Around the Nam Tso

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(Plates 73, 74)

It was a back-of-the-envelope plan, our trip to Tibet in the summer of 1987. An A4 envelope, admittedly, but quite large enough, given the limited information we had about our chosen area, and our non-technical ambitions. With our time restricted to four weeks, and the assumption that a visit to Lhasa was inevitable, we had chosen to trek in the Nyanchen Thanglha, a range of mountains some 80km N of Lhasa. There were four of us, each with a special contribution to make. Sheila Cormack did the organization and operated her idiosyncratic primus, Annabelle Barker negotiated with the locals, Jay Turner carried the heaviest sack, and I booked the flights and was chief hypochondriac.

In retrospect, the Bangladesh Airways flight to Kathmandu was not the best approach. Halfway through a jet-lagged, eight-hour interlude at Dhaka airport a mullah started to lead his flock of Mecca-bound pilgrims round and round the transit lounge, all chanting enthusiastically. At Kathmandu we discovered that our ski-sticks had not left London, and that a devastating flood had washed away two villages and a substantial stretch of the road to the border. Instead of reaching the Friendship Bridge in a day, we found ourselves well short at 7.30pm, stumbling in the pouring rain and pitch dark into a virtually foodless and totally bedless Tatopani, where the offer of a small dish of noodles and a floor to sleep on was gratefully accepted.

At Xhangmu we had our first taste of Chinese bureaucracy. Tourists were passing through all day, wanting to change money, but the bank did not open until 5pm. We spent the afternoon in a chai shop which accepted Nepalese rupees, and where the western music and pocket calculators (used to show us our bill) were in stark contrast to the primitive shack in which we sat.

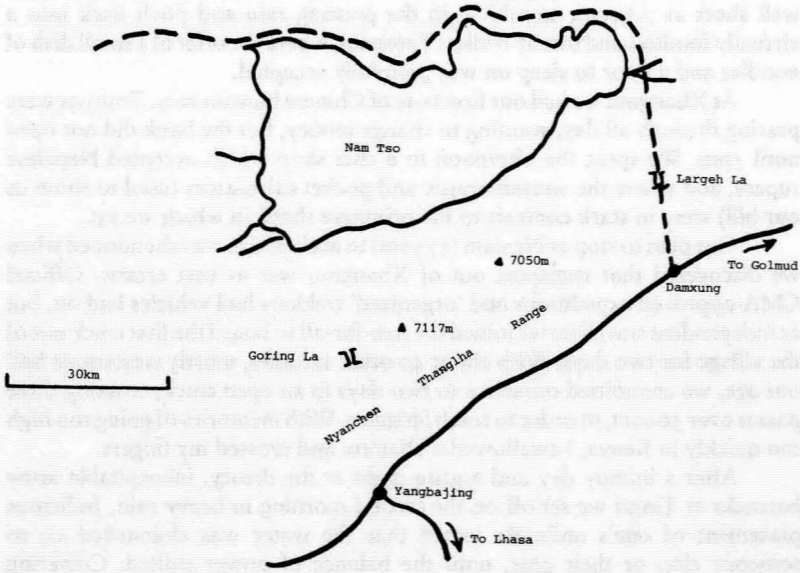
Our plan to stop at Nyalam (3750m) to acclimatize was abandoned when we discovered that transport out of Xhangmu was at best erratic. Official CMA-approved expeditions and 'organized' trekkers had vehicles laid on, but as independent travellers we joined the free-for-all to board the first truck out of the village for two days. With about 40 other sardines, mostly westerners half our age, we committed ourselves to two days in an open truck, crossing three passes over 5000m, in order to reach Shigatse. With memories of going too high too quickly in Kenya, I swallowed a Diamox and crossed my fingers.

After a bumpy day and a grim night at the dreary, inhospitable army barracks at Tingri we set off on the second morning in heavy rain. Judicious placement of one's umbrella meant that the water was channelled on to someone else, or their gear, until the balance of power shifted. Cowering

beneath our brollies in the now muddy lorry we could see little, then nothing at all, as the rain turned to snow and then a white-out. We passed other lorries, stuck, then an overturned minibus, its western Buddhist occupants smiling unperturbed as they stood in the snow in their sandals. On our truck there was a lower discomfort threshold, and tempers were short, until the need to deal with an incipient case of hypothermia restored a community spirit. The victim, clad in little more than a T-shirt, had expected Tibet to be hot!

A day's recuperation, a bumpy bus ride, and we were in Lhasa, where little remains of Harrer's city, which is now engulfed in a concrete sprawl. After a sleepless night in a downtown hotel my face was swollen out of recognition, and my body was covered in blotches. Bedbugs? Fleas? But on studied reflection it could only be a Diamox allergy; so much for trying to cheat on acclimatization. Weevils crawled out of a bag of porridge as we packed our gear; morale was low.

A week of precious time had gone when at last we clambered on to the Golmud bus, and the driver was puzzled when we insisted on alighting, apparently in the middle of nowhere, a few kilometres past Yangbajing. We had seen a valley cutting deep into the mountains and, in the absence of a detailed map, we hoped that it was the approach to the Goring La which we wanted to cross, reversing Harrer's route of 1946 over the Nyanchen Thanglha. Only in retrospect did we realize how crucial it had been to have a clear day; for most of the next fortnight the mountains were shrouded in mist, and maps were barely better than sketches, being on a scale of 1: one million, or worse.



As on previous trips, we planned to hire porters or animals to carry our gear, and so had not made efforts to pare away surplus weight. Thus we took several hours to stagger to a nearby village, negotiating two rivers, ankle-twisting tussocky grass and barbed wire *en route*. But we *were* in the right place, and over tsampa and butter tea we negotiated the hire of two men and three horses for three days.

For two days we walked up the grassy main valley, with the added interest of a thigh-deep, fast-flowing glacier stream to cross on the second afternoon. On the third day, in cloud and drizzle, we turned up a side valley, traversed below a glacier, then began a rising traverse, horses too, up across the ice. The horses went well until a steepening some way below the col, where they stopped, but our ever-helpful porters heaved and pushed sacks up slippery snow for a few more precious metres before waving goodbye. The col itself (5800m) was rocky, and bedecked with tattered prayer-flags. In the grey light we saw snowy mountains all round, but we had only limited distant views and wondered what Harrer had seen on his southward crossing towards Lhasa. Traders and nomads still use the route, and there was a good track down a moraine on the northern side.

We were prepared mentally, if not physically, for humping our gear for the next two and a half days, by which time we would, according to our porters, reach encampments and be able to hire more porters. Downhill we plodded, to stop at the first grassy spot, suffering from the weight of our sacks or from the altitude.

The valley widened, and after two days we were on a flat, green plain. We had begun a 'half an hour at a time then stop' routine as a temporary measure. Only Jay was able to lift her sack on to her back unaided, so woe betide the last person if she got left behind or wanted an emergency stop. As predicted, we passed nomad camps, but despite Annabelle's dramatic gestures, Jay's drawings and my appearance of misery and exhaustion, no porter, yak or horse could we hire. The performance was repeated several times before we gave up; the half-hour routine became permanent.

Our situation was reassessed. We did not want to recross the Goring La but knew of no other pass in the vicinity. We were at the SW corner of the vast Nam Tso lake, but the locals were adamant that we should not try to traverse its southern shore, the shortest distance to a known pass. We never found out why.

We took their advice and opted to circumnavigate the lake; there was a road marked on our map on the N side, and we hoped to hitch a lift along it. Such innocence! The decision made, we waded a couple of silt-laden rivers, bowed our heads against the wind and drizzle and trudged northwards across the plain, not reaching more water until 6.30pm. The weather cleared, and two horsemen rode out of the sunset, passing our camp. A greeting, and they galloped away eastwards, like cowboys in a spaghetti western. Next morning the great Nyanchen Thanglha itself was towering above the now distant range, a shining, icy Matterhorn. This tantalizing peak of a respectable height (7117m on our map) was usually shrouded in cloud; it could make a fine objective for a climbing holiday, given reasonable weather.

Another day and a half and we saw the Nam Tso, a vast inland sea and, at

4590m, supposedly the highest named lake in Tibet. We continued northwards along its western flank, watching the water change from brilliant blue to ultramarine, to leaden grey and then back again. One evening, having passed no fresh water all day, we camped on the lake shore, resigned to a thirsty night. Like the Ancient Mariner, we looked out over an ocean of salt water – until Annabelle dipped a mug into it. True, the tea was over-salty, but next morning's porridge was excellent. Fresh water was to remain elusive; one evening's trickle, found with difficulty, had dried up by the time we had finished our meal.

Shortly after midday on the fifth day after crossing the Goring La, in cloud and drizzle, we reached a dirt track which was the road. Empty. That night we saw a lorry pass, and next morning as we walked along there was another. Exuberantly I stood in the middle of the road and waved my arms; in disbelief we watched the lorry swerve past, accelerating. Stillness returned. The road snaked inland, and hopeful of more traffic we followed it. Now low hills hid the lake and mountains, and we plodded on across immense green plains, grazed by occasional yak herds. People who describe Tibet as brown have seen the country from Himalayan peaks, but it can be vivid shades of green, as far as the eye can see.

Descending, drenched, into a valley at a wet lunchtime, we saw stationary lorries and two large tents, one elaborately decorated. Inside this mobile gompa were women and children at worship. Their menfolk in the plain tent gave us salt tea in return for a look at the Dalai Lama pictures in our *Tibet survival guide*, but they were travelling in the opposite direction and not interested in a joyride back the way they had come.

Later that day a large lake came into view to the north, and hopes rose; we must be further on than we had thought. Inevitably, though, it was the map that was wrong, and we realized that at our snail's pace we would miss the plane home unless we could hitch a lift. Now jeeps began to taunt us as they visited settlements which were specks in the distance, or as they actually drove along the road, the wrong way, their noises echoing across the plain. At one village, touched by our obvious disappointment at finding yet another lorry going in the opposite direction, locals brought us drinks as we sat resting by the roadside.

That afternoon, the fifth we had spent on the road, salvation arrived in the form of a small jeep, already carrying two passengers, but happy to shoehorn us in as well. To our delight, the driver offered to make a detour from his journey for us, on eastwards, then back up and over the low hills, and down to the Nam Tso again, taking us much further than we could have walked in a day. We were now almost at the NE corner of the lake, and one more day's walking took us southwards along the shortest side. The morning we finally left the lake behind us, the Nyanchen Thanglha ahead had a dusting of fresh snow, but the road was a quagmire of deep mud. No wonder there had been so little traffic. We floundered up to the Largeh La, and were able to hitch a lift down the other side on a roadmender's lorry. That last night we ceremoniously ate our last tin of sardines, one fish each. At least we were not carrying excess food back.

We knew that civilization was near when, some hours after a final frugal breakfast of oatcakes, we met a large party of chic, well-groomed French

trekkers, carrying minuscule day-sacks. Their luggage followed behind on a herd of unruly yaks. Another lift took us to Damxung, on the main road, and as the bus rolled back to Lhasa we looked out at the bank of impenetrable cloud which hid the Nyanchen Thanglha. Just where was the Goring La?



73. *Campsite in the Nyanchen Thanglha range.* (Margaret Clennett) (p 75)



74. *Approaching the Goring La pass.* (Margaret Clennett) (p 75)