Overnight – hotel*

**Day 19 Journey's end...** The Oriental Caravan heads home

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

### **Tour price (excluding international flights) – £1,995\* per person on a twin share basis**

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

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

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

**Accommodation** In Lhasa and Shigatse we stay at centrally located, 3-star Tibetan-style hotels with good facilities (in Kathmandu we use a modern 4 star hotel, also centrally located). Elsewhere on the trip we use the best available accommodation. As always in Chinese-built hotels the plumbing can be something of a hit or miss affair! The hotel in Shelkar is basic but blessed with its own slightly Kafkaesque charm. In all the above we have rooms with private facilities, and in all hotels guests are provided with large thermos flasks of hot, boiled water for drinking. In Nyalam we stay in a guesthouse which although simple is friendly and full of character. The accommodation in Reting and Drigung Til will either be in tents or the dormitories of the monastery guesthouse. At Drigung we stay in the monastery guesthouse and at Lake Namtso in a tent encampment. A sleeping bag, possible to hire in Kathmandu, is required.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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