

Cycling around Lhasa in Tibet



The Phantom from Flekkefjord made a trip around the planet in the fall of 2007 by plane and bike to find a suitable place to retire. Started with a week in *Agra* and *Varanasi* in *North India* and three weeks in *Kathmandu* in *Nepal* which was not so bike friendly. Did three trips in the surrounding area around *Kathmandu*, but then I read in the paper that a cyclist had been run over by three trucks on the triple so I packed the bike.

It took three weeks to get the *Tibet permit* from the *Chinese Embassy* in *Kathmandu* when they had a week's vacation during the *Sun Festival*. The same time it supposedly was martial law in *Lhasa* while *Dalai Lama* received his award from *U.S. Congress* 17. October in addition to the 5 year *Chinese People's Congress*, but who could know? Was nothing in the newspaper *Agder* about it.

Landed eventually at *Lhasa Airport* (3500 m) in *Tibet* Saturday 27. October and thought it would be much checking of the bike bag as usual, but was actually waved past by a female custom officer, while all the other ones were held back. Strangely, every place has their system like *Norwegian Homeland Security* and you get literally high on being in *Lhasa*.

Tried to find an *ATM* cash machine that first night, but buzzing my way in a queue there was someone who said: "It must be a *Bønpö*" and realized that I had ended up going against the queue around the *Jokhang Temple*. According to the *Buddhist* tradition you shall walk around with the shoulder to the right towards the temple. The *Pre Buddhist Bønpoes* goes in the opposite direction in accordance with their tradition and that will easily make a traffic jam. Turned diplomatic and went a few rounds along with a few thousand *Tibetans* and it was quite an experience. Found a cash machine on a corner back to the hotel and it worked.

Flora hotel was situated in a *Muslim* part of the city. For several centuries, there have been a few thousand *Muslims* in *Lhasa* without problems. They are often butchers and *Buddhists* also eat the meat.



There are hundreds of kilometers of flat roads as well as some hills in *Tibet*, so something for every taste. The altitude is an issue for most the first few days, but experienced no notable problems, took it easy and built up the blood. Clear air, and in this altitude less air resistance and less *Oxygen*. Maybe *Oxygen* bottles will be just as popular as water bottles in a *Tour de Tibet*? It is also possible that the blood becomes so thick that one cannot start without being classified as doped.

Sunday 28. October: 40 km, 60 m altitude gain and two punctures. That is literally quite flat! Put on 32 mm cross tires that seem to fit better to the pavement in *Lhasa* city centre that is similar to that in *Oslo, Norway*. Outside of the old town a combination of *Chinese* shopping centres and souvenir shops, with some original bars and restaurants in between, all with signs both in *Chinese* and *Tibetan*. The *Potala Palace* is a revelation to ride in front of. Pollution rules are not as strict as in *Europe* and *United States*, but not much traffic, and a coal power plant pollutes *Western* part of the city.

Monday 29. October: 58.5 km, 271 m altitude gain, a small round in *North Eastern* part of *Lhasa Valley*, inclusive a small mountain pass (*Drak Yerpa*) 3888 metres above sea level where a bus with pilgrims threw small flags on me or the pass? It's not what you experience on bicycle training in *Norway*. A fantastic nature and probably some natives who was wondering what kind of alien came cycling. An *old viking* in *Tibet*? *Changlam nyingma vikingpa!* *Pøke rangsem!* *Live a free Tibet!*

Tuesday 30. October: 62.5 km, 208 m altitude gain, a little ride halfway to the airport and back, a lot of wind with sand and traffic with exhaust and turned long way before I got to the tunnel to the airport. Some nice drags in the tail wind on the way back. Good food at *Snowlion* restaurant in the evening and found my regular place in front of the *Mt. Kailash* painting.

Wednesday, 31. October: 400 m swimming in *Lhasa Spa* is also an interesting experience, the buoyancy in the water is the same as at sea level. Good lunch with an acquaintance and local sightseeing without the bike.

Thursday, 1. November: 16 km ride to *Sera monastery* North of the city, but when I see a *Ticket Office* in a monastery I don't bother to go in. It is also said that some of the monasteries are used for retraining *Tibetans*, something ala the *Norwegian Welfare* courses to customize them to a labour market where there hardly is any. 8 km walk later to/from the *Tibetan Museum* who really is suspicious and some of the strangest I have seen. Unfortunately it is just what the *Tibetan* culture is about to be, literally a museum? Started to get cold even in the afternoons, 16 °C after a few days with over 20 °C. Time for a cap and long pants.

Friday 2. November: a bit chilly, so I thought I'd climb up on *Bumpari* (4150 m above sea level), a holy small mountain top in the vicinity. It also required a permit and maybe *Chinese* tourists going to *Holmenkollen* ski jump in *Oslo* needs one too? There were no police there when I cycled past the foot of the mountain on Monday, perhaps the way really was closed for single cyclists? It was actually the only place in 97 days around the planet where I was denied access.



Samye the monastic city (© Naldjor)

Saturday 3. November: Taxi to *Lhasa* airport 60 km from the hotel and rode 120 km to/from *Zhalang* ferry site at the *Mindroling* monastery that was a bit more than "a few kilometers" from the hotel, but kilometers are maybe a bit longer in *Tibet* than in *Norway*? Took a ferry between sand banks in *Yarlung Tsangpo* (*Brahmaputra*) river and jeep to/from *Samye* which is the first *Buddhist* temple which *Guru Padmasambhava* from *Odiyana* built in year 775 and maybe he was an old *viking*? *Odi = Odin*? Got to see the famous *Ngadrama* ("looks like me", i.e. *Padmasambhava*) statue. It was apparently destroyed during the cultural revolution and reconstructed. He was a bit golden in the skin, and perhaps the original has moved to *Manhattan*? Who knows, stunning scenery and not much traffic, just a lot of oncoming military vehicles on the way back. The last kilometers went in complete darkness and sharp awareness, ironically I almost crashed on a speed bump just before the airport hotel. It was a so-called strong Saturday and an overwhelming experience.

Sunday 4. November: 60 km in the upper section of the *Yarlung* valley, *West* of the airport on the old road to *Lhasa* and towards *Gyantse*, again you're just stunned by the wide valleys and the high mountains. Spent the afternoon in the village at the airport, talking a bit with the local *Tibetans*, ate food and drank a little beer with them. Nice cultural integration. *Lama la chø pa bul!* (*We offer to the lama!*) *Cheers!*

Monday 5. November: Flying to *Beijing* in the afternoon/evening. Massive mountain ranges all the way to the plain before *Chengdu* so here is more to explore. *Alaska, Rocky Mountains, Jotunheimen, Pyrenees* and *Alps* are wane in comparison. *Beijing* was, however, a disappointment, dense fog and smog, so didn't bother even to pack out the bike to look at popular sights in the city the next day. Booked a flight to *Hawaii*. The *Olympic* participants the following year, also got to taste a bit of the bad air and heavy rain. Maybe they should put the bike races to *Tibet*? Time trial in the *Yarlung* valley, and long race *Gyantse-Lhasa*? There at least the air is clean, but thin ...

A long week and only 360 km cycling in *Tibet* is hardly enough to get acclimatised and full of red blood cells, but it was what time and temperature allowed this time. *Himalayan Mountain Bikes* arranges some nice trips, but you have to be early with booking at least two months in advance to avoid having to wait in *Kathmandu* on the various permits you need in rural areas. The best times to ride a bike is normally March-May, September-October, when it otherwise easily gets too cold or hot and wet. In the summer of 2007 there was an abnormally long monsoon and even flooding in the *Lhasa Valley* where people waded deep in water. The *Tibetans* also notice the climate changes and a campaign is underway to take care of the forest, irrigate the water and cultivate the Earth in a reasonable manner so those who are dependent on the major rivers get their share to the extent the *Chinese Government* follow up their demands.

I can not say so much about the political situation, but the youth seems to integrate as in other parts of the world regardless of the past. *Tibet* is becoming a secular society without any other religions than *Capitalist Communism*, the two systems of whatever that is. *Sheraton* has already built a hotel and there will likely be a *Casino Presidente* in *Lhasa* also to the extent it has any significance for the natural state. The *Norwegian-Tibetan University* cooperation works well and is the way to go, using intelligent youth to get a thorough and good education in *Norway*. The *Tibetan* community will hopefully lift itself out of *Chinese* dictatorship and all citizens get a passport once they have found their place in a free society, or what is called a democracy.

Tibet has an enormous potential as a tourist country with beautiful mountains and valleys. The infrastructure needs to be developed with more hotels and hostels. The *Chinese* have naturally control over how many foreigners are coming and going, a la the *Bhutanese* model so it doesn't get too many bums like in *Nepal* and *Norway*. Experience also most *Chinese* as friendly people and one should at least praise them for creating roads that are relatively good to ride on. It may not cost so much to invite *H.H. Dalai Lama* to meet his old hometown? It will not only make an extraordinary person happy before he dies, but also be a gesture that will be well received all over the planet and give the *Chinese Government* a better reputation which they may need instead of hiding reality for their inhabitants. Human rights for all!