

Trekking

The high mountains, deep valleys and endless plains of Tibet offer incredible opportunities for trekking. The remoteness of Tibet combined with climatic extremes poses special challenges for walkers – and unique rewards. In the higher reaches of the plateau snow storms and blistering heat are both possible on a single day. The wonders of Tibet's natural environment are enhanced by the people met along the trail, heirs to an ancient and fascinating way of life. Blessedly, it is still possible to trek for days in Tibet without having the experience marred by the hubbub of modern civilisation.

Most trekking is done in the centre of Tibet, not far from the major towns and highways. Cities such as Lhasa and Shigatse provide bases from which to equip and launch treks. Mastering the six great treks covered here will serve you well should you decide to venture further afield. There are certainly many new frontiers beckoning the experienced, well-equipped trekker. For the most adventurous and carefree, it is even possible to cross large sections of Tibet's mountain ranges on foot.

The first people trekked over the mountains to Tibet during the Old Stone Age, 40,000 years ago. Over the ensuing millennia invaders, pilgrims and traders covering huge distances made it to the mountain-ringed 'Land of Snows'. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a slew of spies, explorers and scholars walked great lengths in their attempts to reach the Holy City, Lhasa. For those who survived their Tibetan adventure it was standard practice to regale their fellow countrymen with an adventure book or two. The greatest Tibetan explorer of all time was the Swede Sven Hedin, who made more than a dozen epic trips to Tibet in the early part of the 20th century. One of the most memorable treks was mounted by George Roerich's Central Asiatic expedition in the 1920s. By traversing a great swathe of Tibet's northern plains, Roerich made a series of pioneering archaeological discoveries.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Walk the old pilgrims' trail from **Ganden to Samye** (p288), a test of one's physical ability and spiritual aptitude
- Follow the Buddhist trade route from **Shalu to Nartang** (p296), a fine introduction to trekking in Tibet and a window on the ancient art of pilgrimage
- Circumambulate **Mt Kailash** (p302) – not merely a walk around a mountain but a journey towards a deeper understanding of the inner self
- Traverse the **Nyenchen Tanglha range** (p308) to the turquoise healing waters of lake Nam-tso, extending one's reach and endurance
- Trek with **Mt Everest** (p299) as an ever-present beacon, for spectacular scenery, rigorous exercise and the opportunity for fellowship with Tibetans



PLANNING

For all its attractions, Tibet is a formidable place where even day walks involve survival skills and generous portions of determination. As it's situated on the highest plateau on earth and crisscrossed by the world's loftiest mountains, nothing comes easily and careful preparation is all important. Even on the most popular treks, which can involve several days of travel without any outside help, high passes up to 5600m are crossed.

WHEN TO TREK

The best time to plan a trek in Tibet is during the warmer half of the year. May and June are excellent months without much rain or snowfall but some high alpine passes in eastern Tibet may still be closed (although in this chapter we don't cover treks in eastern Tibet). July and August are the hottest months of the year but they tend to be rainy and this can make walking messy and trails harder to find. September and October are excellent months for trekking but in high areas the nights are cold and early snow is always a possibility.

It's a good idea to budget in a few extra days for your trek, especially if much road travel is needed to get to the trailhead, as roads can be blocked, especially in the wet summer months. You might also need additional time hiring local guides and beasts of burden.

Trekkers must be prepared for extremes in climate, even in the middle of summer. A hot, sunny day can turn cold and miserable

in a matter of minutes, especially at higher elevations. Night temperatures at 4500m and above routinely fall below freezing even in July and August! At other times of the year it gets even colder. In midwinter in northwestern Tibet, minimum temperatures reach minus 40°C. Yet Tibet is a study in contrasts, and in summer a scorching sun and hot, blustery winds can make even the hardiest walker scurry for any available shade. Between the two extremes, the Tibetan climate – cool and dry – is ideal for walking but always be prepared for the worst.

Before embarking on a trek, make sure you're up to the challenge of high-altitude walking through rugged country. Test your capabilities by going on day walks in the hills around Lhasa and Shigatse. Attempt a hike to the top of a small mountain such as Bumpa Ri (p116), the prayer-flag-draped peak on the far side of the Kyi-chu from Lhasa.

WHAT TO BRING

There is a great deal to see while trekking and you will be revitalised by the natural surroundings, but you must be prepared for extremes in weather and terrain. The time of year and the places in which you choose to walk will dictate the equipment you need.

Clothing & Footwear

As a minimum, you will need basic warm clothing, including a hat, scarf, gloves, down jacket, long underwear, warm, absorbent socks, all-weather shell and sun hat, as well as comfortable, well-made pants and shirts. Women may want to add a long skirt to their clothing list. Wear loose-fitting clothes that cover your arms, legs and neck and choose a wide-brimmed hat like the ones Tibetans wear. For information on culturally appropriate dress, see Responsible Tourism (p47).

If you attempt winter trekking, you will certainly need more substantial mountaineering clothing. Many people opt for synthetic-pile clothing, but also consider wool or sheep fleece, which have proven themselves in the mountains of Tibet for centuries. One of your most important assets will be a pair of strong, well-fitting hiking boots. And remember to break them in before starting the trek!

Equipment

Three essential items are a tent, sleeping bag and backpacking stove. There are no

TREKKING DISCLAIMER

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The fact that a trip or area is described in this guidebook does not mean that it is safe for you and your trekking party. You are ultimately responsible for judging your own capabilities in the conditions you encounter.

restaurants in the remote areas of Tibet and provisions are hard to come by, so you will probably end up cooking all of your own food. Count on camping because, except in certain villages that are on the main trekking routes, it can be difficult to find places to sleep. Invest in a good tent that can handle big storms and heavy winds. A warm sleeping bag is a must. Manufacturers tend to overrate the effectiveness of their bags, so always buy a warmer one than you think you'll need.

You will also need a strong, comfortable backpack large enough to carry all of your gear and supplies. To save a lot of misery, test the backpack on day hikes to be certain it fits and is properly adjusted.

Other basic items include water containers with at least 2L capacity, a system for water purification, a torch (flashlight), compass, pocketknife, first-aid kit, waterproof matches, sewing kit, shrill whistle and walking stick or ski pole. This last item not only acts as a walking aid but, even more importantly, for defence against dog attacks. Tibetan dogs can be particularly large and brutal and they roam at will in nearly every village and herders' camp. Bring your walking stick or pole from home, or purchase Chinese-made trekking poles in Lhasa.

Petrol for camping stoves is widely available in towns and cities but is of fairly poor quality. To prevent your stove from getting gummed up you will have to clean it regularly. Kerosene (煤油, *meiyou* in Chinese, *sanum* in Tibetan) can also be obtained in cities. In Lhasa you will find kerosene vendors on Dekyi Shar Lam, opposite the road to Ramoche.

For details on buying and hiring trekking gear in Tibet, see p126. Nowadays, there are scores of shops in Lhasa selling such equipment.

MAPS

There are numerous commercially available maps covering Tibet, but very few of these maps are detailed enough to be more than a general guide for trekkers. The best overview map currently available is called *Tibet*, a 1:1,500,000 scale chart by **Reise Know-How** (www.reise-know-how.de) of Germany. The Chinese government produces small-scale topographic and administrative maps, but these are not for sale to the general public. The US-based Defense Mapping Agency Aerospace Center produces a series of charts covering Tibet at scales of

1:1,000,000, 1:500,000 and 1:250,000 (though the last can be hard to find). The most useful of the American 1:500,000 references for trekking in Tibet are H-10A (Lhasa region, Ganden to Samye, Tsurphu to Yangpachen), H-9A (Kailash and Manasarovar) and H-9B (Shigatse region, Shalu to Nartang, Everest region).

Soviet 1:200,000 topographic maps can now be consulted in many large university library map rooms. However, most libraries will not permit you to photocopy them because of international copyright laws. Buying them has become easier with commercial outlets in the West stocking them. Punch 'Tibet maps' into your computer search engine to see who carries them in your area.

The Swiss company **Gecko Maps** (www.gecko-maps.com) produces a 1:50,000-scale Mt Kailash trekking map.

For details of places to buy maps of Tibet and Lhasa, see p321.

TREKKING AGENCIES

The kind of trek you take will depend on your experience and the amount of time you have. Unless you have already hiked extensively in the Andes or Himalayas, it may be better to consider organising your walk through a travel agency. This can save much time and worry.

The main advantage of going with an agency is that it takes care of all the red tape and dealings with officials. Most agencies offer a full-package trek, including transport to and from the trailhead, guide, cook, yaks or burros to carry the equipment, mess tent and cooking gear. The package may even include sleeping bags and tents if these are required.

There is now a plethora of private agencies in Lhasa, some of which can arrange treks. Let the buyer beware, for the standard of service fluctuates wildly and may bear no correlation to the amount you pay. In general, standards of service and reliability are much lower than in Kathmandu or other popular trekking hubs. Shop around carefully and compare the services and attitudes of at least several agencies. Shady dealings are part of everyday business in China but they need not scuttle your trip. The good news is that competition between agencies offering trekking services is fierce, impelling the smarter ones to up the quality of their product. If cost is a big issue and you and your party are seasoned trekkers, consider the FIT agencies (see p100). They are