

Monking Around CHINA-SANTWAY TO LITANG

**From Yakety Yak: Bombay to Beijing by Bicycle
by Russell McGilton**

On a cold mountain pass flapping with prayer flags, I stopped, took off my shoes and massaged my feet. I couldn't feel them anymore and they looked like they had been mummified. A van whizzed passed and skidded to a halt. An overweight man with a white beard jumped out, ran up to me, then whipped out his camera and madly clicked away.

'You are at 4560 metres!' he exclaimed in a sharp German accent and shoved his altimeter watch in my face.

'Oh, hey—'

'I am doing a book on ze source of ze Yangtze River. Last I did ze Yunnan Province. Goodbye.'

He shook my hand, then ran back to the van, jumped in and sped off.

I had only cycled 11 kilometres that morning, most of it uphill and freezing my head off. I had stayed the night in a road-workers' hut, where the husband and wife fed me up with noodles and beef, and their mad chained dog joined in the fun, taking a swipe at my arse when I went outside in the middle of the night to crap.

I was neither well nor in the best of spirits. I had a cold and was spitting out chunks of bloodied phlegm after I had ambitiously tried to snot out my blocked sinuses once and for all. The sound ricocheted across the valley, scattering herds of yaks and flocks of birds, and setting off dogs and, quite possibly, avalanches.

I was tired, and I looked it. Filth crept into everything in a Tibetan, ground-in way. Why wash, the Tibetan logic seemed to be, when you're likely to catch a cold?

The only compensation was a clear blue sky, which made the trip enjoyable. Soon I was in Santway, some 85 kilometres north of my drunken night with Jason in Xiangchen; I ended the day propped up in bed, snoozing under a pink doona that smelled of rancid yak butter.

Santway had a Wild West feeling about it. The streets were wide, unsealed and raw, and dust devils whirled around the skirts of Tibetan grandmothers and young, broad-smiling monks. As I sat in a restaurant and watched men swagger in, some in wide-brimmed hats, I waited for the sound of spurs and the spectacle of a bar fight. Other locals wore fur hats and big coats, and stood outside looking at me and at my bike while kids bounced bottles off the tyres.

I had been sleeping in one of the rooms above the restaurant. The room was clean, timbered and very comfortable, though no one would have thought that when looking at the restaurant itself. It was walled with newspaper to keep the draft from cutting through the gaps of slatted timber.

The owner brought me a large bowl of stew comprised of potatoes, meat and strange herbs like sun wheels.

But, it would be my baldness that opened up a new experience for me. I had snuck into a small Tibetan monastery nestled at the foothills of a valley less than a kilometre away from Santway. I had passed oblong stone houses with jutting carved beams and multicoloured window frames.

The cacophony of drums and horns flurrying and blasting away had caught my attention. I stood behind a pillar observing young monks sitting down and chanting over yellowed scriptures while older monks sat on platforms near tall yellow candles. For all its formality, the scene had a very relaxed air about it. Monks drank their butter tea, hacked off chunks of cheese and nibbled at round loaves of bread as if they were reading the sports pages in a tabloid.

Catching sight of me, an older monk walked over, and I expected to be escorted out. But instead, he took off his maroon robe and put it around my shoulders, then offered me a seat by the horn players. I sat down. He pointed to my bald head and gave it the thumbs-up, as did the other young monks sitting next to me, smiling and laughing.

One of the young monks offered me a 5-foot-long silver horn to play, intimating that he would let me know when I had to blow. But it seemed fairly obvious: whenever the drums were beaten in a quick frenzy, the horns followed suit.

The monks gave me the cue, so I let rip. I didn't just give them a deep flutter, as most of them were doing, but a melody of different tones somewhere near, 'Oh, When The Saints Come Marching In'. The monks snapped around, mouths wide, then laughed.

I was pleased with myself, but the young monk snatched the trumpet from me and collapsed it like a telescope. Fearing that I had broken a sacred tradition, I felt that it might be best if I left, but it appeared that the prayers were now over, and soon the monks gathered around me and led me outside, where we took photographs, arms round each other's shoulders. I was then ushered into a kitchen and plied with butter tea until I could drink no more.

As I walked back up the dusty road toward Santway, I stopped and looked back. Tibetan women washed their clothes in the afternoon light while their filthy children played, one running off with the empty Sprite bottle from my jacket pocket. On a beam hanging from the monastery a mandala billowed in the breeze, while a giant prayer wheel was pushed by an old Tibetan couple. What a glorious afternoon it had been.

Back at the restaurant, I couldn't help myself: I had to teach a Tibetan truck driver to 'James Brown', like I had with Lanarge and Manarge in India. The truck driver picked the moves up immediately, shaking and twisting his hips and yelling 'HEY-YYYY!' as he played to the audience – a smiling woman,

her husband with hat and bung eye, their eight-year-old daughter, the cook, a filthy dwarf, and a sweet fifteen-year-old hotel assistant with a long plaits and rosy cheeks.

The room was filled with laughter. How happy everyone seemed, sitting by the fire, effortlessly chatting and drinking tea.

Just as everything was feeling cosy and we were all like one big, happy family, the generator was cranked up, the video-CD player was switched on, and the moment stopped. Kids fell to the floor, cheekbones slouched on fists, eyes glazed over and mouths yawned open as an ultra-violent Hong Kong film tore down the warm curtain of comfort.

Out of Santway, I set off with eight boiled eggs (trying to get them boiled was a mission – the cook nearly fried them in their shells in a big wok). The terrain was potted with boulders and large stones, and small pine trees clung to the steep slopes. Shrubs had stopped growing by the edge of the approaching pass, frightened off by the sheets of frigid air screaming up the valley. Ice, in the permanent shadows of the mountain, bled icicles like old men's beards.

I spent the day on the nude hills. There was absolutely nothing out here, and the sense of total isolation and loneliness seemed all too real, so empty, that I had to scream to confirm that I existed. Traffic was rare except for a convoy of squat People's Liberation Army tanker trucks, fifty or so, filing past, leaving me with their awful diesel breath.

By late afternoon I was struggling up a 5-kilometre pass, a tail wind freezing my arse off. I stopped and let my body sink over the handlebars, the will to keep going smashed on the barren rocky landscape. I got off and pushed. When I did eventually get to the pass, I saw, to my delight, a road descending into the valley below. At the end of it was a small town, Litang.

I flew down the road, my bike smacking heavily in protest under the weight of luggage. I popped over irregular bumps, stones and tarred lumps, and nearly lost everything when the road dropped into a trough left when the land had

given way to heavy rain. Around a corner, I was nearly collected by an overloaded truck on the wrong side of the road; I threw the bike into the embankment, a narrow miss of only inches. After recovering, I took another turn, the bike accelerating on the speedometer to 70 kilometres and the free-hub screaming ‘WHHHEEEEEEEEE!’ as I came face to face with a police car dozily climbing up the hill. I wondered whether I should stop, but then decided not to. (Actually, what I thought was: *Fuck it. At this speed, by the time they turn around, I’ll be in another province.*)

I put my head down; the bar grips howled like a dive-bombing Stuka; the police car was in my sights.

WHOOSH!

I flared past the police car’s windscreen, leaving both officers inside with their mouths wide open like carnival circus clowns. I looked back. They had stopped, but then with a jolt, kept going.

After an hour of this bouncing madness, I had to stop and shake my wrists out from the pain of squeezing the brakes. I checked the brakes. I had already gone through two front pads and, because of an uneven adjustment, had dished the rim on the front wheel. I touched it. It was red hot.

Beyond the tree-lined hills, I could see Litang in the distance, fed by an open, brown, lonely road. It was arid; I could not see crops of any sort, only yaks dotting the vastness.

Litang was a dusty old town with wide streets – another Santway but with more people. Chinese business abounded, lured by financial incentives to resettle here. I was the only foreigner among rough-and-ready-looking men sporting leather jackets, long hair and silver daggers around their waists as they swaggered down the streets. I was in what was once known as Kham (the Chinese renamed it Sichuan), and, not surprisingly, the people here were called Khambas, a sub-group of nomadic tribal Tibetans that inhabited the highland plateau from the foothills of Sichuan in the east for almost a thousand

kilometres west to Lhasa. Unrivalled in horsemanship, the Khambas had for over a thousand years maintained a reputation as fearsome warriors, fighting other clans, robbing settlements and trade caravans, and, lastly, waging a seventeen-year war against the People's Liberation Army.

So why, in all my infinite wisdom, did I end up throwing one of these beefy warriors through a chair?

Well, during a long afternoon sleep at the International Hotel – a dusty, beaten place housing sour Chinese door-bitches who begrudgingly opened the door to my room (they were the only ones with the keys) – when thumping techno music roused me enough to put my shoes on.

In a bar two doors down from the hotel, women danced with each other while Tibetan men in James Dean-style leather jackets looked on. They invited me over, and it wasn't long before I was being plied with drink. Conspiratorially, we repeated an understood fact.

'China no good,' whispered a wide-shouldered man. 'Dali Lama very good.'

One of them looked around and put his finger to his mouth.

'Ssshhhhsshh! China no good. SSSHHHHHSSHH!'

'Yes, of course,' I agreed. 'SSSHHHHHSSHH!'

'SSSHHHHHSSHH!'

He looked around again and made a gun gesture with his fingers. 'China. BOOM!'

I was surprised to learn that the Khambas, with their war-like reputation, were some of the most devoutly religious of all Tibetans. At one time, they had one of the largest monasteries in Kham, but it was destroyed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, along with 250 others in Tibet. The Chöede Gompa is one

of the remaining monasteries in Litang and was built for the third Dali Lama. When I visited the monastery, a tall statue of Buddha towered inside, rumoured to have been carried on foot all the way from Lhasa.

Now rightly drunk, I encouraged the men to dance with the women. Like schoolboys they shirked away, but I persisted, and soon they were all laughing and giggling while I showed them a few dance moves.

And then I did it.

I made the mistake of trying to get the biggest man in the bar to dance. There he sat, beer in hand, dagger at knee, dragging on a tiny cigarette as he observed the melee with squat indifference.

'Come on!' I grabbed him by the hand, which was the size of a yak liver and required both of mine to grip. I tried to lever the brute out of his chair, but he remained seated, shaking his head.

'Ah, come on!' I said and tried again, this time throwing my back into it. He came up halfway out of the chair then fell heavily back onto it. *CRUNCH!* The leg of the plastic chair split clean off, and he went right over with it.

Shit.

I helped him up. Thankfully, he didn't look overly upset.

The madam of the bar, wide-shouldered and with a face like a shovel, made a gesture that did not exactly forward another invitation to her establishment. When I motioned to protest my innocence, two of her heavies pointed to the door. I followed their aim out into the frigid dark air.