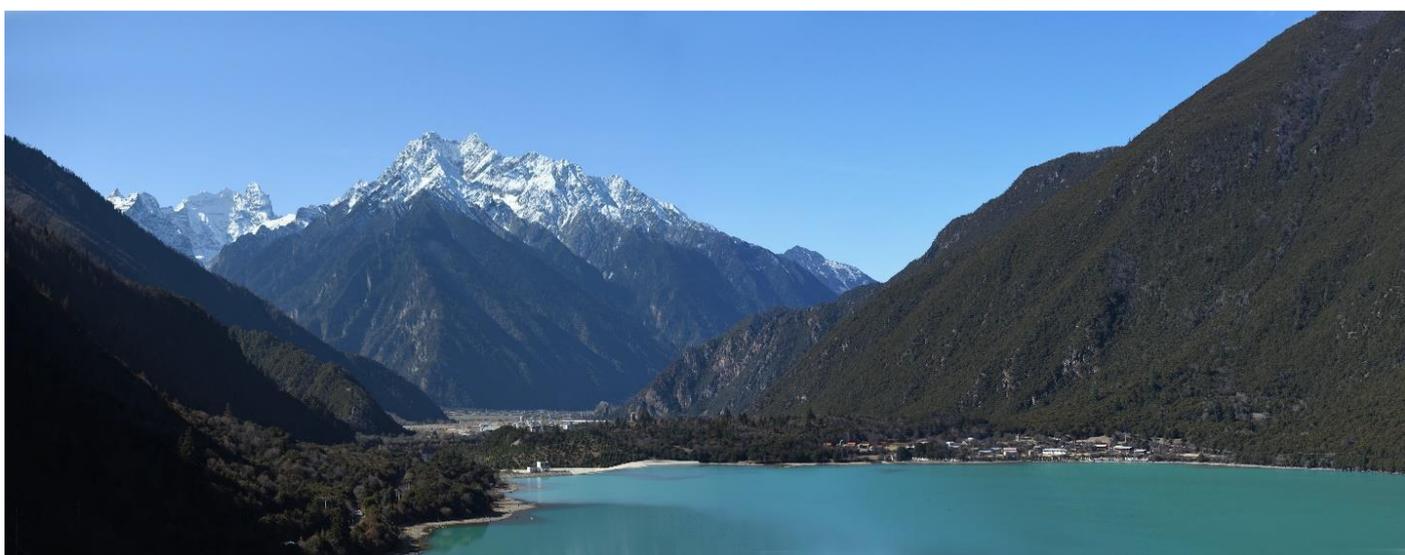


ASIAN ALPINE E-NEWS

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Meili Snow Mountains Yunnan-Tibet border (above) Lake Basong Tso, east Tibet (below)

[Willian Boehm's YUNNAN and TIBET]

SONGTSAM G318 ROAD TRIP EXPLORATORY Part 1 ~ Part 6.

SONGTSAM'S SHANGRILA TO LHASA EXPLORATORY ROAD TRIP SCENIC HIGHWAY G318; THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED IN THE HIDDEN KINGDOM OF EASTERN TIBET

PART 1 SHANGRI-LA YUNNAN



Songtsam landrovers and photographers at Meil, Yunnan beginning the first foreign Trip into Kham Easter Tibet Autonomous Region from Shagril-La Yunnan to Lhasa via Highway G318, a route that includes part of the traditional Tea Horse Trail

Beginning in the Song Dynasty In the seventh century, the elite of Tibet's feudal Buddhist theocracy discovered Pu er tea found in Sichuan and SW Yunnan. Supplying its growing demand meant forging a network of trails across China for both porters and mule caravans through steep mountainous forests, over 5,000 m (16,400 ft) passes, along deep gorges, and across unnavigable rivers traversed by rope and cable. The journey was long, 4000 km (2400 mi) with the valuable tea carried by porters, or mule caravans. In return, China needed the Tibetan sturdy war horse to fight the northern invaders. The trade route became known as the Tea Horse Road, the Cha Ma Dao. It still exists with some of it forgotten along ancient stone trails found in forests, some of it paved over beneath modern highways. A few of the men who still live have shared about survival of often bitter lives on the trails. They were the leaders of the mule caravans, the Ma Guo Tou, a culture of men who braved snow storms, bandits, and treacherous river crossings through one of the longest trade routes of the ancient world.

Songtsam now takes the traveler by landrover through Route G 318 that follows the tea horse trail from Deqen Shangri-La to Lhasa, traversing passes over 5 000 meters high, crossing breathtaking mountainous landscapes and deep river gorges. G318 is known for steep grades, hairpin, stomach twisting turns, and snow showers that can come at high altitudes at any time of the year. But the scenery is spectacular, combining scenery comparable to Alaska and British Columbia with Tibetan Culture. We undertook the first foreign journey November 2019 with Songtsam, and stayed in their luxury Tibetan Style Lodges.

Pacific Northwest Americans love scenic road trips, choosing to either camp along the way or overnight in rustic lodges in our National Forests and Parks. There is Mt Rainier and Olympic National Parks in my home Washington State, Highway 101 that winds along the Pacific Ocean from Washington State to southern California, the Icefields Parkway drive through Banff and Jasper National Parks Alberta,

Canada, or the scenic drive along Highway 20 from Lillooet in the Caribou Range Northeast of Vancouver to the coastal town of Bella Coola in British Columbia, Canada. What else could compare to these amazingly famous scenic drives in Asia? I then discovered Highway G318 through Southeastern Tibet's Hidden Kingdom, an exploration developed by Songtsam Boutique Lodges owner Mr. Baima Dorje <https://www.songtsam.com/en/>.

The scenic East-West Highway G318 of Kham and Chamdo regions of Eastern Tibet threads through some of the most spectacular and dramatic landscapes in China: the highway connects Chengdu with Lhasa and threads through the wild and dramatic Eastern Tibetan Hengduan Range. The Hengduan Mountains consist of a group of north-south oriented mountain ranges in southwest China that traverse the southeast portions of the Tibetan Plateau with the Yunnan–Guizhou Plateau. The Hengduan Ranges cover much of western present-day Sichuan province as well as the northwestern portions of Yunnan, the easternmost section of the Tibet Autonomous Region, and touching upon parts of southern Qinghai. The highway follows much of this ancient Tea-Horse trade route that transects through major climatic zones, from tropical in southern Yunnan to arctic in Tibet, and along it, I was told one can find the most beautiful mountain scenery in China, one thousand year old towers, artistic and very ancient Buddhist



Top: Mt Mianzimu 6,054 metres (19,862 ft) from Meil Lodge, middle: Yanjing village known for its processing salt extracted from river wells on the Mekong River;



Bomi Songtsam Lodge and the mountain ranger that surround the Parlung Tsampo river



Traditional Tibetan wedding Shangri-la

monasteries, and amazing ethnic towns and untouched Tibetan villages. A Tea Horse Road trip would be wonderful from an archeological, cultural, historical as well as scenic outdoor adventure, more so than the more famous northern Silk Road. Pu'er tea, a distinctly Yunnanese form of broad leaf tea *Camellia sinensis assamica*, and possibly the first variety of tea ever to be consciously cultivated as opposed to



Parlung Tsampo River from below Bomi Songtsan Lodge



The 1350-year-old Drak Yerpa Monastery place at an altitude of 4,885m (16,022 ft) and below right; Left Shangri-La, ng the largest Tibetan uddhist monastery in Yunnan, Songzanlin Monastery; Below Tea Horse Trail porters, turn of the century, muleteers with tea loads and salt

the harvesting of wild trees was highly valued as 'tribute tea' (贡茶) in the past, when precious commodities from across the empire were offered up to the imperial court. Pu'er, unlike most varieties of tea, is ideally suited for investment as it can be stored for decades and, depending on the quality of the tea, will 'improve' with age. Some of the Pu'er tea cakes (the tea is compressed into small discs for ease of storage and transportation) were at this time commanding astronomical prices. It als became a necessary element of Buddhist meditation, with monks acting as middlemen in the trade routes.



Porters and mule train carrying Puer tea at the turn of the 20th century

Unexplored and only recently opened up to foreigners this year, I was privileged to join a Songtsam photographic group at the request of Mr Baima Dorje. We would travel in a land rover caravan from the



Map of the Tea Horse Trail Route G318 from Shangri-La Yunnan west across the three parallel rivers, then across the Hengduan mountains below the highest anchor of the eastern Himalaya Namcha Barwa, then west through the lowlands of Nyingchi and the Yarlung Tsangpo River, finally ascending to Lhasa

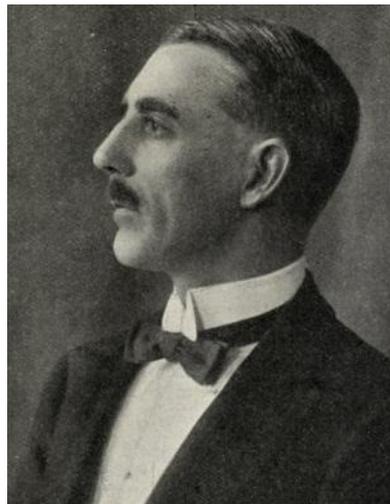
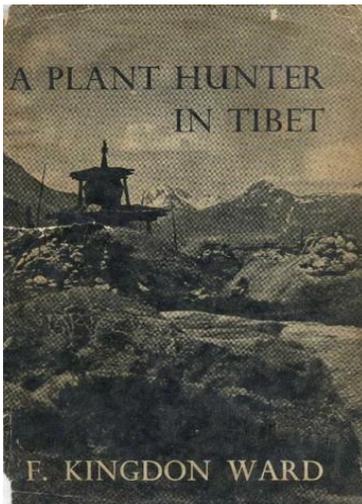
Three Parallel Rivers area of Shangri-La, Yunnan across the Mekong and to the west the Nu River into Nyingchi Prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and the Yarlung Tsampo River, on to Nyingchi and complete our journey in Lhasa. From Yunnan, the highway crosses east to west through Chamdo and Nyingchi prefectures of the TAR. Unlike the high desert terrain of central Tibet north of the Makalu, and Mt Everest in the Tibetan Himalayas I had experienced in May, the Eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau is at a lower altitude with abundant rainfall and a great diversity of plants, a temperate lush forest. The spruce, fir and oak-forested landscape is a striking contrast to the dry, brown mountains of central Tibet, yet connected with spectacular mountains that include Namcha Barwa, the eastern anchor of the Himalayas which span 2300 km (1400 mi) east from the Indus to the Brahmaputra Rivers. Gaya Peri, the sister peak of Namcha Barwa only 22 km (14 mi) north are the two highest peaks over 7300 meters (24,000 ft) in this isolated section of the Hengduan Range. Between these two peaks lies the Mt



Namcha Barwa, 7,782 m (25,524 ft) above sea level, is the highest mountain in the Hengduan Mountain Range and as an anchor of the eastern Himalaya, ranks as the 28th highest peak in the world. Below it flows the Yarlung Tsangpo, creating the deepest canyon in the world.

great bend of the Yarlung Tsampo river that enters into the deepest gorge (6000 m or 19,680 ft deep between summit to river) in the world, emerging as the Brahmaputra.

The largest river in Tibet, the Yarlung Tsampo mysterious unexplored gorge was first described in 1924 by a remarkable botanist-explorer from Lancashire named Frank Kingdon-Ward. Accompanied by Jack Cawdor, a British nobleman, together struggled on hunters' trails through the Upper Gorge and deep into the canyon, they discovered a stunning waterfall that they christened Rainbow Falls. They ascended



and crawled straight out over a high pass called Senchen La, and dropped into the tropical Lower Gorge, becoming the first outsiders to traverse the Tsangpo Gorges. "Every day the scene grew more savage; the mountains higher and steeper; the river more fast and furious," Ward wrote in his 1926 book, [*The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges*](#). "Had we finally emerged onto a raw lunar landscape, it would scarcely have surprised us." I have wondered how Frank Kingdon-Ward survived just one of his many expeditions into the Himalayas.

The year before I had explored an area of Gaoligongshan on the Nu Jiang river spending three weeks on hunter trails traversing near vertical peaks and ridges to photograph rhododendrons. All this in pouring rain, and at my age now 73, almost gave up cross country travel. If he wasn't moving horses across a river by tramline, face to face with a black bear, he was clinging to a yawning precipice, or wobbling precariously on flimsy rope-bridges suspended high above raging rivers to collect plant specimens. If

you thought that plant collecting in the Edwardian era was a peaceful and sedentary pastime, think again. Thankfully exploring and hiking parts of Highway G318 mountains would not be that demanding.

Highway G318 is known as “heavenly road” for its wondrous scenery and unique Tibetan culture. The road itself is challenging for its ruggedness at high altitude, multiple hairpin switchbacks and narrow sections along gorges, and sudden snowstorms any time of the year. The highway courses through 5 mountain passes that are hazardous, and descends in steep sections into deep river canyons that are narrow, with no turnouts. Mr. Baima Dorje, owner and creator of Songtsam Tibetan Lodges was completing his vision 20 years ago recreating the Tea-Horse Trail route from Yunnan to Lhasa, TAR, and has built Tibetan boutique lodges from Lijiang in Yunnan to Lhasa in areas that were Tea Horse trail stopovers. This was the first trip open to foreigners to enter TAR, and area of Tibet that has been closed for 10 years. This journey in the past took porters and muleteers up to 6 months to complete, was extremely dangerous, and only done once a year. Pu'er tea had been transported for almost 1500 years from his home town in Shangri-La and southern Yunnan to Lhasa by crossing the deep gorges of three major rivers systems separated by steep mountains, and high mountain passes. These caravans endured great hardships to make it to Lhasa, where tea and salt was exchanged for Tibetan horses, necessary for fighting the northern invaders that included the growing Mongolian empire in the past.

The Ancient Tea Horse Road became a network of trading routes linking the tea producing areas of Yunnan (mainly concentrated in the southeast of the province in Pu'er 普洱, Xishuangbanna, 西双版纳) and Ya'an 雅安 Sichuan 四川 with the tea-consuming regions across China, but in particular with Tibet. The network first emerged during the Tang dynasty (618–907), reaching its zenith during the late-Qing period (1790s to 1911) and the first half of the twentieth century. The network also extends into mainland southeast Asia, Nepal and India.



The tea road, in what was approximately a six-month caravan journey from Menghai to Lhasa, crossed innumerable rivers, including the Mekong 湄公河 or Lancang 澜沧江 (more than once) and Yangtze (known as the Jinsha River 金沙江 in Yunnan), and over many high mountain passes, some exceeding 5,000 m (16,400 ft). In its progress tea porters and mule caravans traversed a range of distinct topographical zones, from the temperate rainforests of Ya'an Sichuan to the high-altitude alpine forests and meadows of modern-day Deqen and Shangri-la. Today Highway G318 also travels through many different cultural zones inhabited by a diverse range of ethnic groups, from Naxi, Dai, Bai and Tibetans.

Today the route still includes remnant paths and roads, bridges (arched, cantilever, and cable), market towns, staging posts, and shrines and temples (including mosques and even a few Christian churches), all elements of what is now termed 'tangible cultural heritage'.

The first half of the road cuts across several grand ravines of the Hengduan Mountains that include the Lacang Jiang or Mekong, and the Nu Jiang Nu Rivers, while the second half meanders along the valleys of tributaries of Yarlung Zangbo River, namely the gorges in Nyenchen Tanglha Mountains. The north-south oriented Hengduan Mountains east of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is the most complicated alpine gorge area in the world and a journey through this region is known as "soul in heaven and body in hell". The gorges along this road also enjoy great fame: the most beautiful gorge located within the Dadu River Gorge, Sichuan, the most dangerous Lancang River Gorge, and the first and third deepest in the world, the Yarlung Zangbo and Parlung Zangbo Grand Canyons. We would be traveling through these biologically diverse areas, varying from desert canyons with rare thousands year old Cypress trees (related to the sequoia in the US), to high altitude alpine meadows. The Yarlung Tsangpo that cuts south into India, and to the east the Nu, Mekong and Yangtze Rivers that are oriented North-South, allow the SE Asian monsoon to penetrate further north into the Tibetan plateau than the western Himalayan Range that lies to the west. Seasonal tropical moist air has created the greatest Temperate Forest and alpine diversity in the world, with over 500 species of rhododendrons, primulas, lilies, and trees, over xxx species of mammals, and xxxx species of birds, including an incredible array of pheasants, robin-thrushes and sunbirds. The Hengduan Range allows the monsoon and milder temperatures to penetrate deep into the Northeastern Tibetan Plateau that supports a great diversity of not only plants, but birds, large and small mammals. The area we would travel through is immediately southeast of the Tibetan plateau, and yields the greatest plant and animal diversity of Tibet.

I left Chengdu flying to Shangri-La, mesmerized looking out the window at a full moon and a spray of stars at 29,000 feet that lit up scattered clouds filling the mountainous terrain below. I was joining a group of photographers to begin our journey with Songtsam in northwestern Yunnan at Songtsam Linka situated on a beautiful plateau where Baima Dorje had grown up. Shangri-La is nestled in the mountains between the Yangtze River east and only 50 km (30 miles) due west, the Mekong River. Our group of 12 participants included two Americans and myself, the rest amateur Chinese photographers from Beijing and Shanghai, China. . I could see the Songzanlin Monastery from my lodge bedroom veranda, largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Yunnan, built in 1679 and one of the famous monasteries in the Kang region. It is located near Shangri -La County, at the foot of Foping Mountain. We were all anticipating an amazing scenic trip into Tibet.

Below: Songzanlin Monestary from Songtsam Linka lodge





Hengduan Mountains



Hengduan Mountains, below: The remote Yarlung Tsangpo River gorge from the air



Namcha Barwa, highest peak in the Hengduan Mountains. Songsam photos from Eagle helicopter Service, SongsamMt kawagebo, highest peak of the Meili Mountains, Yunnan from Eagle Helicopter Service with Songsam

SHANGRI-LA SONGTSAM LINKA



Songsam shangrila Linka and shanri-La area

HUANGDAN MOUNTAIN RANGE FROM THE AIR: EAGLE HELICOPTER TOURS THROUGH SONGTSAM BOUTIQUE LODGES





**SONGTSAM'S SHANGRILA TO LHASA EXPLORATORY ROAD TRIP SCENIC HIGHWAY G318; THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED IN THE HIDDEN KINGDOM OF EASTERN TIBET by WILLIAM D BOEHM
PART 2 MEILI TO MARKHAM, TIBET AUTONOMOUS REGION (TAR)**



Songtsam Linka Shangri-La Linka lodge and meal

Part2 journey Highway G318 through Southeastern Tibet's Hidden Kingdom, an exploration developed by Songtsam Boutique Lodges owner Mr. Baima Dorje <https://www.songtsam.com/en/>.

We departed for Meili in the morning, and just outside the Shangri-La city we came upon a large number of parked cars and hundreds of people dressed in Traditional Tibetan clothing gathered around a Tibetan house. It turned out to be a Tibetan wedding festivity that had just begun, and we were invited inside by beaming hosts into the courtyard to share in the communal celebration meal. We sat at low tables with traditionally dressed Tibetan men and women, and plate after tantalizing plate of Tibetan dishes appear before us. I delighted in the century eggs with a translucent lemon-yellow albumen, stir-fried string tofu and braised minced yak meat, among the dozen exotic dishes.

The Tibetan bride and groom were present at the tail end of a parade where the groom had brought her from her village home to the wedding celebration. With well-wishes and songs, a meal and ceremony that we were privileged to witness for several hours, the bride would then leave with the groom to his house. Women were dressed in beautiful silk dresses, with silver plated boxes hung around their necks which contained Buddhist writings and small images of Buddha. Older women wore traditional cylindrical hats and wool capes, while men sported Stetson hats and sheep skin coats. We were fortunate to have seen this amazing activity.

The older women wore a wool shawl on the back demonstrating their eldership, with a blue slit robe, sleeveless vest, a ribbon around the waist, and a pink headband. Their blue aprons with black borders seemed to have Naxi tribe influence. The grandfather wore a fox tailed hat, was considered the most cultured in the village when he was young. The Diqing Tibetans valued the red, white, green, blue and yellow clothing, symbolic colors that represent the five origins of Bonismo, the older animist religion of Tibet. Red the flame of passion, blue sky the worship of supreme power, white of white clouds and purity, green river of life and wealth, and yellow, the land full of life and vitality. These colors were vibrant in the women's dress, and the women exchanged their wealth of yaks for jewelry. They wore a gawu (small talisman amulets made of silver to protect them, and a large Buddha box or chama worn on their chest embossed with a mountain peak and water depicted with a wave that contain Buddha statues, sutras, Buddhist relics and long knots) made of pure silver, or white copper with fine designs. The chama has set jewelry, usually red agate, green coral, or turquoise, some with a base plum blossom made of gold. They also wore chama or silver belt buckles, and nalongs (stone decorated earrings).





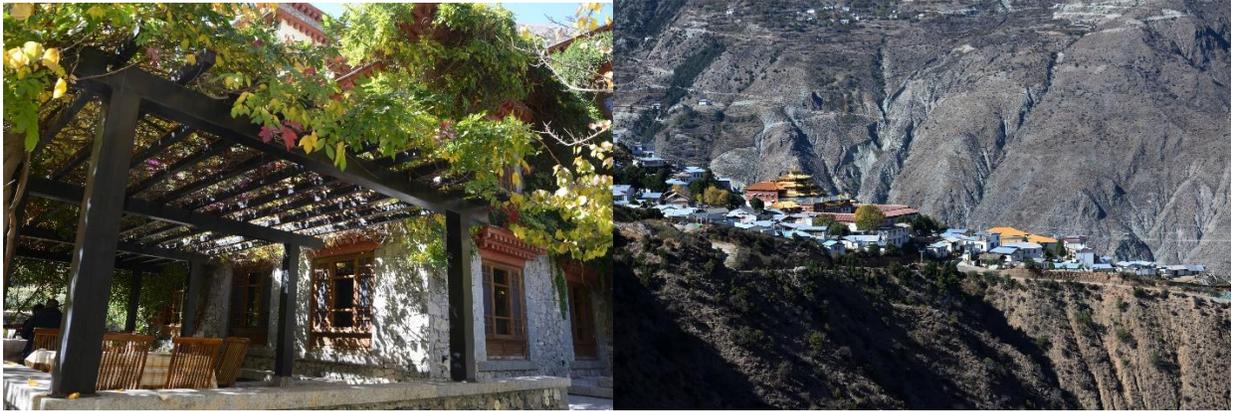
Tibetan Wedding party Shangrila. Top: women from both bride and grooms neighborhoods in line to welcome the groom as he brings the bride to the wedding party. Older women in fox fur Tibetan caps with wool shawls



Women wearing silver amulets with talisman to protect them from evil, and large a large Buddha box or chama worn on their chest embossed with a mountain peak and water depicted with a wave that contain Buddha statues, sutras, Buddhist relics and long knots) made of pure silver, or white copper with fine designs. Middle: Young girls, Right: Uncle blessing the bride and groom. (bottom lf photo Scott Jiang)



We finally left the wedding at lunchtime and drove north along the plateau stopping at the Songtsam lodge in Benzilan for lunch, and visit the Dongzhulin monastery. Perched on the banks of the Yangtze river, in a sunny valley with a very pleasant climate, the small millenary village of Benzilan was an important stage on the road of tea and horses, in the time of the caravans who were preparing here to brave their first really snowy passes from their perilous journey to Lhasa. A ferry on the river, made of yak skins, was still active a short time ago.



Songtsam Benzilan lodge, Benzilan; Rt Dongzhulin monastery overlooking the Yangtze River

We left ascending the ridge from the Yangtze river across the Baima Snow Mountain pass to spend our second night at the Songtsam Meili lodge, a well-designed Tibetan Stone structure with each bedroom window commanding a view of the Meili Mountains. We were blessed with clear weather and arrived just before sunset at 3800 m (11,811 ft).

Known for the grandest mountain view in Yunnan Province, Meili Snow Mountain boasts thirteen ice-covered peaks that exceed 6,000 meters (19,685 feet) above the sea level. We had arrived in the middle of November, and there was some fresh snow from a storm days before our arrival. By morning clouds had lifted revealing Kawagebo 6,740 metres (22,110 ft) and Mianzimu 6,054 metres (19,862 ft). It was good to be back as this was my third trip to Meili. We enjoyed an incredible evening of the peaks yielding in a sunset alpenglow to a starlit night sky that revealed the Milky Way.



Meili Snow Mountains and Mt Mianzimu 6,054 metres (19,862 ft). Meili Mountain Range at eastern boundary of Hengduan Mountains



Meil snow Mountains morning, and night sky, Deqen Yunnan from Songtsam Meili Lodge

We left late morning the next day in a caravan of 7 Land Rover discovery vehicles and passed through the small town of Deqen that overlooks the Meili Mountains, then following G214 north descended into the Mekong River valley for our the first leg of the 1200n km (746 mi) trip for a 300 km (186 mi) first day drive to Markham in the Tibet

autonomous region (TAR). Once past our first checkpoint, we would enter as the first foreigners to pass through here in 10 years.

Followed the Mekong River for several hours until we reached Yanjing village known for its processing salt extracted from river wells. The village was surrounded on both sides of the river by wood constructed scaffolding of clay terraces where salt water extracted and carried from the river could dry in clay lined shallow pools. Amazing to see both men and women carrying the dried salt in 50 kg bags up to the storage locations above the river. Reminded me of the ancient Tea Horse Trail where men carried up to 60-90 Kg (132-198 lb.), which was often more than their own body weight in Pu'er tea. They traveled such a long distance to Lhasa, and I reflected how strong they are.



Yanjing village known for its processing salt extracted from river wells.

From around a thousand years ago, the Tea Horse Road was a trade link from Yunnan to Bengal via Myanmar; to Tibet; and to Central China via Sichuan Province. In addition to tea, the mule caravans carried salt. Both people and horses carried heavy loads, and the porters carried metal-tipped staffs, both for balance while walking and to help support the load while they rested, so they didn't need to lay the bales down. The route earned the name Tea-Horse Road because of the common trade of Tibetan ponies for Chinese tea, a practice dating back at least to the Song dynasty, when the sturdy horses were important for China to fight warring nomads in the north.





Salt Terraces and the process of drying the river water, collecting the salt on clay terraces, and carrying to the village

For centuries the people of Tsakalho have carried their tradition as the bringers of the salt. Tsakalho is the Tibetan name of the village which translated means a place where salt is found. Perched on a valley side more than 3 km (9800 ft) above sea level, Yanjing marks the border between TAR and Yunnan province. Once an important trading post between the Naxi minority capital Lijiang and Lhasa in Tibet, the town retains its wild west atmosphere and its importance for the trade in one particular commodity. Historically Yanjing was a traffic hub connecting Tibetan Empire and the Kingdom of Nanzhao, as well as the only way where Yunnan tea was transported to Tibet. In ancient times, salt selling was the primary source of income for local villagers. The ancient salt well at Yanjing is the only surviving artificial salt-sunning landscape. In 2009, the 1000-year-old salt fields in Naxi were made a cultural relic site protected on the regional level in Tibet. The salt producing technique in Markam has been listed in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage entities.



Wars were fought for control this commodity along the Mekong River, and today a Naxi community still own a number of steep terraces while the Tibetans retained the gentle sloping side slopes facing the town. On the dark red Tibetan terraces, workers carry their brine on a simple stick balanced at each end by two buckets. On the Naxi side, the terraces are beige and the paths exceedingly steep. The Naxi carry long wooden barrels on their backs: when full of salt water, each barrel weighs about 30 kilograms.

There are more than 3700 of these "salt terraces", each roughly three meters square, and all built on wooden structures with hardened clay tops. Despite China's development and technological advances, this valley has remained virtually untouched for more than five centuries. Its white crystals are prized and sold throughout Eastern Tibet and West China. It is not known exactly when the terraces first appeared, but according to local oral history the Qiang people were the first to inhabit the area and produce the white gold.

The source of the salt are deep wells dug into the rock to reach the salt water table that lies below the Mekong. It is rare in that it holds brine and not pure water. This precious brine is hoisted to the surface and then emptied into collection pools. The buckets are submerged, filled and carried, step by arduous step, to the clay terrace fields, where the brine is poured onto the terraces, covering the surface with about 10 cm of salt water. After several days, the water evaporates, leaving residues of pure salt. The crystals are scraped up, bagged and loaded at one time onto horses to take to town for selling. Today the salt is hauled by lory.

We left the village in late evening light, and ascended the deteriorated and bumpy highway to the first pass 4448m (14,590 ft) Hong Le. We were immersed into gently sloped high ridges of juniper yielding to spruce/birch forests. From the pass summit we had an amazing view of a series of sharp, tooth-like mountain aretes to the west including Mt Damyon el 6324m (20748 ft) of the Hongla and Lawu Mountain Ranges. Below lay the distant Lacang jiang (Mekong) River. The jagged peaks were bathed in the evening light casting long shadows interspersed between the summits. We still had several hours to drive and our caravan descended in an evening light casting a mauve and golden tone over the distance hills, sending shafts of light rays through the gaps of the peaks into the meadows below, creating a colorful palette of gold with shadows in shades of blue and violet purple.

The highway followed the high ridges of forest until we crossed the second La pass 4338 m (14,228ft), then descended. We witnessed amazing clouds lit on fire in scarlet as the sun set into the valley of Yulong. In the twilight we continued west along a beautiful valley of barley fields and traditional century-old styled Tibetan houses made of mud and trapezoid shaped windows decorated with fading paints. The light was striking the clouds in brilliant mauve and crimson tones set against a turquoise blue sky. Darkness came quickly before we reached Markham in the evening where the highway joined G318 from Chengdu, where we turned west to Zhuka, a small town nestled along the Mekong River upriver from Meili and Dequen. Threading through the town narrow streets of the village, we we came to Mangkang Songzan Rumei Mountain House 2600 meters (8530 ft) located in Rumeizhen (Zhikacun). This new Songtsam lodge had just opened this summer and were welcomed by a wonderful staff that took us inside, served us ginger tea, and assigned our beautifully appointed rooms facing the Mekong River. The evening was filled with a delicious Sichuan dinner. I slept well with the door opened in my veranda listening to he murmur of the Mekong River.



Above: Meili Mountains; Below, village above the Mekong river; Right, Tibetan checkpoint along the Mekong River

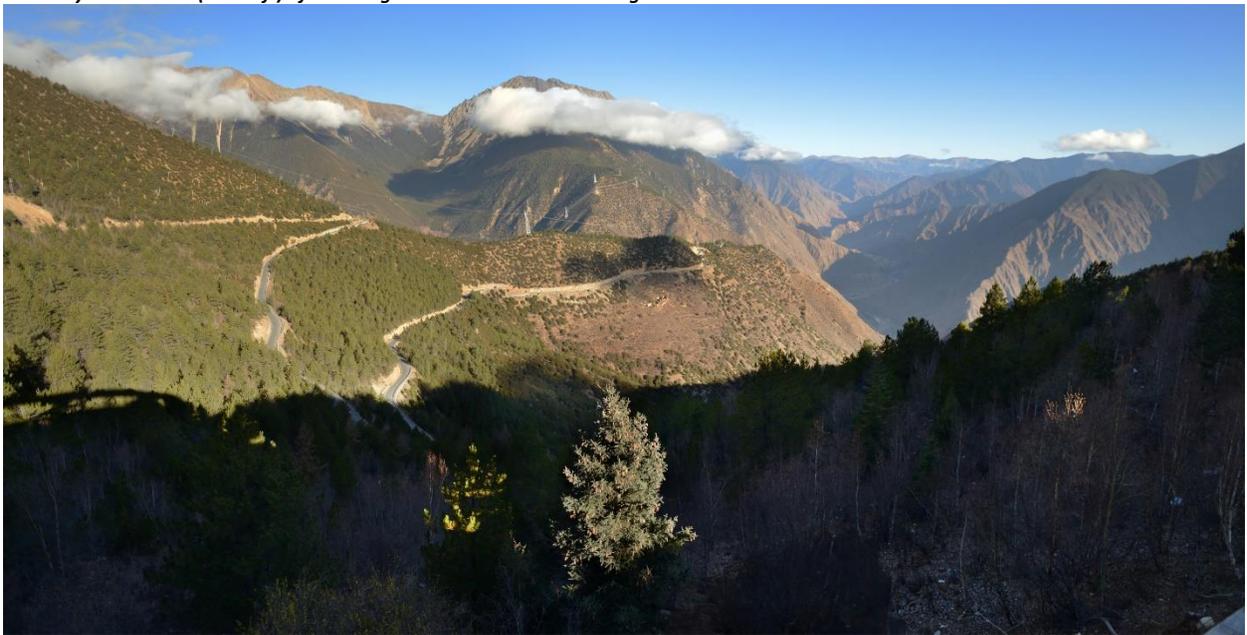


Mt Damyon el 6324m (20748 ft) of the Hongla and Lawu Mountain Ranges





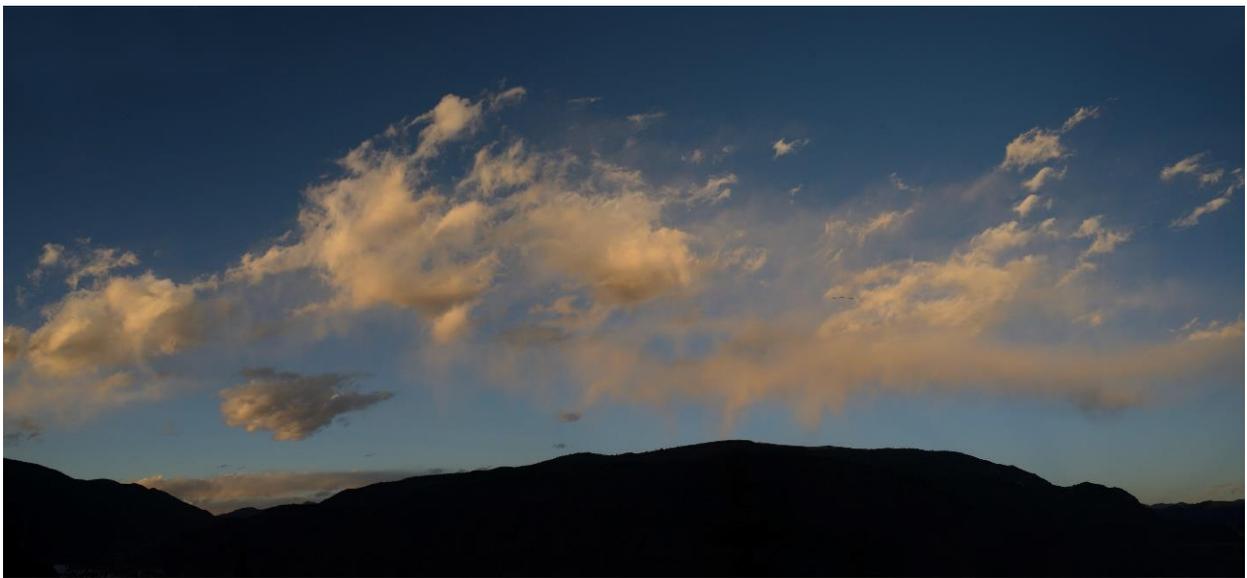
Mt Damyon el 6324m (20748 ft) of the Hongla and Lawu Mountain Ranges



View from pass looking back down into the Mekong River Valley



Mountains above the Mekong river approaching Markham above and below



Tibetan plateau clouds; Below left Town of markahm; Below right Village of Zhuka on the Mekong River



Town of Markham east of Zhuka on the Mekong River, where Songtsam lodge is located



Above: Songtsam Zhuka past the town of Markham on the Mekong river and rooms that face the river



SONGTSAM'S SHANGRILA TO LHASA EXPLORATORY ROAD TRIP SCENIC HIGHWAY G318; THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED IN THE HIDDEN KINGDOM OF EASTERN TIBET

PART 3 MARKHAM TO RANWU LAKE AND THE LAIGU GLACIER

Our caravan left early the next morning for a long day drive through amazing sections of the Hengduan Mountain Range, crossing two high passes and entering a deep river canyon. We will be following the highway along sections that were once an important trade route of the Tea-Horse trail that was used for over a millennium since the Song Dynasty 960–1279. Today would be a long 430 km (258 mile) drive across two high passes, descend into the NuJiang Canyon, the deep canyon of the Nu also known as the Salween River flowing from the Tibetan plateau, then ascend into Ranwu Lake high in the central Hengduan Mountain Range. I had explored last year the Gaoligong Mountain Range and Nature Reserve west of the upper Nu River to the north, and discovered a remote watershed to be rich and diverse in flora and fauna.



Left the drier Mekong River valley and ascended into a Juniper and ceanothus (nitrogen fixing shrubs with leathery leaves known as buckbrush or California lilacs in the Pacific Northwest) forest at Ju Ba la pass 3911 m (12,828 ft), then climbed through open meadowed juniper forest Dong Da Shan pass at 5130 m (16,826 ft), the highest pass through the Dongda Mountains we would cross today and on our trip. It was marked with countless prayer flags and two large stupas, reminders to Tibetan travellers of





Yu Qu River flowing from the NW as the highway ascends to the Bangda Prairie; Below near Bangda prairie



Remote Tibetan Village of Tiandu, Village and the Yu Qu River

Buddhist prayers being flung into the winds for travellers' safety. We descended the cold and windy pass into a scenic valley of steep peaks, one with sharp shale vertical faces and jagged shale summits that reminded me of mt Kidd in the Kananaskis and Medicine Lake in Jasper National Park in Canada. The highway took us through more gentle valleys and we followed the Yu Qu River northwest until we again



descended through a stunning mountain range of red and white limestone peaks that rose steeply above the river. We emerged onto a vast Bangda grassland prairie.

The Bangda alpine grasslands are fertile in the long valley, and in the past this is where muleteers on the Tea Horse route would stop and pasture their tired horses from the long trip in southern Yunnan. Some transferred their tea and salt loads to the slower moving yaks. Today the grasslands have mostly been cultivated with barley fields. Today the grasslands have mostly been cultivated with barley fields. We stopped at a remote Tibetan village called Tiandu Town at 3660 m (12,000 ft) in ZongGong County, part of Chamdu prefecture and north of Nyinchi on the eastern edge of Tibet. The town consisted of the older Tibetan style homes constructed with mud bricks and walls. Barley straw was drying on wood racks, children in tattered clothes playing in the streets, and homes spattered with drying yak dung, fuel for the Tibetan stoves for cooking and heating though winter. Further up the valley we stopped at the town of Bangdazhen for lunch.



Yela Pass 4658m (15,367 ft) where we descended the famous Tian Lu (Nu Jiang) 72 switchback turns down the steep mountain valley



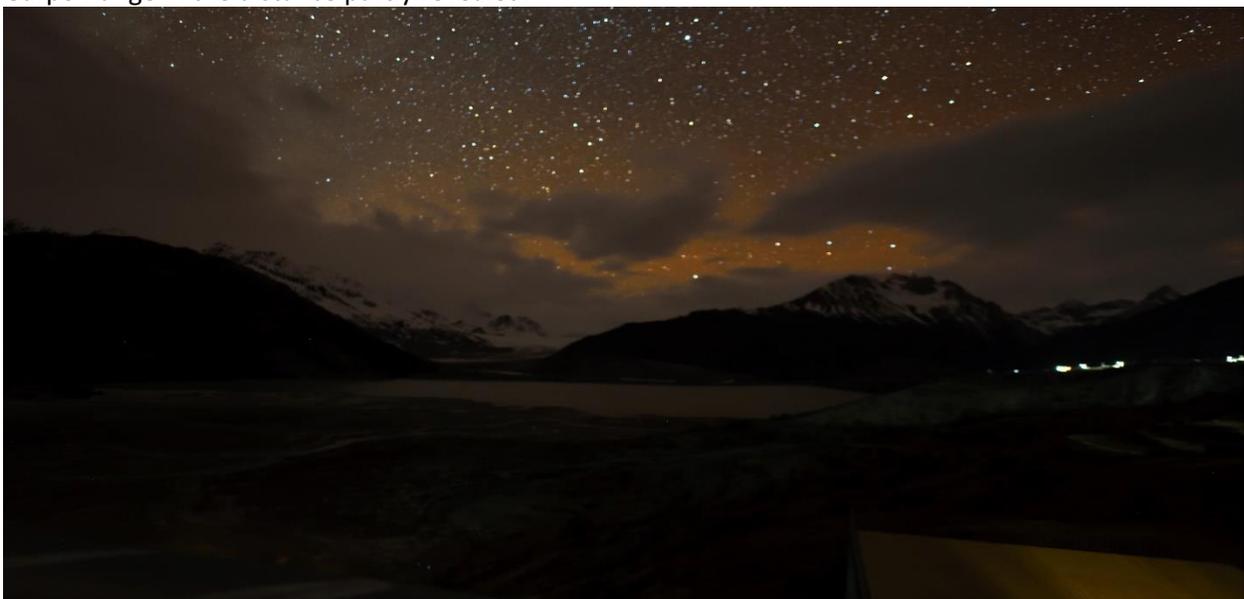
Nu Jiang (River) Canyon



Nu River Canyon

We left the Bangda Prairie ascending the highway to the west along another mountain ridge with bare grass side slopes until we reached Yela Pass 4658m (15,367 ft) where it began to snow. Under heavy clouds at the summit we descended the famous Tian Lu (Nu Jiang) 72 switchback turns down the steep mountain valley and the dry steep precipitous canyon until we to the Nu Jiang. The peaks were vertical uplifts of sedimentary silt, sandstone and shales, dramatic rock formations. At the bottom of the switchbacks, the highway followed alongside the boiling Nu River which had carved a steep canyon, and the road seemed to hang on the edge of the cliff. Nujiang Grand Canyon is one of the most beautiful canyons in China, a spectacular, 315 km (189 miles) long marvel of nature, with banks that reach as high as 3,000 m (9,840 feet). Nujiang is one of the most important rivers in China, and flowing into Myanmar it is known as the Salween river.

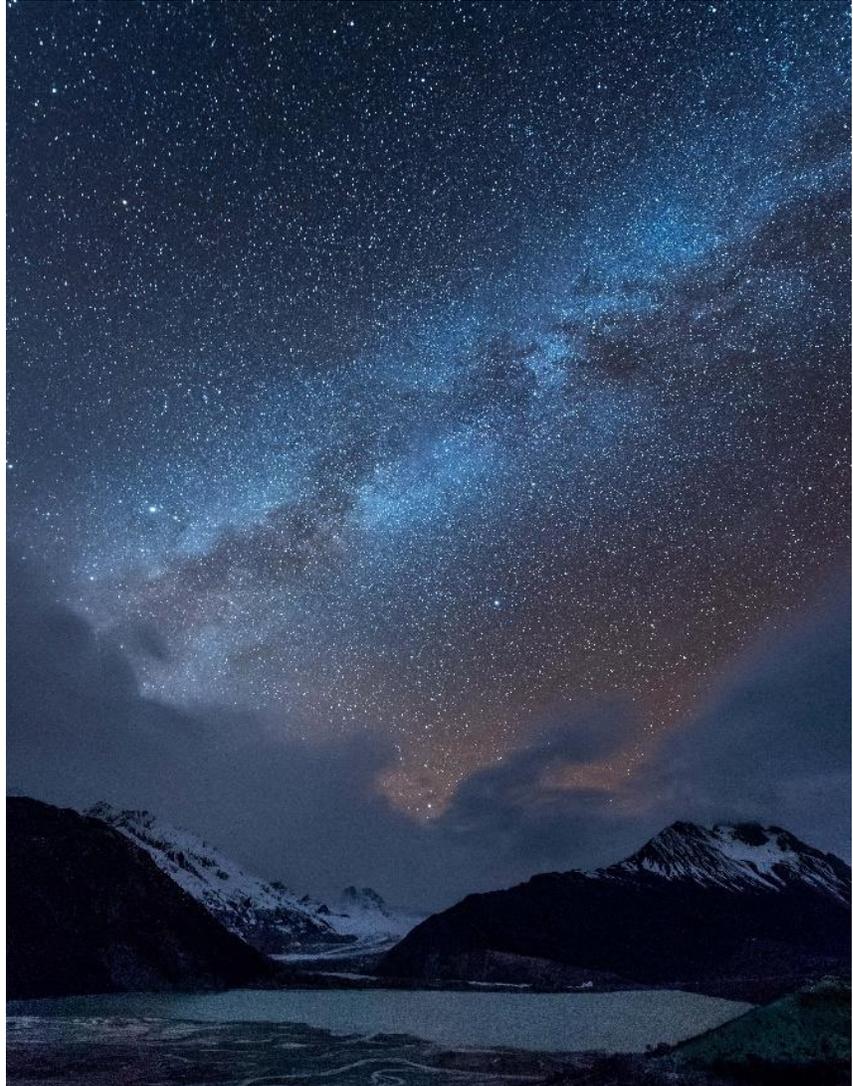
The highway gently climbed for 50 km (30 mi) towards Angela pass 4475 m (14,678 ft) and we drove in the dark through a snow storm, reminding me of past night skiing trips to Stevens pass in my home. Once across the pass we drove out of the snow storm and descended to Rawu, turned off G318 and drove the 39 km (23 mi) up the once glaciated valley to Songtsam Leigu (Tibetan for glacier) lodge. Arrived at 20:45 under a partially cloudy sky that revealed some stars. Late dinner but spent an hour in the cold outside attempting to get decent star shots with the Laigu glacier descending from the Kangri Garpo Range in the distance partly revealed.



Laigu Glacier at night from Songtsam Laigu Lodge

Ranwu Lake is the largest lake in eastern TAR and is the main source of the Parlung Zangbo River, an important tributary to the Yarlung Tsangpo also known as the Brahmaputra. Because of its glacial turquoise color, it is considered a sapphire on the roof of the world. The largest of the three connected lakes is 26 km (15.6 mi) long, with mountains to the south rising to more than 6,000 m (19,680 ft) above sea level. Ranwu Lake is surrounded by Mt. Gangrigabu to the southwest, the Azhagongla Glacier south and Bosula Peak to the northeast, with the famous Laigu glacier, one of the largest icefields in the Hengduan Mountain Range that extends into the lake from the north. The size of the watershed area is 1798 square km (694 sq. mi), and since it is a high-altitude lake, freezes over from late November until late March with a thickness of the ice that can reach 2 meters (6.5 feet).

Right: Laigu Glacier night sky Scott Jiang



Ngan tso or Ranwu Lake was created through a massive debris landslide over a century past, and has been designated a National Forest Park that encompasses a subalpine evergreen conifer forest and alpine vegetation zones that includes 505 species of plants, 42 species of mammals, 90 species of birds and 5 species of amphibians. Mammals under state key protection live in the Ranwu Lake National Forest Park include bahral sheep, snow leopard, white-lipped deer, golden eagle, and the white-tailed eagle *haliaeetus albicilla*. During our stay we had only seen Himalayan vulture, Himalayan partridge and fox.

The following morning was cold with fresh snow on the ground. There were some patches of blue sky to the east where the sun broke through lighting up the Laigu glacier and surrounding peaks. We visited the lake in the early morning, mirroring the brilliant shafts of light reflected off the mountains, then drove to the Rawu monastery overlooking the mountains and lake. Found the monks and the village pilgrims to be very friendly and happy, welcoming us with 'tashi delek' greetings in contrast to most other monasteries we had visited that see more tourists. Beautiful lighting on the snow-covered peaks. Came back and stopped just above the ridge and saw a fox in the snow. Then stopped by the lake enjoying the reflections in the water of peaks in and out of clouds and sun patches.



Upper Ranwu Lake, a series of three lakes between Ranwu and the Songtsam Lodge Laigu Glacier (below)



Laigu Glacier and outwash plain



Ranwu Lake



Himalayan vulture



Laigu Glacier



Laigu Glacier



VILLAGE life in Laigu and monastery at Ranwu lake





Laigu Glacial valley



ttom aerial view of Laigu glacier, one of the largest in the Hengduan Mountains TAR



Route from Songtsam Zhuka west of Markham to Ranwu and Songtsam laigu lower left

SONGTSAM'S SHANGRILA TO LHASA EXPLORATORY ROAD TRIP SCENIC HIGHWAY G318; THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED IN THE HIDDEN KINGDOM OF EASTERN TIBET by WILLIAM D BOEHM
PART 4 RANWU TO BOMI ALONG THE KANGRI GARPO MOUNTAINS, THE HEART OF EASTERN TIBET



Laigu Glacier area west of Ranwu from Songtsam Helicopter; Below: mountains above the Parlung Tsampo River on the way to Bomi G318



We now will follow the Parlung Tsangpo River and the northern slope of the Kangri Garpo Mountain Range west, and in the early morning left for Bomi. We again stopped several kilometers from the Songtsams Lhagu lodge above the edge of the glacial lake full of calved ice from the Laigu Glacier. The area reminded me of parts of Glacier Bay National Park in SE Alaska 45 years ago when I worked as a park ranger exploring Muir Inlet. We continued afterwards back to Ranwu to connect with G318 for our next destination at Bomi, 137km (82 mi) away. Drove along the serpentine road at the edge of the backed-up Parlung River that forms a turquoise-colored lake wedged between steep vertical side slopes, reminding me of the glacial rivers of Banff, Canada. The highway threaded through a steep valley of juniper forest, then ascended into a canyon of forested spruce, fir, and birch. The side slopes were colored in yellow ochre rock outcroppings resembling a part of the Yellowstone canyon in Wyoming. Within another 30 km (20 mi) the landscape again changed revealing peaks that rose vertically on both sides like the

Kananaskis, part of the southern Canadian Rockies. The road continued to wind through vertical walls a section of solid granite that resembled parts of Yosemite National Park. Beautiful country that was so



Oak trees and mountains along the Parlung Tsampo River that flows west along the north slope of the Kangri Garpo Mountain Range.

eclectic in variety of landforms. After several hours we emerged into a forested valley, having reached the broader floodplain and the Medui Glacier visitor center of the Kangri Garp Mountain Range. Here there is a turnoff where the road ascends 7 km to the Midui trailhead to hiked to Midui lake where one can view the spectacular Kangri Garpo Mountain Range that extends west and Medui glacier that descends from its peaks. Unfortunately, the road was closed for winter season.



Parlung Tsangpo river, one of the primary tributaries of the Yarlung Tsangpo that cuts between the eastern Himaalan peaks Namcha Barwa and Gaya Peri and emerges from the deepest canyon in the world into the Brahmaputra River in India



Midui Glacier viewed from 7km trail from G318 Highway. The Midui glacier flows north from the Kangri Garpo Mountain Range that supports the Lhagu Glacier to the southeast.

Our caravan followed the highway through more juniper, oak, and pine forests below a series of vertical and jagged peaks of the Kangri Garpos that now resembled the BC Coastal Range until we finally reached the flood plain of the Parlung Tsangpo. Here we discovered a lush forest at the foot of peaks that resembled the Snoqualmie or upper Fraser River Valley. Passed through the town of Bomi following the Pauling Tsampo, a tributary of the Yarlung Tsampo and within another 30 minutes' drive arrived at Songtsam Bomi, Songtsams newest lodge that just opened October 31. Beautiful place with more of a beach house wood decoration following the local wood, traditional Tibetan, but to me seemed more like NW BC coastal homes; nice touch. There was a Swimming pool, and such wonderful atmosphere. I have a deep tub to take a bath tonight. Incredible luxury. Thankyou lord for this.



Songtsam Bomi, just completed October 2019



Songtsam Bomi, just completed the end of October 2019



Parlung Tsangpo River and lush temperate forest Above and Below





This afternoon drove to the forest under still heavy overcast skies. Walked along the river to enjoy a forest of oak, pine, dogwood and sassafras. Forest included *Sassafras albida*, *Lindera obtusiloba* a deciduous tree, *Quercus aguifolia* an evergreen oak, *Hedera nepalensis* an evergreen vine, *Araliaceae* *Cerasus clarofolia* (prunue) and a small tree in the family *Berberidaceae*, *Berberis gyalica* with edible red fruit. The mountains rose above the turquoise colored Parlung Tsampo River that originates from the Medui and other glaciers on its long journey towards the Yarlung Tsampo. Passed a wetland field



Ruddy shell ducks on the Parlung Tsangpo River



Above ruddy shelducks, unidentified duck, bar-headed geese, grebe pair, sandpiper, heron, Parlung Tsangpo River



Above warber spp, Derbyan Parakeet Psittacula derbiana below: Derbyan Parakeet Psittacula derbiana , snow pigeons



Above, Bharal sheep, middle photo by Z Hua, rt granala

with grazing Tibetan ponies in a tranquil meadow, while a flock of Ruddy shell ducks flew overhead, then congregated on the river gravel bar. Such a tranquil place.

Nov 20, Wednesday Day 6 Great breakfast and today we would ascend the Motuo highway to explore the Gawalong glaciated valley next to the tunnel that connects to Medog, the last Chinese county without access to highways until 2014. We crossed the Parlung River then ascended the Motuo highway in a snow storm to the tunnel at an elevation of 4000 (13,123 ft) and the Galong Temple. We could not

pass through because the south side was closed to foreigners. Beautiful forest of spruce, true fir, larch, and the hardwoods birch, poplar, sumac, and a flowering tree (budding?) possibly in the cherry family. Snowed and cold up on top where there was a small Buddhist Kalong Temple, a branch of Dodong, Ningma. We viewed a flock of snow pigeons that were roosting in a fir tree next to the temple. I learned that the view from this Gawalong Glacier area was spectacular in clear skies, with jagged peaks and a couple small lakes all around us.

Beautiful view from the lodge this afternoon as the mountains were clearing from a low cloud cover. The turquoise Parlung Zangbo River flows below, a branch of the Yarlung Zangbo River. Below the Bomi Lodge, the river is backed up forming Guxiang Lake, a freshwater barrier lake caused by a huge glacial mudslide that blocked the Parlung Zangbo River in 1953. There was evidence that debris flows and landslides occurs frequently along Parlung Zangbo with scoured ravines leading into the river, seriously damaging Highway G318 in the past. We saw across the scoured and still barren Jianmupuqu (Tianmo) Ravine that had cleared the forest with massive boulders and gravel from the 2007 massive glacial debris-flow, blocking the Parlung Zangbo River and covering 450 m (1,476 ft) of the Sichuan Tibet highway at the other side. The following outburst of the flooded river destroyed a bridge 76 m (250 ft) long, causing casualties. Since that year debris-flows with medium or on a small scale occur almost every year. The steep slope and the huge altitude difference of the Jianmupuqu Ravine provide predominant energy conditions for slope failure. The region is located in the southwest monsoon influence area, and concentrated rainfall, as well as the strong glacier activity provides the water source for debris-flows. Most debris-flows in the ravine are induced by the rainstorms, and combined with melted water may be



blocking off Parlung Zangbo River again.

The Parlung Tsangpo threads through a wide

flood plain above tranquil, forested slopes of hardwoods, pine and oak with the Gawa Mountain group rising abruptly with many horn-like summits. It's a pleasant landscape, and to me more beautiful than Meili as there is less human impact here. These mountains are spectacular, and the forest contrasted with the steep snow covered and glaciated peaks is so much like the BC Coastal Range and the European



Alps. Weather is clearing and tomorrow we head to Nyinchi, a lowland fluvial flood plain of the large tributary Nyang Qu River that joins the Yarlung Tsampo. Here lies the richest agricultural farmland and the most diverse lowland wetlands and forests found in Tibet.



Motuo highway pass, Gawarong Monastery



Above: Motuo highway to the tunnel at 4300 m. Monastery; Below. Snow doves roosted in fir tree, flight



Mountain forested slopes of the north slope of the Kangri Garpo Mountain Range





Bottom: Peaks near bomi, RT Motuo pass on a clear day: photo songtsam



Gawalong Mountain and glacier above Motuo Pass Highway on a clear day: photo by Songtsam staff



Kangri Garpo Mountain Range and unnamed peaks rising above the Parlung Tsangpo River east of Songtsam Bomi Lodge above and below KG 52 (Delupola) 6343M/20,810 ft center horned pk, and KG 52i 6065m/19898 ft and kg 52ii 6140m/20,144 ft just behind it to left.





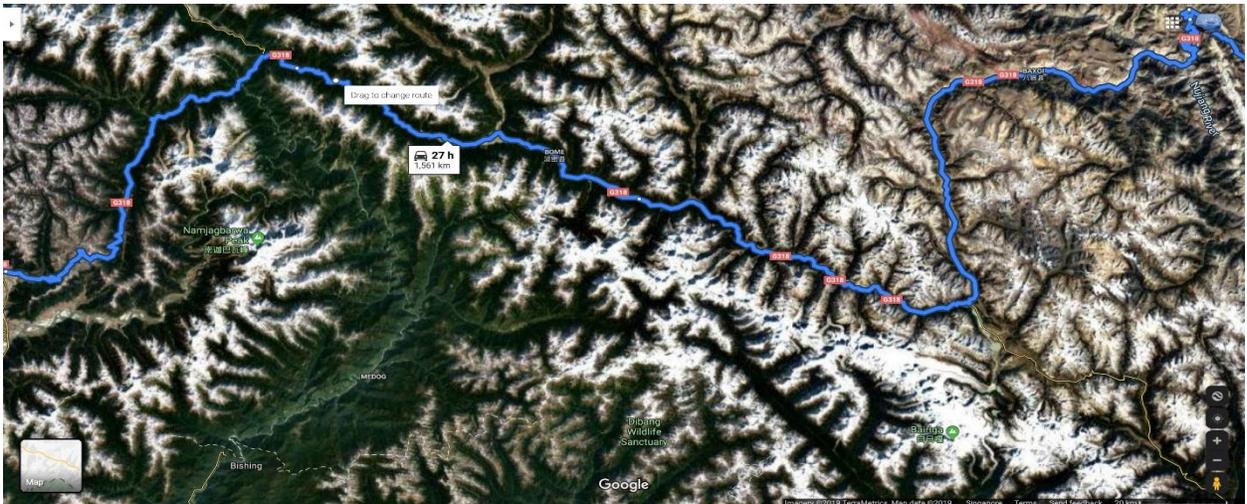
KG 52 (Delupola) 6343M/20,810 ft center horned pk, and KG 52i 6065m/19898 ft and kg 52ii 6140m/20,144 ft just behind it to left. Both peaks extend from the ridge north of Gone Kangri 6347m/20823 ft of Kangri Garpo Mountain Range



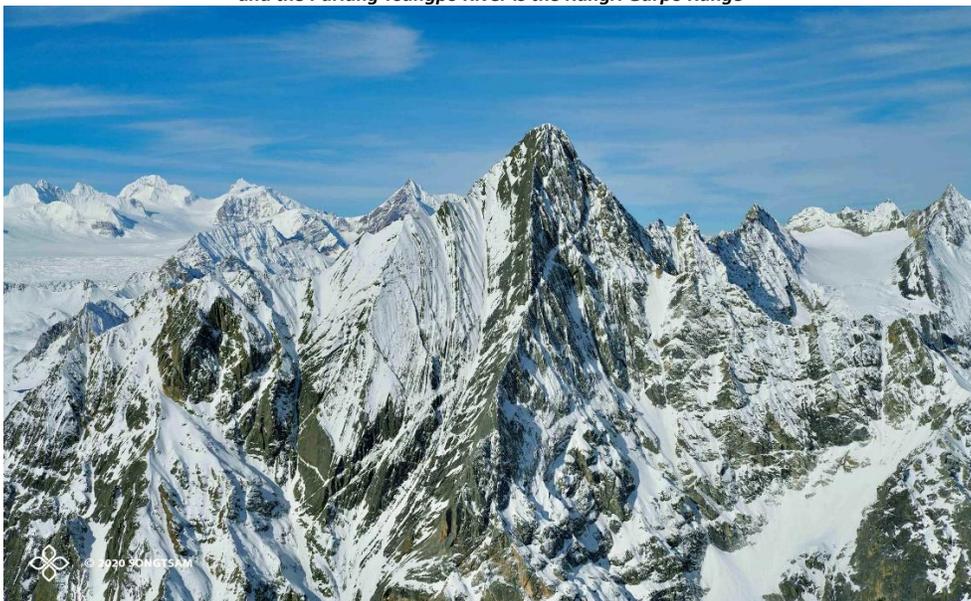
Kangri Garpo Mountain Range and unnamed peaks rising above the Parlung Tsangpo River east of Songtsam Bomi Lodge. KG 52 (Delupola) 6343M/20,810 ft center horned pk, and KG 52i 6065m/19898 ft and kg 52ii 6140m/20,144 ft just behind it to left. Both peaks extend from the ridge north of Gone Kangri 6347m/20823 ft of Kangri Garpo Mountain Range, the latter peak higher than Mt McKinley in N America.



Parlung Tsangpo river, flowing from Ranwu Lake west into the Yarlung Tsangpo that forms the Brahmaputra in India



Route from Ranwu (lower right) west to Bomi upper middle left. North of highway G318 is the East Mountain Range, south of the highway and the Parlung Tsangpo River is the Kangri Garpo Range



SONGTSAM'S SHANGRILA TO LHASA EXPLORATORY ROAD TRIP SCENIC HIGHWAY G318; THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED IN THE HIDDEN KINGDOM OF EASTERN TIBET by WILLIAM D BOEHM
PART 5 BOMI TO THE YARLUNG TSANGPO, NAMCHA BARWHA AND THE LOWLAND FORESTS OF NYINCHI
Nov 21 Thursday, Day 7



Nyainqentanglha Mountain Range north and above Tangmai Bridge where the Parlung Tsangpo River joins the Yigong Tsangpp from north
Left what was to become my favorite of the Songtsam lodges at Bomi and drove towards Nyinchi also called Linzha following the highway alongside the downriver flow of the Parlung Tsangpo. The highway diverted northwest ascending a small river within hardwood forests where we crossed a bridge of the Bide (Boltoi) Tsangpo River that drains the Nyainqentanglha mountain Ranger. After an hours drive, we stopped at Tongmai Bridge scenic turnoff, a bridge that had been destroyed several decades ago by glacial flood flows and that spans the Yigong Tsangpo where it joins the Parlung Tsangpo. The Yigong drains the massive Nyainqentanglha East Mountains that are largely unexplored with the exception of Japanese alpinist Tomatsu Nakamura and Tim Inoue. I wanted to explore upriver, as the area so reminded me of the BC Coastal Range Canada that likewise receives huge amounts of snowfall during the winter, like this area.



BelowTangmai Bridge where the Parlung Tsangpo River joins the Yigong Tsangpp of the East Nyainqentanglha Mountain Range north



Mountains above Tongmai Bridge that was destroyed in past glacial/rain catastrophic landslides where the Parlung Tsangpo joins the Yigong Tsangpo. The Yigong River flows south from the massive East Nyainqentanglha Mountain Range into the Parlung Tsangpo that then flows into the big bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo, that becomes the Brahmaputra in India . Right large monsoon slope failure above Parlung Tsangpo River, regular events that occur during summer Monsoon season.



Above left Looking downriver of the confluence of the Yigong tsangpo with the Parlung Tsangpo; Right Yigong Tsangpo upriver (Tom Nakaumura) that drains a major section of the East Nyainqentanglha Mountain Range. Below: Mt Tiba Kangri Elevation: (22460 ft) west of Tangmai in the eastern edge of the Himalaya immediately north of Gyala Peri 7294 m above the Yarlung Tsangpo canyon.



Wopu village Yigong Yssngpo Rivr and right Jongpo glacier and jongpo po rang 6570 m north of the river in the East Nyainqentanglha Mountain Range. Both photos taken by Tom Nakamura, Kobe University Alpine club



Above: Diermarasong 6135 m southeast face, Nyainqentanglha East mountains above Yigong Tsangpo River by tomatsu Nakamura
 The Nyainqentanglha Mountains form a high watershed between the Yarlung Zangbo (Tsangpo) River valley of southern Tibet and the area of inland drainage and salt lakes on the high plateau. The dramatic peaks of the range are extremely rugged and support large glaciers equal to parts of Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska, with many sections above 6,100 metres /20,000 feet, with some individual peaks well above 6300 meters that include Kona Kangri I 6378 m/ 20925 ft, and just north of the Parlung Tsangpo and Yigong Tsangpo juncture Jalong Kangri 6420 m / 21062 ft.



Nyainqentanglha East mountains nr kongka krangi 1 pk and village of Jinlingxiang. Aerial photo of Maraipo glacier and jumbo lake source of Xungqu qu that flows into the Yigong Tsangpo tributary of Parlung Tsangpo, a tributary to the yarlung Tsangpo that cuts through Namche Barwha and Gyala Peri to form the Brahmaputra in India. The mountains here average above 6100 meters /20,000 ft. The Nyainqentanglha Range proper forms a high watershed between the Yarlung Zangbo (Tsangpo) River valley of southern Tibet and the area north to the Nu River, and area of inland drainage and salt lakes on the high plateau.



Above: Map of part of Nyainqentanglha Mountain Range East. Below photos of Jumba Lake and Maraipo Glacier taken in the top center of the map, near Kona Kangri (Elevation: 6378 m / 20925 ft). Below: unnamed peak at head of Jumba Lake. map shows the Yigong Tsangpo that flows left to right towards the Parlung Tsangpo River bottom left. Photo below unnamed peak 6018 m/20000 ft at head of Maraipo Glacier photo by Tomatsu Nakamura. These mountains experience a tremendous amount of snowfall from the seasonal summer monsoon and dramatic peaks of the range are extremely rugged and support large glaciers equal in scale to parts of Glacier Bay National Park





Above: Nyainqentanglha East mountains Maraipo glacier and jumbo lake, the same lake of aerial photo above taken by Tatsumo Nakamura. Unnamed peak on right 6018m/19744 ft.



Nyainchanglandla Mountain Range, Mt Pumonuji 5782m/ 18,970 ft, and right Mt Pulongu 6310m/ 20,702 ft unclimbed peaks south of the Yigong Tsnagpo River and NE of Lake Basaong. Distance Namche Barwha Rt and Gaya Peri to its left, gap of the Yarlung Tsangpo T Inoue



Nyainchanglandla Mountain Range, Mt Jainija 6586 m/ 21,607 ft, and unnamed peak to right 6444m/ 21,142 ft both unclimbed and south of the Yigong Tsangpo River NE of Lake Basong. Photo by Tim Inoue



Left: First glimpse of Namche Barwa Pk

The Parlung Tsangpo River was surrounded by steep, ice-covered mountains within the forested river valley. More dramatic glaciated peaks of the western extremity of the Kanri Garpo Range partially hidden in clouds. We then followed the winding highway as it ascended into a fir, spruce and Juniper forest before emerging to a

meadowed, rhododendron and dwarf oak forest of Lulang. Beautiful lake with snow mountain reflections of Tiba Kangri, 6846 m (22460 ft), a sister peak of Geya Peri. Had lunch in the newly created hotels of Lulang that lay below a pass that gives commanding views of Namcha Barwha and its sister peak Gaya Peri. Lulang forest and village is nestled between the mountains and glaciers at an elevation of 3,700 m (11,943 ft), a vast expanse of meadows, forests and villages. In Tibetan, the name means “a place to forget your homesickness”. The forest consisted of cypress, rhododendrons, spruce, maple, oak, and pine trees, a landscape that resembled a brush-and-ink Chinese painting of a serene scene with distant ice-covered mountains, glaciers, primitive forest, villages and rivers nearby. Following lunch, we ascended the switchbacks through a rhododendron, juniper, and dwarf oak forest to Sejila Pass 4,720 m (15,481 ft) and at the lookout got a partial view of Namchu Barwa Snow Mountain, and to the north its sister peak Gawa Peri. The Yarlung Tsampo descends between these mountains that forms the deepest gorge in the world. Rising 7,782 m (25,524 ft) above sea level, Namcha Barwa is the highest



Above: Gaya Peri 7254 m in center foreground, Namche Barwha 7782 m center background and Sanghung 7015 m left. The Yarlung Tsangpo travels in between these peaks, flowing within the deepest canyon in the world.



Unnated lake with snow mountain reflections of Tiba Kangri, 6846 m (22460 ft), a sister peak of Geya Peri.above and below



Town of Lulang where we took lunch before ascending Sejila pass with views of Namcha Barwa



Recently constructed resort town Lulang.



Namcha Barwa 7,782 m (25,524 ft), the highest peak of the Hengduan Mountains and the eastern anchor of the Himalayas. The Yarlung Tsangpo River courses between Gaya Per Gyala Peri 7,234 m (23,727 ft) i through a water gap, forming the deepest canyon in the world with a maximum dept of 6,009 m (19,709 feet), then emerges into India forming the Brahmaputra. Namcha Barwa below Nigel Hans photo

mountain in the Hengduan Mountain Range and as an anchor of the eastern Himalaya, ranks as the 28th highest peak in the world. It is one of the most revered snow mountains in southeast Tibet as the main holy mountain for Bonism, the oldest anamistic religion in Tibet. The Yarlung Zangpo Grand Canyon (or Tsangpo Gorge) is longer than the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and the deepest canyon in the world.



Namcha Barwa 7,782 m/25531 ft from Sejila pass

The river passes between the peaks of Namcha Barwa 7,782 m (25,524 ft) and Gyala Peri 7,234 m (23,727 ft) reaches a maximum depth of 6,009 m (19,709 feet) then emerges into Medog, and India as the Brahmaputra. The tropical monsoon and mild climate penetrate through this water gap into the Nyanchi valley to then north, facilitating an incredible diversity of plants and animals that rivals the Kharta valley, an extension of the Arun River of Nepal, and Yunnan, Sichuan mountains. Because of its remoteness, Namcha Barwa has an intact vegetation zonation that still can be found in China, with evergreen and semi-evergreen tropical rainforests scattered in the river valley.



Tiba kangri and Gyala peri 7,294 m/23930 ft north 22 miles of Namcha Barwa from Sejila pass



*Namcha Barwa and the remote canyon of the yarlung Tsangpo River Outside magazine yalung tsangpo expedition 2003.
Below: Glacial source of the Yarlung Tsanpo SW of Mt Kailesh and runs east for about 1,700 kilometres (1,100 mi), draining a northern section of the [Himalayas](#) before it enters the gorge.*



The Yarlung Tsangpo originates southwest of Mt kailesh, and flows east parallel to the Himalayan Origin for 2,057 km (1234 mi) before it drops abruptly over a 2 km (1.1 mile) knickpoint and changes trajectory by 180 degrees in a gorge only 200 km (120 miles) long in the Eastern Himalayan

syntaxis. The river drains 200,000 km² of Tibetan plateau making the Yarlung one of the major drainage catchments in Tibet and the largest in the southern plateau and Tibet. The upper reaches it is called Tachog Khabab (Maquan River), gets water from Jiema Yangzong glacier in the Himalayas.

Descended from the pass into the beautiful Nyang River valley, where we then took a side road past a village of small Tibetan homes surrounded by rich agricultural fields of corn, wheat and barley. At 2600m (8,528 ft) elevation, other crops grown in the valley include rice, peanuts, apples, oranges, bananas, and tangerine, honey peach, pear, grape and lemon. It was evident this is the bread-belt of Tibet. The landscape with mountains and a large, broad alluvial valley reminded me of the Fraser River valley in BC,



Nyang River valley



Nyang River valley

but with more dramatic, ice-covered peaks here. We stopped at the scenic Yani wetlands created by the braided Ni Jang (Niyang qu) river.

The lowland forests of Nyinchi is documented with over 2,000 species of higher plants, 165 species of medical herbs and fungus. According to local forestry officials, Nyingchi is TAR s' largest primary forest region, with the forests of Bomi, Zayu and Loyu having ancient dragon spruces *Picea asperata* which



reach heights of over 80 meters and diameters of 2.5 meters, and a type of sequoia *Cupressus gigantea* that can reach 5.8 meters diameter and age of 2600 years. This forested area is unique for Tibet, part of the Northeastern Himalayan subalpine conifer forests that cover 46,300 square km (17,900 sq. mi) in the southeast Tibetan Plateau, occurring between 2,500 to 4,200 m (8,200 to 13,800 ft). The forests occur primarily in the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, tributary valleys including those of the Nyang River and Parlung Tsangpo, and the Zayü River and Tawang Valley. Many of these forests are found in so-called "inner valleys", which are valleys that are shielded from the South Asian monsoon by mountain ridges but still receive enough precipitation to support thriving forests. At higher elevations, this ecoregion grades into Eastern Himalayan alpine shrub and meadows. In lower elevations it grades into Eastern Himalayan broadleaf forests.

The dominant trees of this temperate forest include hemlock *Tsuga dumosa*, spruce *Picea smithiana*, and true firs *Abies* spp. Less common are larch, pine and yew *Larix griffithiana*, *L. potaninii*, *Pinus wallichiana*, and *Taxus baccata*. Near timberline grow a variety of junipers, birch and oak: *Juniperus indica*, *J. recurva*, and *J. squamata*. *Betula utilis*, and *Quercus* spp. Other broadleaf plants include maple *Acer* spp., magnolia, *Magnolia* spp., laurals, *Lauraceae*, Viburnum, mountain ash *Sorbus* spp., oak *Quercus* spp. and *Araliaceae*. Rhododendrons reach their pinnacle in this ecoregion with the Yarlung Tsangpo River gorge alone having over 60 species. It also is purported to have the highest forest in the world with Tibetan juniper *Juniperus tibetica* reaching heights of 4,900 m (16,100 ft) in Baxoi County, TAR. Mammals typical of this ecoregion include the red panda, snub-nosed monkey, takin, musk deer, red goral, Asiatic black bear, and leopard, but are rarely sighted. The diversity of birds include the Tibetan eared-pheasant, white-eared pheasant, and the giant babax, a drab-colored laughing thrush.

We visited a 600 years old Demu Monastery damaged by 8.4 Richter scale 1950 earthquake and returned to the freeway that led into Linzhi City (Nyingchi). It was late evening and in the dark the city looked like a small-scale Las Vegas with all the new hotels, streets and shop lit up with a display of Christmas tree strings of lights. Everything so new and well-laid out here. Nyingchi also has an airport. Known as the Swiss Alps of Tibet, Nyingchi is one of the lowest areas of the Tibetan plateau inside the TAR, and is renowned as one of the most beautiful places to visit in Tibet, with beautiful lakes, deep gorges, stunning valleys, vast forests, and lush green meadows. Nyinchi was an important stopover for a

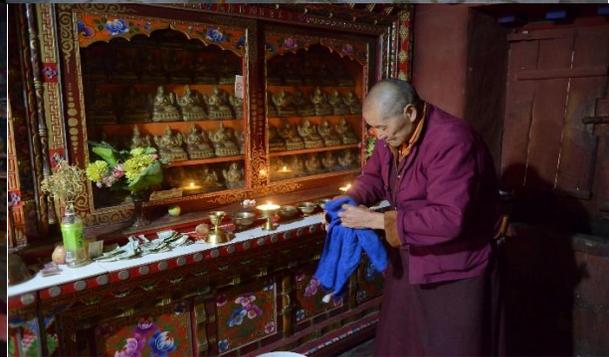
thousand years for the Tea-horse caravans on their way to and from Lhasa from Sichuan and Yunnan.



Namche Barwa above and below on the Yarlung Tsampo River where new Songtsam lodge will be constructed by 2020



Nyinchhi (Linzhi) at night, lit up like Las Vegas. A very modern city



Demu Monastery outside of Nyinchi (linzhi)

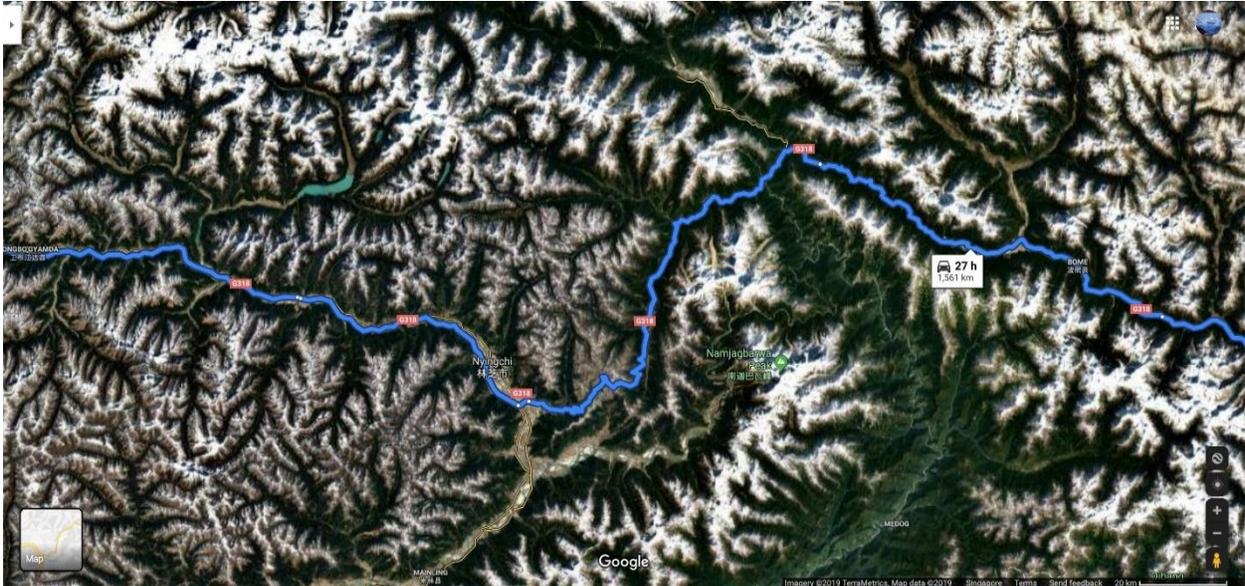


600 years old Demu Monastery





Hotel Tingyard, Nyinchi



Route Bomi through the Mountains between Namche Barwa and Geya Peri to Nyinchi Valley

SONGTSAM'S SHANGRILA TO LHASA EXPLORATORY ROAD TRIP SCENIC HIGHWAY G318; THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED IN THE HIDDEN KINGDOM OF EASTERN TIBET

PART 6 Nyinchi to Lhasa

Nov 22, Friday Day 8



Leaving the Linzhi valley and the Nyang River



Basamtso lake (Draksum Tso)

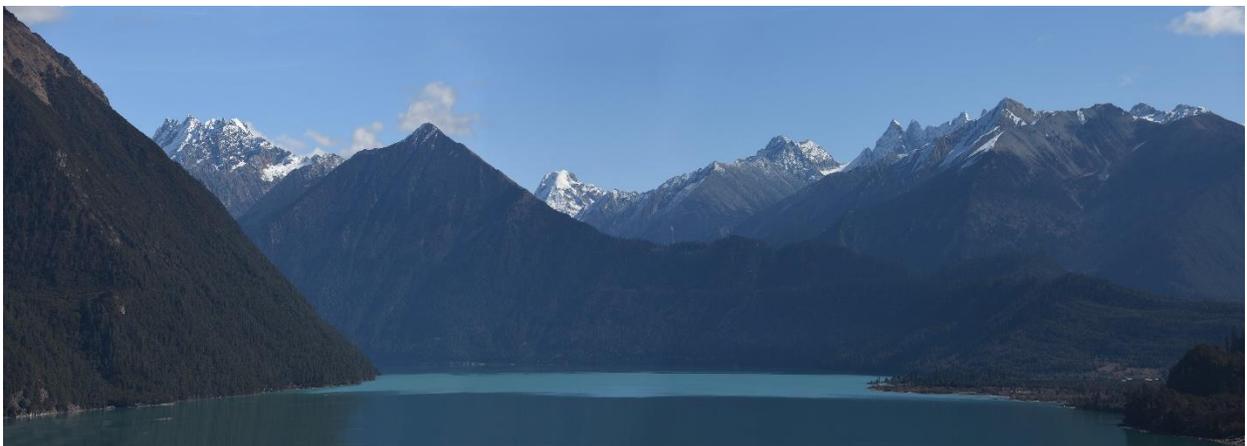
We leave for Lhasa today, and will stop by one of Eastern Tibbets most beautiful mountain lakes, Basam (Draksum) Tso. Leaving Nyinchi, we entered the freeway west through the broad alluvial valley of the Nyang Qu River. The road ascended and took us into oak forests where we turned off an exit to drive some 40 km (24 mi) up the valley of Basamtso lake. We gathered at the commercialized entrance gate in a large parking lot surrounded by shops and restaurants at the foot of this beautiful mountain range waiting for opening. Drove to the overlook and hiked up a long flight of stairs to get the incredible view of the mountains surrounding the glacial colored turquoise lake. Jagged ice-covered peaks with glaciers surrounded the lake, a scene reminiscent of Howe Sound driving from North Vancouver BC into



Peaks surrounding Draksum Tso (Basam Tso) Lake

Squamish with the coastal range in view, but with more magnificent peaks. Spent several hours here including exploring a small nearby islet where there was a boat launch for lake touring, and a monastery. Apart from the sheer beauty of the lake and its surrounding 6000m (19,680 feet) peaks, the site has strong connections to Gesar of Ling, the semi-mythical ruler of eastern Tibet, and Guru Rinpoche, the Indian sage, both of whom are said to have resided at the lake centuries before.

Draksum Tso is an alpine lake at the mid-upper reach of the Bar River, the largest tributary of the Niyang River which flows south into the Yarlung Tsangpo. The 118 km (11 mi) long lake within a glacial valley at 3,538 m (12,631 ft) above sea level. Historically valley glaciers have formed the lake and retreated, creating a watershed of rivers that converge into its turquoise blue waters. Dramatic peaks surround the lake with sharp toothlike summits and glacier cirques, with many of the alpine glacial tongues extending to lower elevations deep into the lush, old-growth forests. The giant trees and flourishing understory that include oak, hemlock and juniper still support rare wildlife like bear, leopard, bharaal sheep, musk deer, and birds that include ruddy shelducks, black-necked crane, and Tibetan snow pheasant.



Draksum Tso (Lake)



We returned down the valley back to the freeway, and it took us four hours to get to Lhasa located within the broad alluvial plain of the Yarlung Tsampo River. We arrived at night, and passed the Potala Palace flooded with lights, then across town in a small valley reached our final destination, Songsam Lodge Linka. We again were warmly greeted by staff that included the manager Lhamo and Baima's Sister, now the general manager of songsam Lhasa and served warm ginger tea. Nice to stay here as the rooms are amazingly well decorated in



Tibetan style with wood beams and side walls. We relaxed and were served an amazing dinner to celebrate our arrival at our final destination in Tibet.



The next morning, we visited the lesser known meditation caves at the 1350-year-old Drak Yerpa Monastery place at an altitude of 4,885m (16,022 ft). An hour drive south of Lhasa, we walked up to a series of caves decorated on the outside showcase a riot of primary colors to match the deep blue sky. The walkway threaded through Jiaye basib caves and main temple set on nearly vertical limestone cliffs. Each small temple was built around a cave where monks had in the past meditated. Pilgrims came to worship visiting each temple cave, giving money and carrying their prayer beads. Beautiful setting, like all Temples seem to be. Monks were stoking large clay stoves with mulberry, pine, cypress branches and highland barley powder. There is superstition that the mulberry smoke fills and connects with the mountain god and nature. In Tibet, incense burners are usually placed at the entrance to temples, before sacred mountains or at the mountaintop pass to pray for blessings. In the homes of the local people, there are small simmering mulberry stoves, which can also simmer and purify before festivals and important guests come.

We had traveled for 10 days through an incredible variety of landscapes, and experienced a disappearing part of Tibetan culture still seen in a few remote villages. Reflecting on the journey, I wanted to return and explore more, discover alpine areas by trail, and find areas of wildlife that still are protected in this remote area of Tibet. Songtsam Lodges is aiming to turn the long-forgotten Yunnan-Tibet Tea Route into a historical, cultured boutique travelling route with beautiful scenery and excellent hospitality facilities. I was fortunate to have taken this journey, and look forward to returning to experience the new lodges that will be constructed at Namjibawa, Basong, and Yigon. I concluded that yes, it rivaled some of the most beautiful drives in North America, with the additional bonus of experiencing a unique Tibetan culture. The Hidden Kingdom was becoming accessible now for the avid adventurer.



Potala Palace lhasa; Below Potala palace group, Songtsam linka Lhasa below







Songsam linka Lhasa; below enroute to Drak Yerpa Monastery place at an altitude of 4,885m (16,022 ft)





Drak Yerpa Monastery place at an altitude of 4,885m (16,022 ft)





Songtsam Linka Ihasa and group dinner celebrating the end of our G318 journey.

