A Photographic Exercise on “Top of the World”

A Photographic Diary of our “Special Western China Tour 2007”
by Yau-Sun Tong

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Photography and Text: Mr. Yau-Sun Tong

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
Preface

In the “modern digital” world, taking pictures has become so “easy”, but in the same time good photos have not at all any easier to come by, because the creation and conception of good images still remains the need of the photographer’s brain, not the modern digital “technology”… in fact the modern techno… often just helps to do the opposite…

The following images within this “Photographic Diary” of 《Special Western China Tour 2007》 were taken straight with a little Leica D-Lux 3. The images are intended to capture and to document the events, our travel routes, the joy and fun of our tour members during this lifetime experience of a fantastic visit to China, especially with the highlight of riding the world highest altitude railroad train from XiNing of Qinghai province to Tibet Autonomous Region!

The little “point and shoot” D-Lux 3 has a lot of limitations in picture taking, little performance in terms of optical quality (certainly not compared to the Leica R and M systems with slide-films I am so often used to and fond of using), but in the same time posts as a challenge to myself for still trying to create meaningful images with it.

Amongst the goals I am trying to achieve in my photography, that include:

• True to the moments in nature and culture;
• Natural and candid;
• Compositionally challenge and unique;
• Meaningful in subjects and topics;
• Story telling with good impacts;
• Not to disturb and intrude into local human subjects’ life.

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Gathered in Beijing just after mid May, I led our tour group flew to Qinghai province, adjusting/preparing for higher altitude condition while enjoying local sightseeing and traveling. Then took the famous newly completed Qinghai-Tibet railroad train for the near 2,000km spectacular journey to Lhasa in Tibet Autonomous Region as the core visit during this special tour. Followed with a few days in Sichuan province for an adjustment after our high altitude travel in Tibet region. Then finalized with another few days of relaxation and sightseeing in the eastern seaboard region of the Yangzi River delta area before exiting from Shanghai back to North America…

The following images in chronological order intend to share the enjoyments from some of the events and highlights of our journey of this over 20 days tour – another successful one of my ongoing specially arranged cultural/photographic tours.

My sincere appreciation and many thanks to all participants of this very special tour!
Execution style in public...

It’s unfair that George shooting from behind...

Just arrived Beijing, lots of excitement, lots of fun and lots of “shootings…”
Some members of our group had been Beijing before, some had not. But everyone found interesting things to do and to visit, our members found the morning activities in the parks for local folks fascinating.

In no time most have done very well with chopsticks. Good and healthy foods three meals daily during our tour for sure. (still healthily lost weight for many of us…!)

folk scenes in Temple of Heaven Park
We arrived XiNing - the capital city of QingHai province from Beijing on May 22nd. At around 2,300m of elevation, it is my designed location for our group members to acclimatize and prepare for the much higher elevations on route by train to Lhasa and during in Tibet Autonomous Region. For the next few days we will have some very interesting and worthwhile nature sightseeing and cultural visits. Treats for cameras…Foods for taste buds and stomachs…

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Muslim “shooting” Muslim...

Speeding on Lijiaxia reservoir nature area
Qinghai is a huge province with lots to offer in Nature and cultures. Though most of ordinary tours do not know or do not offer good visits to Qinghai. Here we visited some interesting places including The native Qinghai minorities unique to Qinghai region, such as the Muslim Sala nationality and the Buddhist Tu nationality etc.
Some of our member may remember that day when we passed and stopped by that area, there were many wild pheasants in the field roaming freely. Certainly in my binoculars their beauty were detailed without obstruction - treats to the eyes.
In the morning we visited Xunhua county, a Sala Muslim area. We had some wonderful family visits to villagers’ homes as well.
four kids and the four words
“The one...”
In that afternoon we were in HuangNan area. Wutun Tibetan Buddhist temple.
Who would like to be that perfect bridegroom…?

A day of visiting the minority Tu nationality. HuZhu county is a Tu Autonomous County in Qinghai with Tu people population in majority. Tu people have very colorful costumes and cultural identity, their religion is Tibetan Buddhism.
The meal we had while in the Tu people’s village was fantastic, local flavour for sure, tasted great, and more than plentiful… Wish we could have such a meal even just once a month back home here in North America… (no luck for sure…)
YouNing monastery in Qinghai Huzhu county was once a very important monastery locally. Each year there are several religious events held here that offer great cultural and photographic opportunities.
Three at prayer...
On our way back to XiNing we ran into a local bazaar under the hill of the “WhiteHorse Temple”, the event provided lots for our members to troll around…; the date is a local celebration in lunar calendar.
A morning visit to the Te’er Monastery, just half an hour by coach outside XiNing - a large and a very important Tibetan Buddhist monastery.
After another fantastic meal in a well-known local Muslim cooking restaurant for a lunch, we set out to the XiNing train station, ready on board the much anticipated highlight of our trip - Riding on the world highest altitude specialized train for a 24 hour journey to Lhasa... a great way for traveling to the top of the world!
The nearly 2,000-kilometer QingHai-Tibet train ride was a highlight of our tour. Fascinating sceneries along side of the highland plateau, snow capped mountains, highland Lakes, scores of wild animals, the once endangered Tibetan antelopes, herds of yaks and sheep on Grazing lands with herdsmen in colorful clothing spotting the vast fields. The comfortable train that’s Specially designed for the tough environment of the low oxygen high elevation Qinghai-Tibet region. We had passed through the highest spot on the railroad at 5,200 meters…

On board of the famous Qinghai-Tibet highland train. Truly a lifetime experience!
24 hours later, we arrived Lhasa Train Station with high spirits. A ready coach picked us up and checked into a comfortable garden style hotel with very nice condition; a welcoming arrangement for our members after the long high-altitude train ride.

An initial evening strolling in front of the Potala Palace, Followed with a good meal of the first of many during our stay in Tibet region.
The next morning started with a visit to the tranquil and beautiful Norbulingka. It is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Culture - “Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple Monastery and Norbulingka”. Norbulingka, the Dalai Lama's former summer palace, constructed in the 18th century, is a masterpiece of Tibetan art.
Gardens, royal residences, temples…; rich plants, flowers, multi species of birds…running rabbits inside the grass And bushes… Colorful cultural and historical displays…; All make Norbulingka a must to visit in Lhasa.
Followed with a visit to the Tibet Autonomous Region Museum which was also an excellent experience and well worth time spent. There are so many valuable cultural and archaeology artifacts, really is a rich museum to visit.

Today’s activities were designed for relaxing and easy going, helping to adept to the first arrival in this city of 3,600 meters altitude.
A lunch in this inspiringly retro styled Sichuan flavour restaurant was a delight! The duck soup meal tasted great with all healthy ingredients. The service was wonderful too...
Followed with an afternoon visit to the Jokhang Monastery, it is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Culture - “Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple Monastery and Norbulingka”. Founded in the 7th century, the Jokhang Temple Monastery is an exceptional Buddhist religious complex; all pilgrims to Lhasa would come to pay tribute in Jokhang Monastery.
In late afternoon, some of our group members followed me for a visit to a Tibetan family that is amongst some of my friends in Tibet.

The family visit was truly genuine and the cultural hospitality, the yak-butter-tea, the Tibetan style snacks, the exchanges... an unforgettable experience indeed.

It was difficult to say “goodbye”...
The next morning was a visit to a major UNESCO site - the Potala Palace. Located in the centre of Lhasa valley, at an altitude of 3,700m, is the palace of the Dalai Lama since the 7th century.
Nowadays, the visit to Potala Palace has become a not so easy task with the obtaining of entrance tickets, and the restriction in the amount of time that one can stay inside the Palace.

All those are part of the efforts in protecting and restoring this imposing great building and museum, by limiting the otherwise overly huge amount of visitors wanting to get into this popularity site.
在布达拉宫广场上  at Potala Palace Square...
The afternoon was a visit to the Sera Monastery in northeast part of Lhasa city.
Today we are on our way to the western part, traveling towards Gyantse, Shigatse area…
On route we are visiting one of the four sacred lakes in Tibet… fantastic views along the way and lots to see and photograph for…
During our roadside lunch picnic, I chatted with those two village boys with their tractor...
Spring Plowing in Gyantse area 江孜地区春耕忙

江孜地区农耕忙
The next morning in Gyantse Palkhor Monastery.

Gyantse area is fertile for agriculture; while the township of Gyantse is traditionally an interesting place for visiting, this well-know monastery is one of the few must see sites.
Quick action and a ready-in-mind designed image are the keys in capturing this “perfect” moment of a “perfectly” natural and strong picture with the using of lighting.

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That distanced figure did not come by easily or readily, but it was all important to make this image to be “the image”… the key is the capturing of the moment…
Today we are on road to the city of Shigatse…
Established in 1447, Tashilunpo Monastery was an icon for Shigatse which was the site for Benchen Lama’s residence and where he conducts religion and political activities. It is one of the most imposing structures in Tibet second to the Potala Palace.
扎什伦布寺全景，overview in Tashilunpo Monastery
my view in Tashilunpo Monastery
The next morning our coach continued the journey by driving southeast toward the southern Tibet area… Again on route lots of refreshing and interesting views…
Frequent stops of our coach provided good opportunities to everyone in our group for interesting visits, photos, resting and stretching the body…
In the afternoon we arrived Tsedang in the Yarlung Valley - known to be the birthplace of Tibetan Civilization; with this “first palace” of Yumbulagang way up on top of a hill, originally built many centuries ago.
Early next morning we are preparing to cross the mighty Yarlung Zangbo River to visit the Samye monastery in south side of the river.

The one hour and a half ride on a primitive wooden boat provided some unsettled wild fun…

A group of off school students rushed on board in the last second on their way back home in the other side of the river, their presence presented some genuine joy and laughter for the crossing journey... They were all herdsmen or peasants’ children.
The highest elevation river in the world 雅鲁藏布江 — 海拔最高的河流
After the river crossing, on route to Samye Monastery…
A Scene in Samye Monastery. Built in 761, Samye’s buildings are arranged in the shape of a mandala representing Buddhist cosmology. Inside the main temple are Tibetan, Chinese and Indian artworks depicting legends and events from history.
...wondering what model of vehicle is preferred by Buddha...?
Our last day travel in Tibet region, on route to Lhasa airport for a flight to our next destination. I must take a photo with myself in it before leaving…
Lhasa airport - the highest elevation airport in the world 贡嘎机场海拔最高的机场

Today at noon we fly from here to ChengDu in SiChuan province, completing our unforgettable and successful journey of a visit to the Top of the World!
Arriving Chengdu - the hub for traveling in southwestern China. An evening of great tasting Sichuan style cuisine and performances. We had a good evening of resting in a lower altitude of only 540m… Tomorrow morning we travel by coach south of Chengdu for an interesting part of Sichuan sightseeing.
This morning by coach we are traveling towards the “Mt. E-mei and LeShan Giant Buddha” area. It is a “UNESCO World Heritage Site of Nature and Culture”, one of those only few “double sites” on UNESCO’s list.

LeShan Giant Buddha is the world tallest, started in 713 AD, took 90 years to complete.
We were up early at 5am for the Golden-peak Sunrise…

Staying in the nice mountain top hotel of the Golden-peak in Mt. E-mei. The hotel is at 3,077m elevation. Great views…
Wanfo Peak is at 3,099 meters, over looking the Golden-peak on the other side…
Upon descending from Mt. E-mei, we had another very relaxing and restful stay in a nice hotel on the Foothill of the mountain. Tricycle rickshaws took us to an interesting area where locals gather for night life, a valued evening of activity for our group members to see some ordinary people’s life.
Before exiting Shanghai back home to North America, I wanted to arrange our group to have few days of good and healthy relaxing adjustment in the Yangzi River delta water township area in eastern seaboard of China, to buffer some of the contrast between western China and the western world… An incredible place for photography too…
Those charming little townships possess some of the character that’s so nerve calming for modern city-dwellers.

For our group mainly it is another photographic opportunity, while soaking up more of the ancient culture…
西塘古巷道
the alleyways in XiTang township
“红装一点尽嫣然” that red figure is what sets the picture…
Suzhou is one of the oldest towns in the Yangzi River Delta area, history can be traced back 2,000 Years ago. The city is renowned for its beautiful stone bridges, webs of canals, pagodas and the masterpieces of Chinese landscape garden design in which art, nature and ideas are integrated perfectly to create ensembles of great beauty and Peaceful harmony…
Suzhou ancient canal
A view in Suzhou ShanTang Jie street.
人在画图中… pictures within the picture… a Suzhou canal scene
Suzhou is known as the “Capital of Silk”. Our group had a eye-opening tour of the Silk factory and the Suzhou Silk Embroidery Research Institute.
Ancient township TongLi, 同里古镇水乡 - "一泓月色含规影, 两岸书声接榜歌"
TongLi - a township with over a thousand years of history..., a great place for those who are interested in photography too...
Classical Chinese garden design, which seeks to recreate natural landscapes in miniature, is nowhere better illustrated than in the nine gardens in the historic city of Suzhou. They are generally acknowledged to be masterpieces of the genre. Dating from the 11th-19th century, the gardens reflect the profound metaphysical importance of natural beauty in Chinese culture in their meticulous design.” This garden is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site for Suzhou Classical Gardens.
The last evening for our tour in China was in a wonderful resort hotel located by the beautiful TongLi Lake.

Here we set out in the morning by coach to Shanghai… onto each member’s home return trip…
What a wonderful 20 days together, what a wonderful memory…

Surely in our mind today is only the first of many “last days” in China…

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“Special Western China Tour 2008”

For Year 2008 “Special Western China Tour” in the month of May
the itinerary will be uniquely different then ever before, while the Qinghai-Tibet highland
Train ride and the Tibet region visit is still the core of the tour:

Shanghai entry - (from here we begin our tour) by air to LiJiang in YunNan province;
YunNan province - (a true part of the southwestern China... “Lijiang Old Town” is a World Heritage Site township, at 2,400m elevation we will be here for acclimatization, prepare for Tibet region’s higher altitude. Unusual local cultures, nature sightseeing in this northwest area of YanNan known to be the “Shangri-la” region. A fantastic place to begin our western China exploratory journey;
YanNan to Lhasa - (northwestern YanNan area, great nature and cultures...) by coach to the very northwestern part of YunNan bordering southeast Tibet, along way fantastic scenery. Then by air we go from there to Lhasa;
Lhasa visit - (The centre of Tibet, city of Lhasa’s elevation is at 3,600m) some must seen sites;
Eastern Tibet exploration - (the very different part of Tibet with large areas of original forests... the world deepest canyon... beautiful lakes... holy mountain... rivers... local cultures... lower altitudes) an extraordinary part of the Tibet Autonomous Region, very pleasant to explore and to enjoy the experience.
Lhasa by train to XiNing - (The world highest altitude railroad) a spectacular train ride of a lifetime experience, with incredible scenery and animals sightings along sides the Qinghai-Tibet railroad.
ShannXi Province - (a true part of the northwestern China...) by air from XiNing of Qinghai province to XiAn of ShannXi province. Here we are for an adjustment after the Tibet high altitude travel, visiting some of the many attractions here, including the world-wonder of “Terra-cotta Warriors and Horses”. Also the unique “Yellow-earth Highland landscapes and culture” of northern ShannXi etc.
Beijing exit - (fly from XiAn to Beijing) for connecting to home return trip, or arrangements for individual needs.

This hand-picked itinerary is again designed for unique culture, nature and photographic opportunities.

For details and registering for the limited space in this tour / or to purchase large size file images or prints
contact Mr. Yau-Sun Tong at:
Tel: (902) 443-5500 / Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
E-mail: taiji@chebucto.ca
or news page at: http://photoart.chebucto.org/photonews.html