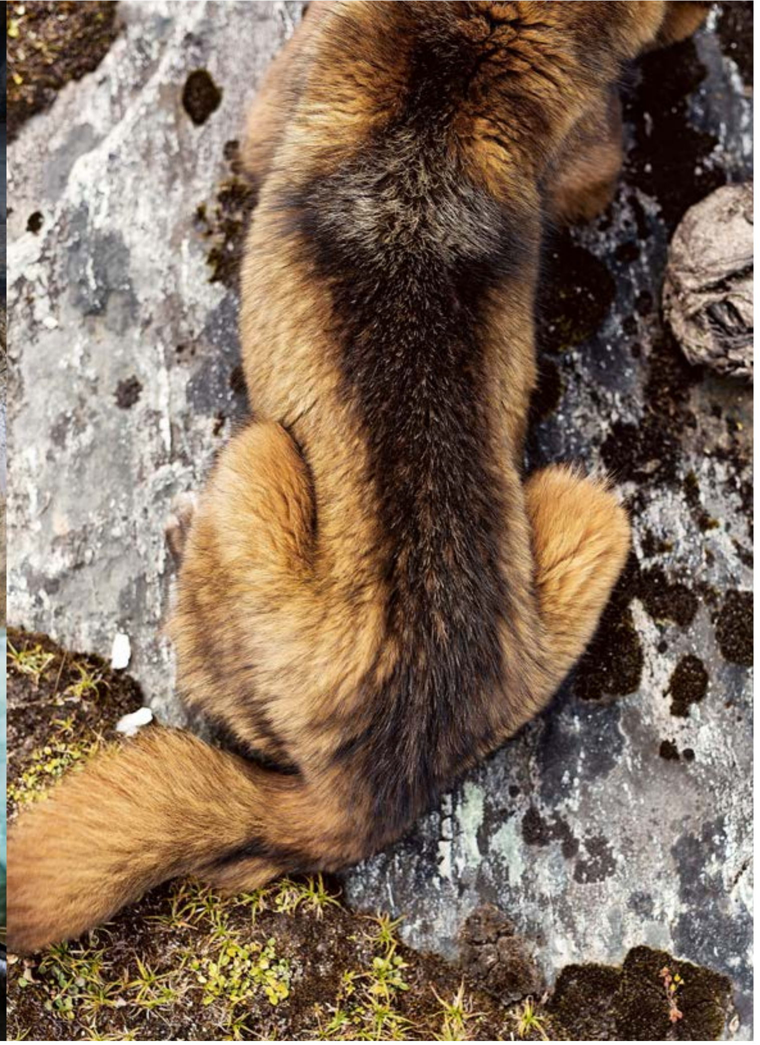
ROUTES MANOEUVRE

High in the craggy Tibetan plateau, merchants carved out a tea trail 1,000 years ago. **Amar Grover** traces their journey as they did it, in a mule caravan.

Photographs by **Tom Parker**



A house in Xiangcheng. From far left: **a horseman on a mountain pass; a woman cooking in the village of Xiangcheng; a Tibetan Mastiff puppy;** Previous pages: **the view from Tse Qu camp**

"You don't want to get too close to that one; he's a kicker." Aju's gestures were clear enough, his amiable Tibetan emphatic and to the point. So I stepped away from the mule's hindquarters as Aju tightened its straps, and watched the remaining 28 animals being tethered, steadied, saddled, loaded and buckled.

It was a monochrome morning. Dark, ominous clouds thinned to a bleached horizon. The imposing houses, all precise brown masonry with black panda-eyed window frames, looked stern. Yet the mood of the villagers was upbeat. Dozens had turned up to wave me and my fellow trekkers off, amused by the group of tall foreigners wearing clunky boots and brandishing walking poles. When the mules eventually trotted off, there were whoops, guffaws and waves. We followed a muddy path between stone walls up towards the forest. A litter of piglets dashed past snorting and snuffling. We climbed above the village to reach the forest. Warm sunshine filtered through extravagant tendrils of beard lichen hanging from tree boughs. There were dozens of multicoloured prayer flags strung up like bunting radiating from a solitary chorten, whitewashed shrines that commemorate Buddha's teachings and sometimes house relics of saints. Our path crossed braided streams on the edge of open meadows dotted with herders' seasonal huts roofed in wooden shingles. We paused for lunch—rice salad and flapjacks washed down with tea—beneath brooding crags that rose abruptly from an emerald-green collar of fir and spruce.

For centuries, this southwestern corner of the Sichuan province belonged to an independent part of Tibet known as Kham. In 1955, the area became a part of China and, despite an ongoing influx of ethnic Chinese, the majority of its inhabitants are still Tibetan. It's a region of deep rugged valleys, surging rivers, dense birch forests, Buddhist monasteries and holy mountains. Relatively few foreign visitors make it here, even though transportation and facilities have improved; in recent years, China has invested in the region's infrastructure to try to win over local Tibetans.

"I love the far-flung frontiers," said our guide, Constantin de Slizewicz, "and Tibetans are some of the kindest people you'll meet." The Frenchman has carved out a life in this area, co-founding Caravan Liotard (caravane-liotard.com), which organises treks that weave through the valleys of Sichuan and Yunnan. He lives in a traditional farmhouse in the Ringha Valley, near Shangri-La, with his British wife and their son.

It's also the land of the ancient Tea Horse Road ('cha ma dao' in Mandarin), a millennium-old trade route connecting southern China with eastern Tibet. By around the seventh century, Tibetans had begun to acquire a taste—and then a thirst—for Chinese tea, which they drank churned with butter. However, the bushes couldn't be cultivated in Tibet's extreme altitude and harsh climate, so they set up a trade route, sending coveted Asian horses to China as a way to strengthen its army and bolster the borders. In return came tea, compressed into bricks or slim discs. Much of it was only powdery leftovers and unfancied twigs, but for Tibetans, it was a welcome addition to their limited diet. Some scholars claim the tea's convoluted journey—from prolonged storage in humid, lowland warehouses to being humped around on the sweaty backs of pack animals up to higher altitudes—changed its taste, aroma, colour and character; it's unclear if this was for the better or worse.

The tea caravans continued for centuries until the 1950s, when communism shut down borders and stalled trade. Some trails have since vanished or been choked by vegetation, others have been upgraded to modern roads. Our own modest caravan celebrated the romance of the journeys of the early merchants, while avoiding the perils and hardships they might have faced along the way.

This was a six-day hike through an area without roads or permanent settlements, away from the tourist-trodden path. We walked for about seven hours a day between comfortable mobile camps with spacious Sibley bell tents, patterned rugs, soft mattresses, snug duvets and three-course meals of steaming soup, pork medallions and chocolate mousse paired →

The team arrived laden with bobbing bales and boxes, sacks and backpacks. "Ki ki so so!" ("Victory to the Gods!") cried the horsemen as they bound down the path

That evening, we dined heartily on yak bourguignon at a long wooden table. Candles flickered in a silver candelabra while a small heating stove, plus plenty of wine, kept us warm as de Slizewicz told us tales of Buddhism and reincarnated lamas

Making tea at camp. From far left: **on the trail, a villager in Xiangyi; a door in Xiangcheng.** Previous pages: **the camp at night**

with French wine. The group was small, made up of mostly French and Swiss, plus two Britons, my photographer and myself, along with 10 Tibetan muleteers managing an astonishing 1.5 tonnes of equipment.

Our trek continued up to higher altitudes where stunted rhododendron and gnarled juniper gave way to meagre grass and bare rock. Just below the pass, a family of yaks glared at us. Then with a final, almost breathless push, we made the col at 14,440ft. An hour later, I glimpsed our camp in the valley below, its tall rounded tents shining like homing beacons in slanting late-afternoon light. Across the nearby river lay grassy slopes speckled with grazing dzos (a hybrid of yak and cattle) and a clutch of sturdy stone cabins.

A group of grinning herders strolled over to greet us. They'd been staying in these rich pastures since late spring, fattening their herds before the onslaught of winter. In a week or two, their rudimentary cabins would be closed, the dzos and female dzomos, mustered, and their own caravan would return to lower villages until spring. It's an ancient cycle that endures in the region's remote, lofty valleys. They seemed delighted to see us—their curiosity piqued by the sheer novelty of Western visitors—but also puzzled that we'd come all this way simply for pleasure.

That evening, under the canvas, we dined heartily on yak bourguignon at a long wooden table. Candles flickered in a silver candelabra while a small heating stove, along with copious amounts of wine, kept us warm as de Slizewicz told us tales of Buddhism and reincarnated lamas, of how mountain sickness defies fitness and of the early 20th-century botanist-explorers who had traversed this region. There was the formidable English botanist Frank Kingdon-Ward, who undertook more than 22 expeditions, returning with hardy new seeds and plants for European gardens. There was also the Austrian-born American Joseph Rock, who lived in Yunnan for over 25 years, first arriving in 1922 to study its flora and its people in forensic detail while writing for *National Geographic*; his stories had evocative titles such as *Seeking the Mountains of Mystery* and *The Land of the Yellow Lama*. De Slizewicz's own operation is named after Louis Liotard, an obscure French explorer who was killed by bandits when he tried to enter Tibet in 1940. I hoped to fare rather better.

The next morning, a few of the group made a headstart and crossed the shallow river to visit the dozen or so herders. Some were out foraging for wood or mustering the dzomos, but a couple of men had stayed behind to milk the cows. They squeezed milk into wooden pails, which they used in part to make a coarse cheese, rather bland to my palate. The rest was left for the calves, who suckled urgently while their mothers were calmed with handfuls of tsampa, the ubiquitous Tibetan staple of barley flour. De Slizewicz regaled us with the lyrics of a local folk song: "Without the forest there are no grasslands; without the grasslands, there're no yaks; without the yaks there's no us."

Every day, it took an hour to break camp. While most of the caravan typically surged ahead to set up the next site, usually about a dozen kilometres away, we set our own steady pace. Losanima, one of the muleteers, invariably walked with us—in canvas plimsolls and a tweed flat cap. His two mules carried lunch and offered a saddle if any of the group grew weary.

The muleteers were rarely silent; they whistled and clicked and cajoled the animals, urging them here and scolding them there. The women, in particular, sang all the while, a beguiling, high-pitched refrain that repeatedly rose and dipped. Once, having ventured ahead with Parker, we heard the sounds of the caravan drawing close, but then veering away up the mountainside. Because of their fading song, I realised we must have strayed. We backtracked nearly a kilometre, saw the fork, smelt the fresh dung and climbed more steeply. The rearguard had kindly hung back and waited for us.

At the first two passes, we relished views of Chenrezig, a glistening 19,690ft peak at the heart of Yading Nature Reserve. Its pyramidal ramparts soared above a stark expanse of serrated jade-grey scarps and bluffs. For Tibetans, Chenrezig is another name for Avalokitesvara, lord of compassion and one of the most popular bodhisattvas. This was →

Prayer flags on the trek to the You Kou grassland. From far left: **a local in Xiangcheng; the home of guide Constantin de Slizewicz near Shangri-La; a Tibetan woman in colourful prints and gold beaded jewellery**

> At our highest pass yet, which offered great vistas of Chenrezig, the mountain bejewelled the horizon, its flanks streaked with snow and stained with moraine

his earthly representation. Together with two lower peaks, the massif is a sacred place, in the same way as Tibet's Mount Kailash. Here, devotees circumambulate the base of the mountains on a two-day kora, a pilgrimage of walking and sometimes repeated prostration. Our less noble trajectory was up towards Yading's alluring peaks, but avoiding the reserve, which has become a magnet for domestic visitors.

Snow flurries heralded the third pass ("It's not a pass, it's a belvedere!" exclaimed de Slizewicz). We spied our distant camp pitched implausibly above the treeline on a slender shelf of green cradled by jagged strata and huge, barren ridges. The trail contoured across an austere, rocky expanse with shallow gullies. Steely grey peaks rose to our right and a great chasm of a valley fell away to the left. One more col lay between us and camp, but the way was faint, steep and stony. Dusk smothered the landscape and sapped our strength, but relief finally came with the soft glow of our lantern-lit tents.

That day was followed by one of exhilaration. It dawned clear and cold, and dazzling sunlight quickly saw off the frost and frozen puddles. We yearned to see the caravan in full theatrical spate. Barely a 90-minute walk away lay the prime spot: our highest pass yet, with great vistas of Chenrezig. For much of the way, mottled slabs of rock had been eased into a semblance of pencil-thin trail. The final metres zigzagged steeply to a slim notch in the ridge in which some waggish local had wedged a door frame. I stepped through and paused; the mountain bejewelled the horizon, its flanks streaked with snow and stained with moraine. Barely an hour later, the column arrived, laden with bobbing bales and boxes, sacks and backpacks. "Ki ki so so!" (Victory to the gods!) cried the muleteers as they filed through the door frame. They bound down the path, singing and whistling. It proved a sublime day. Now waymarked with stone cairns, the easy trail continually lent great panoramas of muscular ranges and huge valleys. After one more notched ridge, at mid-afternoon, we strolled into camp, where the team had set up a gazebo-covered table with glasses of wine, bottles of Ricard, Scotch and beer and plates of chorizo-like sausage and stir-fried lotus root. But the weather turned overnight and we awoke to rain and sleet. The feeble campfire spluttered and smoked. As we wound up to a kind of plateau with undulating ridges, mist shrouded a cluster of lakes in almost Gaelic mystery and eerie silence. It snowed briefly as we began the long descent, gently, at first amid carpets of cobalt-blue gentians and then, funnelled into a ravine down to the pretty meadow on its floor, with a gurgling crystalline stream curving past our last camp.

This was the home stretch. The stream gained both strength and tributaries as we tracked it through the narrow Bon Go Valley, its course now punctuated with huge boulders, swirling rapids and fallen trees. Twice, we crossed it on cantilevered log bridges, the mules showing no sign of hesitation at the tightness or the height. We plunged two vertical kilometres from sub-alpine to temperate climates. Finally, a spindly python marked the road ahead—a line of minibuses awaiting our arrival, the drivers beaming and offering us cigarettes.

We hugged the muleteers. A grinning de Slizewicz gave me a comradely pat on the back. There's an old Tibetan proverb: 'You can't get to the meadow of happiness without climbing the cliff of hardship'. I gazed back up the valley; the terrain looked almost impenetrable. Ⓣ

GETTING THERE

Fly to Diqing Shangri-La Airport from Mumbai (stopovers in Kolkata and Kunming) or New Delhi (stopovers in Bangkok and Kunming) with Jet Airways. Indian passport-holders can apply for a Chinese visa at the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in New Delhi. However, visas for Tibet require special authorisation.