
CHARLES CLARKE

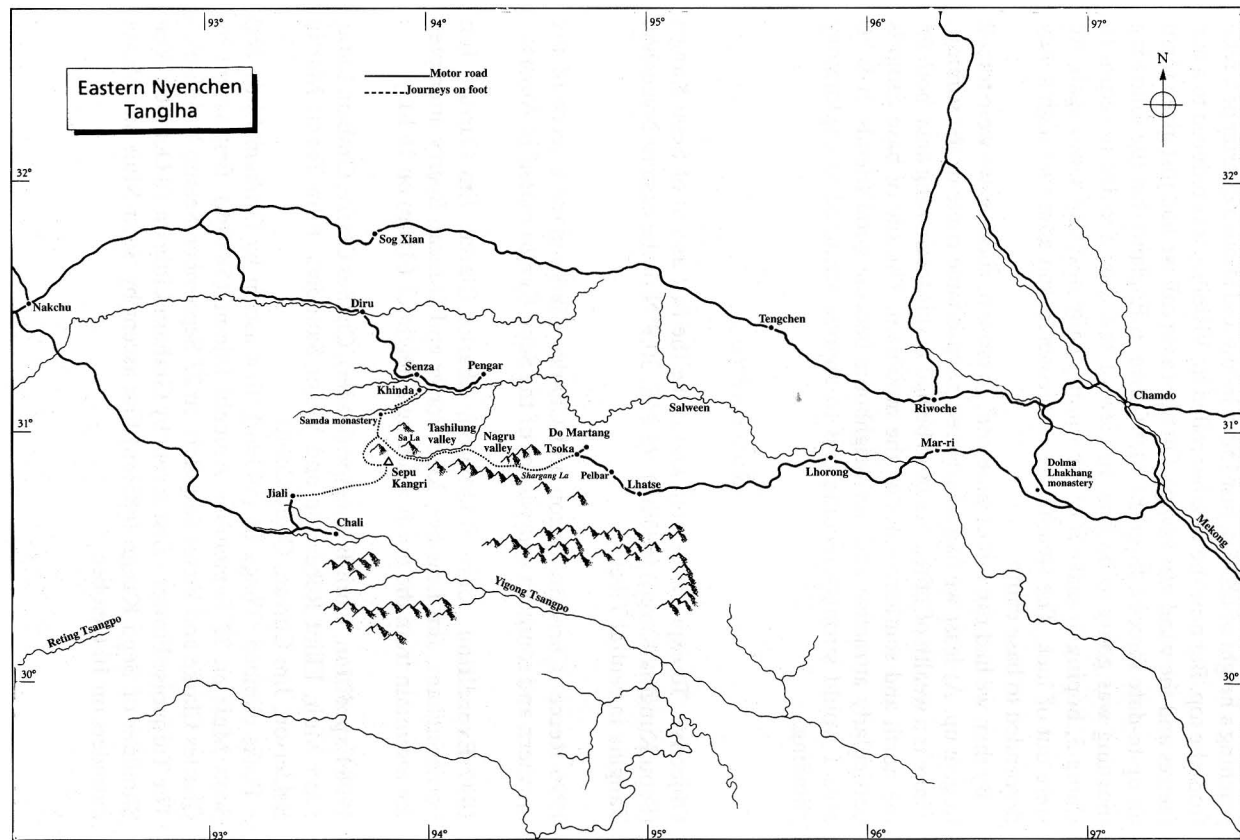
A Journey through the Eastern Nyenchen Tanglha

(Plates 9–11 and front cover)

On a dull snowy day in late May 1997, Jim Fotheringham and I climbed a steep scree slope, its rocks half-frozen, to reach the Sa La, the 5600-metre pass north-west of Sepu Kangri in the Nyenchen Tanglha in central Tibet. It was at the end of the 1997 Sepu Kangri expedition; Sepu Kangri itself was swathed in snow and our summit attempt had been abandoned. I harboured plans for further exploration of the area, but we did no more than peer over the pass to the north and east. A wide unknown valley stretched below and several 6000-metre peaks towered out of the clouds. I wondered if I would ever visit this region guarding the eastern approaches to Sepu Kangri, at 93.8°E 30.9°N. It seemed unlikely. There was little information about the valley below. 'It leads to Nagru,' we were told by Karte, our Tibetan neighbour at Sepu base camp, but no more. Folk tales had mentioned Nagru as a former Hidden Kingdom, a place cut off from the world outside, a land of peace and plenty, where even the wild animals were tame. This romantic vision stemmed perhaps from a tiny fragment of history. Prior to the seventh century the region had indeed been independent. King Songsten Gampo (613–670 AD) who first unified Tibet had conquered the area.

As we made our way back home in 1997, Sepu Kangri dominated our thoughts. Chris Bonington and I barely stopped talking about the coming year, and once in Lhasa hatched a plan. We would return to Sepu in the summer of 1998, and prior to the main expedition, with one companion, I would make a lightweight trip through the eastern Nyenchen Tanglha, beginning with a road journey from Lhasa to Chamdo, capital of Kham. We would then make our way west, first by road and then on foot, to aim to cross the Sa La into the Sepu Kangri basin. Meanwhile, in September 1998 the main expedition would approach from the town of Diru, and the roadhead at Khinda, north of the mountain. Chris would be unable to come with me on this exploratory journey, but as part of our joint venture and his own devotion to electronic gadgetry we would carry lightweight solar-powered communications equipment, to keep in touch and e-mail pictures and stories home.

Shortly before leaving London in August 1998, the success of this project seemed decidedly unlikely. My 26-year-old companion Elliot Robertson,



who had just been appointed Communications Officer at the Royal Geographical Society, began to have serious doubts about my organisational abilities; our request for Chinese visas had been turned down, and it seemed we might be sitting in Kathmandu for a month, awaiting Chris and the main team. There seemed little point staying in London, so we flew to Nepal. Miraculously the bureaucracy melted away, and within a week, on 11 August, Elliot and I were aboard a Land Cruiser leaving Lhasa, with Pasang Choephel, a Tibetan friend from previous years. We were bound for the northern route to Chamdo. Our preferred, southern road route was blocked by landslides, a common problem in the rainy season.

By Saturday 15 August, having followed the road through Nakchu and the monastery towns of Sog Xian, Tengchen and Riwoche, and after numerous mud and landslides in torrential rain, we were in Chamdo, a market town largely overtaken by modern architecture. Here further bureaucracy and roadblocks again threatened progress but Pasang's diplomacy was exemplary and we were soon driving along the Mekong gorge heading for Lhorong, and a potential roadhead near the town of Pelbar. Few Westerners had ever visited this region and travelled along the ancient yak highway between Lhasa and China, the Gya Lam, which means simply, 'the road'. In 1846 two Lazarite priests, Régis-Evariste Huc and Joseph Gabet, had walked east from Lhasa, having been expelled by the authorities. Huc's account of this journey is one of the most charming, vivid and humorous stories of Tibetan travel. They had passed within several miles of the southern approaches to Sepu Kangri. Huc mentions the saw-toothed ice peaks of the massif, its name unknown. They had then crossed the Shargang La, the pass leading down towards Pelbar. 'We could see a long dark trail,' he wrote, 'like a huge caterpillar winding its way up the slopes...a party of monks returning from a pilgrimage... Before we reached the summit the wind began to blow with such fury ... the whole mountain seemed to be disintegrating. The climb seemed so steep that it was too much for man or beast ... Father Gabet ... nearly failed to reach the top ... he was no longer able to hang on to the tail of his horse ... he fell exhausted and was almost buried in the snow. He was more dead than alive; he was ghastly pale and panted with a noise like a death-rattle.' By contrast the tale of a later traveller, Brigadier-General George Pereira, was recounted by Younghusband. Pereira made a remarkable journey in 1921 along the Gya Lam in the direction opposite to Huc. The account of the people he met is almost blimpish and sometimes abusive and the text gives few details of the wonders of the landscape. Pereira's legacy (he had died during his return to China) was, however, a most detailed map of his route. We would follow his route along the Gya Lam for several days and then turn north to reach the valleys of Nagru and Tashilung and, we hoped, the Sa La.

On the road to Pelbar, we made our first visit to a monastery, having avoided these places hitherto at Pasang's suggestion. We located the spectacular and remote Dolma Lhakhang, the former seat of the Akong

Rinpoche, now the High Lama of Samye Ling monastery in Eskdalemuir, Scotland. Arriving unannounced we were made most welcome by the monks. We brought photographs and greetings from Scotland and gave the Kongtoul Lama, the present re-incarnate incumbent, the opportunity to use the BT Mobiq satellite phone to speak to the Akong Rinpoche in Samye Ling. Rarely did we see a snow peak. The weather remained cloudy.

On 19 August we reached the town of Tsoka, near Pelbar, and said goodbye to Lobsang, the driver and his Land Cruiser we had come to love. The kindly district leader provided horses and we headed for the Shargang La, finding it an easy 5000-metre pass two days to the south. On the pass the mountain landscape unfolded in the only fine weather of our journey. The entire eastern Nyenchen Tanglha lay before us with even a glimpse for a few seconds of the fang of the eastern summit of Sepu Kangri, some 60 kilometres away. We soon lost this mountain panorama as we descended to the village of Tsara Sondu, changed pack horses and turned right up the Keela Pu valley heading for three 5200-metre passes which led to Nagru. Two hospitable horsemen, Nima and Po Thondup, made us welcome in a *ba* (a nomad tent) a few kilometres up the valley, slaughtered a sheep and warned us of the terrain ahead. Neither had crossed the Sa La themselves. 'Ah, the Sa La. The Sa La is not for horses,' was all Nima said, with a smile.

We followed easy trails, first through fertile yak pastures and then through typical sub-glacial rocky terrain, over the rocky passes into the Hidden Kingdom of Nagru. 'There are the two mountains called Keela Cho and Jongla Mokbu,' Nima told us, indicating two ice summits to the south-east. 'These mountains guarded Tibet in times gone by. With the help of Sepu Kangri, they stopped the Chinese invading India,' he added. In cloud, the chain of the eastern Nyenchen Tanglha filled the southern horizon, glaciated rock peaks not dissimilar to the Italian approaches to the Alps. We camped at a village called Dorputang, where Nima and Po Thondup had to leave us. 'We have never had such pleasure travelling with strangers,' Nima said as he rode away. We returned the compliment and paid them well.

The journey through the fertile, wooded valley of Nagru was something of a disappointment. The weather was dismal and the villages poor, giving no inkling of a previous age of glory. The attitude of the inhabitants bordered on hostility: perhaps we were over-familiar. We dropped to the confluence of the Nagru and Tashilung valleys. Here we heard worrying news. Most of the bridges in the area had been washed away in the rains, causing us concern about the forthcoming approach march of the main expedition. We discussed these matters with Chris on the satellite phone. The absence of sun and hence solar power prevented more than an occasional foray into transmitting digital images by e-mail during the journey.

The Tashilung was a second fertile valley, some 40 kilometres long. We travelled up it for three days towards the Sa La, with occasional tantalising glimpses of Kok-po (also known as Maya), a spectacular 6000-metre peak at its head, checking our progress with the Global Positioning System. Our

new horsemen, a pair who rarely smiled, gave gloomy forbodings about the Sa La, and at first we gathered they had crossed it, but it soon became apparent that neither knew even where the pass was. We camped beside the river near the head of the valley in driving rain and dense cloud. Out of the mists emerged a man in a deep red robe, fingering a rosary. The nomad was friendly and interested in our journey. He gave explicit instructions about the way to the Sa La, and as the cloud cleared for a few seconds he indicated a col. 'That is not the Sa La,' he said 'but it is close by that place and above it to the right.' This made sense. Chris and I had reached the col in 1996, but not the pass, and unusually the lowest point on the ridge had not been a feasible place to cross it. The man pointed to a band of red rocks several kilometres up the valley, where the river swept down to the valley floor. 'From here you follow the river,' he said 'until you reach the red rocks. Cross the river and climb the rocks and you will find a path leading to the Sa La.'

Next morning, we could see but a few hundred metres through the mist. We set out in rain, and with our horsemen becoming gloomier by the hour, we climbed up the trackless valley floor. Where the hell were we? We really did not know. The 5000-metre mark passed, and then to our left, there rose a red scree slope. Compass and Garmin Global Positioning System were of little use here – we did not know the coordinates of the pass. We crossed the river and plodded up the red rocks. To our amazement a track appeared out of nowhere and led to a cairn. 'We build these stones for good luck,' said Pasang as he built another. Out of what had then become driving snow, a route snaked upwards, and in the distance were two prayer flags like goal posts on the pass itself. We were there by 2pm and peered over the pass towards Sepu Kangri. A precipitous slope of loose rock on ice lay below, extending for a few hundred metres. We each took a horse, and coaxed each frightened beast a step at a time. We slithered down, falling in heaps with the horses, sliding down ice and sending boulders trundling down the slope. We were too exhilarated to be scared. The end was near.

Below this the terrain eased. Within half an hour we were on easy scree. A patch of blue appeared, the sun peeped out and the north face of Sepu Kangri suddenly unfolded before us. The day became gentle. We saw a nomad tent several hundred metres below us. 'That's Karte's *ba*!' shouted Pasang. Elliot was out in front. Familiar figures, our friends from 1997, appeared from the tent, grasped his hands and beckoned him in. Pasang and I hurried on down. Karte and his wife Tsini stood outside holding their palms outstretched in welcome. We rubbed foreheads as family members greet each other. 'We thought you would never come,' they said and gave us milk, yak butter tea, fresh cheese, tsampa and yoghurt. We were back among friends. Even the dogs seemed to welcome us. It was an emotional moment. Tears of happiness came to everyone's eyes. Elliot said 'I was beginning to think we would never meet friendly folk again.' He gazed longingly at the snow face of Sepu that rose 2000 metres from the valley floor. We dropped to the campsite by the lake, paid the two horsemen

and thanked them. They left without a smile or a goodbye, but in fairness they had done a job that many would have balked at.

It was 30 August. The main expedition was due to arrive at the roadhead in little over a week. Local information confirmed that all the bridges were down to the north. The rivers had been in spate. We despatched Pasang on horseback towards Lharigo, a village on a potential alternative southern approach to Sepu Kangri, while Elliot and I spent a few days looking at the western glaciers of the massif, having crossed the Yam La. Pasang's news from the south was bad – more landslides, and bridges washed away. By 4 September we were camped at the roadhead at Khinda, awaiting the team, the TV cameras, news stories and other trappings of the late twentieth century. Our little journey was over. We were happy men.

Summary A journey in August 1998 by Charles Clarke and Elliot Robertson through the eastern Nyenchen Tanglha range, central Tibet. Via Lhasa, Nakchu and Chamdo we reached a roadhead at Tsoka and travelled on foot to join the 1998 Sepu Kangri expedition led by Chris Bonington. This was probably the first visit by Europeans to these valleys.

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