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ACCOMMODATION

Most towns in Tibet now offer a decent range of hotels, many with hot showers and some three- or four-star options. In smaller towns you may be limited to rooms with a shared bathroom, while in the countryside electricity and running water are luxuries that cannot be expected. Hotels are divided into *binguan* or *dajjudian* (hotels), *zhaodaisuo* (guesthouses) and *lǚguan* (simple hostels). The Tibetan terms are *drukhang* (hotel) and *dronkhang* (guesthouse). Midrange hotels generally have rooms with private bathroom and hot-water showers, at least part of the day. Top-end

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

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hotels are limited to Lhasa and one or two other towns.

Hot water is provided everywhere in thermoses and even in basic places a basin and drum of cold water is usually provided for washing. Bedding is provided, but in the cheapest places it's often not clean and a sleeping bag is a good idea.

In some towns the local Public Security Bureau (PSB) keeps a pretty tight lid on which places can and cannot accept foreigners. Most tourists will only come up against this problem in Tsetang and Ali, where the budget hotels are not permitted to accept foreigners.

PRACTICALITIES

- Electricity is 220V, 50 cycles AC. Plugs come in at least four designs: three-pronged angled pins (like in Australia); three-pronged round pins (like in Hong Kong); two flat pins (US style but without the ground wire) or two narrow round pins (European style); and three rectangular pins (British style).
- Note that electronics such as laptops and iPods are often affected by altitudes above 4500m and may stop working.
- The metric system is widely used in Tibet. Traders measure fruit and vegetables by the *jin* (500g).
- CCTV 9 is China's only English TV channel (if you are desperate). CCTV 6 occasionally has movies in English.

SLEEPING BAGS

The question of whether you need a sleeping bag or not depends entirely on where you plan to go and how you plan to travel. Those who aim to spend time in Lhasa and then head down to Nepal via the sights of Tsang could do without one, although they are always a nice comfort, especially in budget hotels. Anyone planning on trekking or heading out to remoter areas, such as Nam-tso, Everest or western Tibet, should definitely bring one along. See also p282.

Camping

Camping out is well understood by Tibetans, many of whom still spend their summers herding livestock in mountain valleys. You probably run the risk of an unpleasant run-in with the PSB if you attempt to set up a tent in Lhasa, but get 20km or so out of town and the nearest patch of turf is yours for the picking. Always ask permission if camping near a settlement or encampment, watch out for the dogs (see p317), and expect an audience.

Guesthouses & Hotels

In Lhasa there are several clean, well-run Tibetan-style guesthouses. Similar set-ups can be found in Shigatse, Sakya and Tingri. Tibetan-style guesthouses tend to be much more friendly and homey than Chinese hotels, and they are also much cheaper. Midrange and top-end hotels in Lhasa are 30% more expensive than elsewhere, though standards are 40% higher.

Some monasteries, such as Samye, Ganden, Drigung Til, Dorje Drak, Mindroling, Tidrum and Reting, also have their own guesthouses, normally a bank of carpeted seats that double as beds (bring a sleeping bag). Remoter monasteries often have a spare room, or even a chapel, which they may be willing to let out. Expect to pay around Y20 per person; if no fee is asked, leave a donation in the prayer hall.

Most of the larger hotels are anonymous Chinese-style places that share several traits: the plumbing is often dodgy, the carpets are dotted with a mosaic of cigarette burns, and all offer a ratty pair of flip-flops so you don't have to touch the bathroom floor, but you're better off bringing your own.

Rooms are generally divided into *biaozhun* (标准; standard), which come with an at-

tached bathroom, and *putong* (普通; ordinary). Standard rooms are often divided into *jingji* (经济; economy) and *haohua* (豪华; deluxe) rooms.

Some hotels (generally the cheaper ones) price their accommodation per bed rather than per room, which can work out well for solo travellers. To guarantee that you have the room to yourself you would theoretically have to pay for all beds (and a few hotel owners will try to force you to do so), but usually that's not necessary. If you are alone in a double room or are a couple in a triple room, staff will not normally put others in the room, although they have the right to. They may possibly put other foreigners in the room, but it is rare for a hotel to mix foreigners and Chinese or Tibetans in one room. This depends largely on your negotiations.

ACTIVITIES

Tibet offers the type of topography to delight mountaineers, white-water rafters, horse riders and others, though the problem, as always, is the confusing travel permit system, which many authorities manipulate to their own financial advantage.

Cycling

Tibet offers some of the most extreme and exhilarating mountain biking in the world. If you are fit and well equipped, it's possible to visit most places in this book by bike, although the most popular route is the rollercoaster ride along the Friendship Hwy from Lhasa down to Kathmandu. Shorter excursions could include trips to Ganden and the Gyama Valley, or to the Lhundrub Valley. Mountain bikes can be hired in Lhasa.

Thaizand Bicycle Tours (see p128) in Lhasa offer route information and can provide bikes and logistical support for all kinds of trips. A 10-day ride to Zhangmu for four people,

DISCOUNTS

In many areas of Tibet, and notably in Lhasa, accommodation prices vary seasonally. Throughout this book, we list high-season rates (May to September), followed by the range of discounts you can expect in April and October. Prices will be lower still in winter. In reality some kind of discount is almost always available when the hotel is not full, so always ask.

with jeep support, costs around US\$400 per person.

For information on long-distance touring, see p342.

Horse Riding

There's something romantic about travelling across Tibet on horseback. The easiest place to arrange this is in the Kham region of western Sichuan, but even here it's just a matter of coming to an agreement with local herds-men. A kora of Lake Manasarovar (p229) on horseback is a great idea and a few travellers have managed to arrange this.

Tibet Wind Horse Adventure (www.windhorsetibet.com) offers day trips on horseback in the Tolung-chu and Drigung Valleys and can customise longer adventures (for details, see p117). Contact Chris Jones.

Foreign travel companies, such as **Hidden Trails** (www.hiddentrails.com) and **Boojum Expeditions** (www.boojum.com), offer expensive horse-riding tours in Kham (western Sichuan).

Mountaineering

There are some huge peaks in Tibet, including the 8000m-plus giants of Cho Oyu, Shishapangma and, of course, Everest, which are enough to send a quiver of excitement through vertically inclined explorers. Unfortunately, the Chinese government charges exorbitant fees for mountaineering permits, which puts mountaineering in Tibet out of the range of most individuals or groups devoid of commercial sponsorship.

A few individuals have succeeded in getting to Advanced Everest Base Camp and even beyond but the authorities are clamping down on this (see p209).

Foreign travel companies, such as **Alpine Ascents** (www.alpineascents.com) and **Jagged Globe** (www.jagged-globe.co.uk), arrange for mountaineering trips to Cho Oyu and Shishapangma in Tibet, but these don't come cheap.

Rafting

Tibet Wind Horse Adventure (www.windhorsetibet.com) offers rafting trips in central Tibet, ranging from one to five days, and are absolutely the people to contact if you want to arrange a kayaking trip in Tibet. See p117 for details.

Trekking

One of the remarkable things about Tibet, considering the difficulties placed in the way

of those heading up there by Chinese authorities, is that once you are up on the high plateau there is considerable freedom to strike off on foot and explore the Tibetan valleys and ranges. Of course no-one at China International Travel Service (CITS) or any other Chinese organisation will tell you this, but nevertheless it is the case. Experienced and hardy trekkers have the opportunity to visit places that are almost impossible to reach any other way, and are unlikely to find any official obstacles. For detailed information on the most popular trekking routes, see p281.

BATHHOUSES

Cheaper hotels often don't have hot showers but staff can normally direct you a simple bathhouse (淋浴; *linyū*; *soog-po tru-ya* in Tibetan), where you can get a hot shower for around Y8. These are purely functional places, and sometimes a bit grotty, but after a few days on the road you'll be glad for the wash. Staff normally provide a towel and flip-flops, but bring your own if you have them.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks, offices, government departments and the PSB are generally open Monday to Friday, with perhaps a half-day on Saturday. Most open from around 9.30am to 1pm and 3pm to 6.30pm. Opening hours listed in this guide are for summer; winter hours generally start half an hour later and finish half an hour earlier.

Most smaller monasteries have no set opening hours and will open up chapels once you've tracked down the right monk. Others, such as Samye, are notorious for only opening certain rooms at certain times. In general it's best to try to tag along with pilgrims or a tour group.

CHILDREN

Be especially careful with children as they won't be on the lookout for signs of altitude sickness. Children don't get on with Tibetan food or toilets any better than grown ups. They also tire more easily from an endless round of visiting monasteries. Bring along a copy of *Tintin in Tibet* for when morale flags. In Kathmandu several bookshops sell Tibetan *thangka* (religious paintings) and mandala colouring books.

On the upside children can be a great ice-breaker and generally generate a lot of interest. Many hotels have family rooms, which