

# Riding on the wind

*A writer bites off a little more than he can chew on a motorcycle adventure through the soaring hills and ferocious chills of Tibet.*

WORDS AND PICTURES IAN LLOYD NEUBAUER

**T**he thermometer reads eight degrees below zero Celsius and my fingertips are numb. My lips are cracked and dry and my bowels are twisted; I haven't been to the toilet for a week. The tendons in my shoulders and upper arms feel like they're about to snap as I draw on my energy reserves to prevent my motorcycle from slipping on ice. And at 5,009 metres above sea level, my head pounds from altitude sickness; even breathing is a labour in this snowy windswept pass through the Dongda Mountains, in the Tibet autonomous region of China.

I'm on a two-week, 4,300km ride to the Mount Everest North Base Camp, in far western Tibet, that began in Lao Cai, a small Vietnamese city on the

Chinese border. There I rendezvoused with 10 riders led by Tuan Nguyen, of MotoTours Asia, who has been running motorcycle tours in Southeast Asia for more than 30 years.

"Tibet is a special place: the history, the Buddhist culture, the landscape," he says. "And it's a mecca for adventure riders."

Nguyen spent months organising the necessary permits and paperwork. But the border police at Lao Cai simply refused to let us ride his motorcycles across to China. For three days the group waited listlessly in Lao Cai while Nguyen pleaded his case with various high-ranking officials, until he gave up and led us across the border on foot.

From there we took a four-hour train ride to





Approaching Tibet's  
Kharola Glacier  
moments before a  
snowstorm hits.

Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, where we lost another day assembling a motley collection of Chinese-made motorcycles from various rental companies before finally putting rubber to the road.

With so much time lost, Nguyen had to accelerate our itinerary. Instead of an already challenging 200km to 300km, we would have to put an average of 400km behind us daily to reach Everest within the allotted time frame. On the first day we would have to cover a whopping 500km.

An immaculate six-lane toll road took us from Kunming past the city of Dali, where we were supposed to spend a day exploring the labyrinth alleyways of the ancient walled city. Instead, we stayed at Lijiang, 2,400 metres above sea level, where we were also supposed to

spend a day, acclimatising to the altitude. But we hit the road bright and early the following morning.

From Lijiang our route took us along another flawless toll road interspersed with kilometres-long tunnels and an enormous land bridge connecting Tiger Leaping Gorge, one of the deepest in the world, to the city of Shangri-La.

We could hardly contain our disappointment on setting eyes on this fabled place: a drab collection of high-rise apartments infested with stray dogs. Other than the Inner Harmony Stupa of Pagoda, the largest and tallest white pagoda in the world, we found nothing to see or do there.

From Shangri-La the highway gave way to a winding, broken, two-lane road that marked our introduction to

the Himalayas. The temperature plummeted to near zero as we traversed mountain passes 3,000 to 4,000 metres high. But with three layers of clothing and insulated leather gloves, I managed to keep the late autumn chill at bay.

Night had already fallen when we reached Deqen, a frontier town where China meets Tibet and the locals are indistinguishable from their westerly neighbours. Dressed in technicolour aprons, long sheepskin coats and golden amulets in piled-up hair, deep lines rake the permanently sunburned faces.

With no heating in our hotel and a bed as hard as a door, we didn't get much sleep on our second night on the road. But at daybreak we were rewarded with panoramic views of snow-capped Khawa Karpo,



**“NUJIANG PASS, AT 5,218 METRES, IS MUCH LIKE THE TIBET OF THE PICTURE BOOKS.”**



Writer Ian Lloyd Neubauer takes a moment to reflect on the “roof of the world”, at the Nujiang Pass.

which, at 6,740 metres, is one of the highest unclimbed mountains in the world.

After a breakfast of noodles and boiled eggs, we got back on our bikes and careered along a two-lane mountain road that curled down the face of the tremendous peaks and troughs of the northern Himalayas. By late morning we found ourselves inside a colossal ravine with sheer rock walls stretching hundreds of metres high, tainted red with deposits of iron ore.

It is prohibited to ride, drive or even walk away from an airport in Tibet without an authorised guide. Ours, who asked not to be named, had been shadowing us in a support vehicle. When we arrived at the Yunnan-Tibet border he got to work presenting our passports, Tibet travel permits, Chinese driver’s licences and a

manila folder full of documents to unsmiling People’s Liberation Army soldiers. Then we lined up for mugshots. This complex and time-consuming procedure would have to be replicated at a dozen-odd checkpoints during the trip, as well as every time we filled up with fuel and checked into a hotel.

**O**ur first meal in Tibet is a celebrated affair held at a cosy hotpot restaurant where waiters sing Tibetan folk songs as they bus meats, vegetables and noodles to our tables. Hugs are exchanged.

From there we continue west, high into the mountains along a dirt road punctuated by frozen waterfalls and stalactites clinging precariously to cliffs. At about 2pm we reach a 4,800-metre mountain

pass decorated with thousands of stone piles and multicoloured Buddhist prayer flags, representing the five elements. With snow covering the ground and thick mist wafting through the air, the climate is not welcoming but tolerable for a short while.

The same cannot be said when we hit the 5,000-metre mark, at the aforementioned Dongda Pass. By the time we check into a hotel after dark, the freeze has worked its way so deep into my bones that all I can do is kick off my boots and shiver under the bedcovers. I curse the day I decided to ride through Tibet.

The next morning, I decide to tell Nguyen that I cannot go on; riding in Tibet just hurts too much. But when I pull back the curtains in my room, I see the most extraordinary sight: an old Tibetan man walking





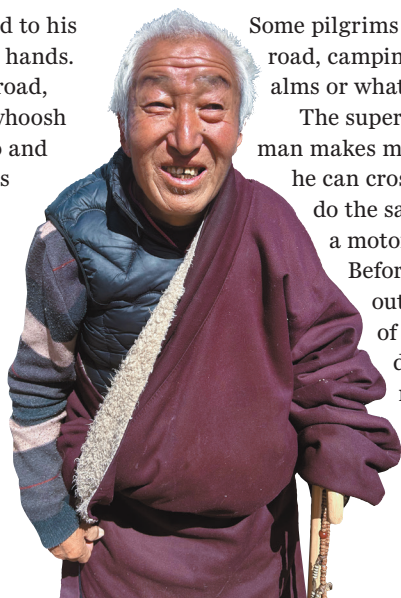
**Left:** one of more than 100 glaciers near Mount Noijin Kangsang.

**Below left:** the sun begins to set over Namtso Lake, on the outskirts of Lhasa. **Below:** the writer's first day on the road. **Bottom:** a pilgrim on the road to Lhasa.



up the road with an animal hide strapped to his chest and wooden blocks strapped to his hands. Suddenly he stops and lies down on the road, touching it with his forehead as trucks whoosh past dangerously fast. He then stands up and raises his hands above his head and claps before taking another few steps and repeating the ritual.

At breakfast, our guide explains the old man is a pilgrim walking to Lhasa, the capital and holy of holies for Tibetan Buddhists. His purpose? To atone for sins real or imagined and generate goodwill for others in the hope he will be reincarnated as a higher life form.



Some pilgrims will spend a year or two on the road, camping in the open and surviving on alms or what little provisions they can carry.

The superhuman faith that drives the old man makes me reconsider my decision to quit. If he can cross Tibet on foot, how can I fail to do the same given the relative comfort of a motorcycle and still call myself a man?

Before setting off, however, I visit an outdoor market where I buy a big pair of plastic mitts with furry innards designed to be threaded around motorcycle hand grips.

Today, we have two more mountain passes to cross. The

first, Nujiang, at 5,218 metres, is much like the Tibet of the picture books, with the sunlit, lonely heights of snowy peaks looking down at us from either side of the road.

At the top of the pass we meet another adventure rider: a Chinese man with a long, sharp fringe who looks like a Manga character and travels with his dog, Money, who he dresses in a jacket and ski goggles. We also meet a young Chinese tech millionaire cruising around in a white Lamborghini. Like most people we encounter, neither speaks a word of English. But that doesn't prevent us from establishing a friendly rapport.

After nibbling on greasy fried meat and soggy, overcooked vegetables (Tibet is not a foodie destination), we ride down the other side of the pass. Having negotiated



Western Tibet resembles a large desert peppered with mountains.



The approach to the Everest North Base Camp, in far western Tibet.



72 hairpin turns we reach a valley with a wide, jade-coloured river running through it, a mild climate and dense green forests that remind me of the Canadian province of British Columbia.

The final 80km of the day takes us up the 3,528-metre Zoji La Pass in the dark. A blizzard is blowing.

Now armed with my woolly mitts and up to five layers of clothing – essentially everything I packed – some of my fingertips still turn numb but the pain doesn't spread any further. My lips are now completely blistered and my eyes won't stop weeping but I bite through the pain after seeing groups of pilgrims bent forward, fighting their way through the wind and snow. Some are accompanied by children. We also pass Olympic-fit Chinese tourists cycling up the mountain.

The following morning we join Route 318 – aka the Friendship Highway. Stretching 5,476km from Shanghai to Nepal, it is one of the longest roads in the world and a must-do for Chinese adventure riders, who we see in greater numbers as we approach Lhasa.

There, we take a rest day and visit the Potala Palace, a soaring red and white fortress that is the former winter residence of the Dalai Lama; and Jokhang Temple, the final destination of pilgrims in Tibet, where they take their last bow in front of a golden statue of the Buddha.

From Lhasa we continue west to Everest. The landscape becomes desert-like, with mammoth pyramid-shaped hills underscored by monasteries with gold pointed pinnacles and frozen lakes and rivers that

become mirrors under the sun. Every corner and bend in the road delivers scenery more epic than that at the last.

There are only 30 minutes of daylight left when we enter the mouth of the tremendous canyon that leads to the 5,205-metre-high Pang La Pass. The conditions are as harsh as they were in the Dongda Mountains and my body is still racked with pain. But after a week in Tibet, I have somewhat acclimatised, ripping up the road with peg-threatening leans that only successive days of riding at high speeds can engender.

It is on this stretch that, for the first time, I overtake Nguyen, who still rides like the wind despite having caught a cold and shivering from fever.

"I know things haven't been perfect," he confesses later on. "It's one of the most difficult trips I've done





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in my life; not only from a logistical perspective. The altitude, the weather, the road conditions. It’s not easy and it’s certainly not for everyone. But the people in this group are all very experienced riders and I warned them it would not be easy.

“I’m going to do things very differently on the next trip. No riding at night. And instead of crossing at Lao Cai we’ll go through Laos to get to China to avoid problems. I’ve crossed over with bikes there 100 times.”

The Everest North Base Camp is a bit of an anticlimax because, 25km before the finish line, we’re forced to dismount at a military checkpoint and complete the journey in a bus.

There is no denying the beauty of Everest, the icy beast that has claimed the lives of at least 322

climbers since records began, in 1922, according to the Himalayan Database. But it pales in comparison to what I see the following day, when we return to Lhasa, to drop off our bikes to be freighted back to Kunming.

At first it appears like a mirage under the glaring sun, so white and phosphorescent it seems like the seat of God himself: the Kharola Glacier. A gargantuan tongue of ice set between the peaks of Mount Noijin Kangsang, Kharola is the most accessible glacier in Tibet, set only 300 metres from a section of road that has more than 100 glaciers in its vicinity.

I snap a photo in total sunlight from a few kilometres away and aim to take a few more at the base of the glacier. But without warning, a gale is whipped up and the temperature drops like a bomb.

Soon we are riding through total snow and the horrible numbness returns to my fingers and toes with a vengeance. And just when I think things can’t get any worse, ice begins to form on the inside of my helmet and I am forced to lift the visor, wincing with pain every time a snowflake lands in my eyes.

I inch my motorbike through the now whited-out world in blind hope I don’t ride headlong into a wandering yak or a swerving truck.

At that moment I realise what it means to dare to take on Tibet, a land of extremes where the beauty of the landscape is matched by the ferocity of the climate, and blue skies are as fleeting as the happiness of the human soul. ■