

Travel Log – Tibet

September 24, 2013

We are in Lhasa Tibet in the St. Regis hotel. Our suite can only be described through photos. It is large and modern with wooden panels, serene ambiance. Instant impressions coming in from the airport: rugged, traditional Tibetan architecture, signs of new developments but nothing like in China proper, insulated and poorer. Mom says better tasting food on a sample of one lunch. We were warned to take it easy, hydrate a lot (Michele Obama would love it) do not shower or bathe in the first two days (Zach and Ethan would love that?) dress well so as to not catch a cold and between noon and 4PM watch for a sun burn. No wonder they are so religious they are so close to heaven here (12,500 feet or 3.5 KM). After lunch we were advised to stay in the hotel for the rest of the day and breathe. It's not easy. So with all that what do the natives do? Smoke and drink and die of lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema, a mild sample of which we brought with us to feel at home (not funny). Oh and our guide's name is Dickey she is very friendly. Mom and I are officially a touring group now so we better get along and be nice to each other. One half of the group is napping now which makes it easy. We decided to go for a walk but by the time we arrived at the nearest Plaza we realized that there was not much to see. The dining room at the hotel is spectacular and so is the menu. In the spirit of the orient I had a Wonton soup and a Sushi and Sashimi (large) plate. Mom had Spaghetti but with Tibetan Zabta. She was on fire. We made it through the night although with endless pit stops. Hydration - remember? Breathing is somewhat heavy and it is very dry up in the sky remember to bring a bottle. As long as you breathe normally you're OK but as soon as you start thinking how hard it is to breath you start feeling things (headaches, stress). This is further proof that 90 percent of the game is half mental.





September 25

Before lunch time we learned more about Buddhism than we had in a life time. We retained one-half-of- one-percent if that, enough to understand why so many young people in the West are drawn to it. First, it's a "good" religion, compassionate, spiritual and "soothing" but mainly once you choose it, it is a life-long learning of all the Buddha, Lamas and the rest of the complex hierarchical structure and intricate worshipping rituals. So it may be an escape from responsibility and accountability of Western culture norms, just saying. Today was the first "authentic" day we toured the old city of Lhasa. Today, Wednesday the day in the week of the birth of Dalai Lama and Tibetans' worship day. The old city is a combination of a bazaar, the catacombs of Old Jaffa or the old city of Jerusalem. There are tons of people, young and old rural, traditional, semi- modern young.





In Canada when Chinese wear hygienic face masks it means that either they are infected with a bug and trying to protect their surrounding or that there may be a flu epidemic and they're trying to protect themselves. Not so in Tibet. We saw many, mostly women of all ages but also few men wearing both hygienic and cloth masks. The reason we were told are many: not to offend the Buddha with the garlic breath; not to be recognized by the authorities when they work past retirement, not to be photographed by dumb tourist like us for fear of it falling into the wrong hands (Chinese authorities); fear of the evil eye and also not to get a facial tan. Chinese and Tibetan adore white/ yellow skin. Go figure. We visited the big and the "small" Jokhang temples and watched the devotion and sincerity of the religious rituals and there are so many. We visited a nunnery and monastery and watched Tibetan's life time devotees, monks, nuns young and old in their natural habitat. We discovered that the infamous Swastika is a Tibetan Buddhist symbol going clock wise and the one going counter clock wise is a symbol of the pre- Buddhist religion. We'll have to find out how it became the Nazi German symbol when it supposed to represent compassion. Best news: we walked a lot, felt reasonably good and experienced no altitude problems. It may be the altitude sickness pills we took this morning or maybe just beginners' luck. Mom still has issues with the food both local but even Western, the smells, the cleanliness etc. In all likelihood our next trip to this region will be in virtual reality.





During lunch Dickey talked to us about her family and life in Tibet. Without getting political it is clear that opportunities are few for young Tibetan while with the influx of Chinese into Tibet and getting first dibs on Government jobs. After lunch we proceeded to the Serra monetary, a sprawling campus of Monk University at the foothill of one of the awe inspiring mountains surrounding Lhasa. This brought the Buddhism altogether. To simplify: reincarnation, protecting against evil spirits and doing good things brings good and doing evil things brings evil. Now anybody who knows more than a day's worth of Buddhism will laugh their heads off with this simplification. One more thing: 5 different burials in Tibetan Buddhism - water, tomb, underground, cremation and sky. Thank goodness mom was in excellent shape considering her circumstances so I did not have to make a choice. By 5PM we're ``temple`` out and crashed on arrival at the hotel. Oh, Canadians the weather: mist and cool in the morning 3 layers and an umbrella, turn drizzle and legitimate rain and by early afternoon scorching sun. We were warned about a sun burn which we laughed off when remembering how close we are to the sun. No, seriously Tibetans put on sun screen and use umbrellas to protect themselves.



September 26

The morning was the ultimate endurance test: climbing up to the top of the Boutalla Palace. Fast forward - Mom made it. She is a brave and courageous woman. Half way through was a touch and go but to get buried next to the Tomb of the many Dalai Lama's you have to get to the top only to find out that there is no room for burial at the top. All the different Buddha and the many Dalai Lamas and all the relics the place is jam packed. The truth be told Mom made it largely because of the understanding of the rest of the group (myself) by allowing her to climb at her snail pace. Unfortunately photos are not allowed inside only from the outside. It's a magnificent structure, high atop the city of Lhasa and a must see not so much for architecture than to content. They say that half of the world's wealth is inside the different chapels, tomb burial display etc. This first among others was the target of the "Cultural Revolution" for distraction, burning of holly books and pillaging artifacts and relics. Only 30 percent has been returned and resorted.





Now in a nice restaurant having Yak Burger (great!) and drinking tea. In the afternoon we went to the present (14) Dalai Lama's summer palace and his residences. He only lived there 3 years before he left to India or more accurately exiled during the Cultural Revolution in 1959. One of the rooms has a four wall painting telling the entire story of Tibetan Buddhism in pictures and it was a wonderful summary of what we heard and saw in the last two days.

September 27

Buddhism is a very colourful religion and each colour has its own meaning. It's also very numerical: 3 Buddha, 1 living Dali Lama, 2 holly books, 13 levels to become a Lama. They must have a song like Echad Me Yodea except its much longer for sure. It is also a very superstitious religion. There is a "protector" for every ill and the belief that praying to him will cure all. Mom ran out of gas this morning when we visited Drepung monastery the highest point in Tibet and therefore in the World. Half way through the second phase mom sat down and I went on for an hour with Dickey the guide. Here they have a contemporary business model: want to take photos in each chapel? No problem: for 20 Yuan you can take as many photos as you want. There are at least 10 rooms. You do the math.



This is a time in every long trip when the wheels start to come off. I had a bad night sleep in one hour increments and had problems concentrating on my breathing (you don't - you die). Mom had every ache in the book mainly stomach and back. But let's face it we are travelling courtesy of the universal Canadian Health care system: we took our individual drug cocktails and some over the counter reinforcements and we're back on our feet although we are challenging longevity. Our tour guide loves mom so much that she took us to an authentic Chinese only restaurant. You should see mom's face when the first dish arrived. But believe it or not she liked it. On to the Tibetan Museum (of revision history the way they are allowed to describe Tibet Liberation). By the end of this trip we may offer ourselves as exhibits. But seriously 3 full days in Lhasa were fascinating. Tomorrow we are descending to Katmandu, Nepal





September 28

``Skyped`` our kids during Shabat Dinner. Miss them. The all look great. Leaving Tibet is more difficult than getting in. The security and customs and immigration are ominous. You try to read body language but these are Chinese always stern. A young Chinese woman frisks you from head to toe - free. The flight delay was worth the wait. Flying over the Himalayan range and seeing Mt. Everest in clear view , is a thrill that only when you see it you could understand what you missed if you didn't. If you can't climb them photograph them. Katmandu is much lower than Lhasa Tibet which means that you can breathe the air pollution of Katmandu much easier than the clear and clean air of Lhasa.



