



ADVENTURE
Hitchhiking Across Tibet
TIBET, CHINA

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For almost two years, Alex Kaeslin and his best friend, Albano Tundo, have been bicycling around the world. The two Swiss nationals started in Australia on 1 June 2007 and have been on the road – or on a boat as Alex hates to fly – trying to get back home.

From Australia, they took a boat to Indonesia, and another to peninsular Malaysia, then cycled their way across Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and into China. Along the way they have suffered bad weather, numerous mechanical failures, bad roads and financial difficulties (they mostly live off savings).

An additional setback: Kaeslin's back gave out during the trip. Kaeslin had to give up his bike and hitchhike through China and Tibet while Tundo cycled along the same route. For 10 weeks, Kaeslin hitchhiked across China and Tibet, walking or relying on the train and bus system to get him from Nanning all the way to Lhasa and eventually crossing into Nepal at the Zongrian border crossing.

Foreigners travelling to Tibet need a permit issued by the Chinese government. Long closed to outsiders, the Chinese government has only started to open up Tibet to outsiders and tourists. Fearful of the political influence of the exiled Dalai Lama, the Chinese have kept tight control over the people of Tibet, since the Chinese army invaded the mountainous territory in 1952.

"We wanted to take our chances and cross the roof of the world 'unofficially', make it more of an adventure," Kaeslin explained. "I made it through Tibet while riding and hitchhiking at night, hiding under tarps, wood, rocks and feet of other passengers on the buses. My first checkpoint was very scary as this was my first illegal crossing ever. I had to hide at most checkpoints; at two, I walked through with pilgrims who gave me a coat and hat, the police thinking I was one of them." Kaeslin would pass through a total of 13 checkpoints before he

▲ Prayer flags strewn across rocks on the road to Lhasa.

► A pilgrim pauses during a prayer ceremony.

reached Lhasa. Tundo, trying to keep up with Kaeslin and meet him in Lhasa, had countless flat tires and snapped spokes. His back pannier broke and a local welder had to help him put it back together.

Travelling through Tibet is only allowed in a tour; individual travellers are generally restricted, although with the opening of the new Tibet train, the Chinese government has relaxed the permit system and single travellers can now travel to Lhasa.

For Kaeslin and Albano, illegal travel was more fun, added drama to the trip, and was much cheaper. To travel into the Tibet countryside, legal permit-holding travellers have to organise a truck and driver. "Imagine paying about USD\$100 a day for a driver; this was just too much and I did not want to travel in a tour package," said Kaeslin, explaining why hitchhiking solo was the only option. "Legally, you have to organise a truck with a driver and guide, minimum 10 days. And if we had done it legally, there is no way I would have had all these encounters with the locals."

Despite his bad back, Kaeslin didn't abandon his quest to complete his trip. "It was my dream to travel by bicycle, which I had to give up in China. I did not want to give up this time and



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had to look for alternatives. I was inspired by my friend Ludovic Hubler; he hitchhiked around the world for five years without paying a single cent for transportation. He did Tibet illegally also... so I thought I can do this as well."

While in Lhasa, the police did catch up with them. "The cops were informed by some local people who saw my friend Albano check in to a guesthouse. They told him to leave Tibet immediately but Albano was cool – or tried to be – and told them that the Chinese authorities in Kunming allowed him to get through Tibet," Kaeslin explains. The Tibetan policemen were forgiving and left Tundo with the one rule: He had to leave before sunrise so they would not get into trouble with the Chinese police.

Kaeslin was struck by how different the Tibetans are from the Chinese, and often repressed. "Tibetans and Chinese are very different; they speak a different tongue, look different and lead different lives. The invasion of Tibet happened more than 50 years ago but the two cultures still don't get along well. The Tibetans love their Dalai Lama, but are not able to talk publicly about him, nor are they allowed to openly carry a photo of him. Tibetans cannot receive a Chinese passport unless they are invited to travel, from somebody outside of China."

For Kaeslin and Tundo, the adventure continues. Now in India, Kaeslin is being joined by his wife Nataly. His back is on the mend and he hopes to continue by bicycle into India, Pakistan and Iran. The cycling trio hopes to return to Switzerland this summer. They have video-taped their adventures and may produce a documentary about the journey. ■



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How to Get There

To enter Tibet, purchase a travel permit from a licensed travel office in Beijing or Lhasa. There is a daily train that leaves Beijing, the T27, which travels directly to Lhasa. There are also many internal flights to Lhasa from Chengdu and Beijing on Air China or China Southern.

Attractions

Some of the most breathtaking scenery in the world. The Himalaya mountains, home to the highest peaks on the planet, are on full display on clear days.

Accommodation

Once in Lhasa, there are many guesthouses and small hotels. During the summer season, it is best to book ahead. Some of the best hotels are located in the old quarter, near the Jokhang temple.

Food

Yak, yak and more yak. Expect to try yak meat and drink loads of pungent yak butter tea.

▲ The deep valleys, and high mountains, in western China.

▲▲ A self portrait of the photographer in Tibet.

▼ Women walk clockwise around a Tibetan stupa. When showing religious devotion, pilgrims spin prayer wheels or walk around temples in a clockwise direction.

