

Understand Tibet

TIBET TODAY.....246

As Tibet charts a course between economic boom and political unrest, what concession, if any, will Běijīng offer the Tibetans?

HISTORY248

Follow the transformation of Tibet from a warring empire to a Buddhist nation, and its perennially complex relationship with China.

TIBETAN LANDSCAPES266

The roof of the world is home to some remarkable endangered species, as well as resources vital for the planet's future.

THE PEOPLE OF TIBET 272

Nomadic lifestyle, exiled communities, the ideas behind pilgrimage – learn about the various unique facets of Tibetan identity.

TIBETAN BUDDHISM.....280

Before immersing yourself in the monasteries and temples, get an understanding of the religion that underpins everything in Tibet.

TIBETAN ART294

Buddhism is the dominant inspiration in Tibetan art, from masked dances and traditional opera to chōrtens, murals and mandalas.

THE FUTURE OF TIBET 301

Does Tibet's best hope for the future lie in the international community, in reincarnation or in its traditional culture?

Tibet Today

Change is afoot in Tibet. The economy is booming at the fastest rate in China; extended train, air and road links are revolutionising life across the plateau; and Tibet's urban areas are modernising and expanding at an unprecedented rate. As the face of Tibet changes beyond recognition, many Tibetans feel they are becoming increasingly marginalised in their own land. With every expression of Tibetan discontent, Běijīng simply tightens its political and religious controls.

Best in Print

The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (Pico Iyer) An engaging look at the warmth and contradictions of the 14th Dalai Lama.

Fire Under the Snow (Palden Gyatso) A moving autobiography of a Buddhist monk imprisoned in Tibet for 33 years.

Tears of Blood (Mary Craig) A riveting and distressing account of the Tibetan experience since the Chinese takeover.

Tibet, Tibet (Patrick French) A nuanced look beyond the propaganda and myth surrounding Tibet.

Trespassers on the Roof of the World (Peter Hopkirk) Chronicles European explorers' early attempts to enter forbidden Tibet. Superbly readable.

Best on Film

Kundun (1997) Martin Scorsese's beautifully shot depiction of the life of the Dalai Lama.

Vajra Sky Over Tibet (2006) John Bush's Buddhist-inspired cinematic pilgrimage to the principal sites of central Tibet.

Seven Years in Tibet (1997) Yes, it's a bit silly, and, no, it's not the greatest film but it's still great inspiration before a trip to Tibet.

Modernisation, But At What Cost?

As part of its 'great leap west', the Chinese government has poured US\$45 billion into Tibet's infrastructure. It has resettled 1.3 million Tibetans in new housing and created a domestic tourist boom that is spurring hotel and restaurant construction across the plateau. The speed of modernisation is breathtaking.

In most parts of the world this would all be good news, but herein lies Tibet and China's conundrum. Alongside the short-term tourists has come a flood of Chinese immigrants, whom Tibetans claim are the real beneficiaries of Tibet's economic boom.

As the Tibetan people bristle under a lack of control over their own communities and religion, China reminds the Tibetans that it has brought in education, health and infrastructure to the plateau, and spent millions renovating monasteries. Tibetan groups maintain that it is mostly Chinese immigrants who run Tibet's businesses, and that monasteries remain under tight political control and exist largely for tourism. The Chinese counter that they are just trying to bring economic prosperity to one of its most backward provinces, at a large financial loss. (At this point, everyone storms out of the room.)

Environmental Challenges

Perhaps the greatest loser in Tibet's race towards economic development has been its once-pristine environment. Urbanisation projects, hydroelectric dams and urban expansion are rapidly changing the face of Tibet. In the last few years alone hundreds of thousands of Tibetan nomads have been resettled into modern housing communities, effectively bringing an end to a traditional way of life. China says it is protecting the grasslands from overgrazing, protesters (often jailed) say it is a cynical move by the government to