

Highland Culture



Up on the roof of the world, the air is bracing, the mountains towering, the people resilient and the culture fascinating. For long centuries, Tibet has captivated the world at large; outsiders are intrigued by its mysterious and colourful religion, stunning scenery and sheer isolation.

Even in the 21st century, Tibet and its neighbouring Chinese highlands provinces have been little touched by outside-world influences. Ancient monasteries populated by richly-robed monks have complex and elaborate daily ceremonies - conducted against a backdrop of jagged mountains.

This is the region where the current Dalai Lama was born, into a simple peasant family. The spiritual leader spent childhood time in the Ta'er Monastery, near Xining, an elaborate and extensive hillside complex of temples which houses members of the Yellow Sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

But even this fabulous enclave is overshadowed by mightiest monastery of them all, the grand Potala Palace in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, a glorious piece of architecture that houses endless rooms and corridors. Its store of cultural treasures and religious significance have earned it a much-coveted World Heritage Site listing.

This is a very special part of the world, where deep spiritual faith helps counterbalance the harshness of nature. People are used to extremities here, witnessing nature at its most raw, and are pragmatic people, not much impressed by the materialism or consumerism of the modern world.

But for all the arduousness of their daily lives, these are hospitable, warm-hearted and cheery folk, not given to grumbling and ever willing to welcome strangers and visitors into their humble homes or settlements.

Stunning sights are never far away up here: a short mountain drive from our starting point of Xining is the magnificent Qinghai Lake, the largest salt-water lake in China, with shores that play host to flocks of richly-plumed birds.

The deep blue of lake itself contrasts with the snowy white of the mountains and the swaying green grass of the pasture lands. Artists are invariably inspired by the sheer beauty of this little-populated environment; the only human presence consists of land-travellers to Tibet and roaming nomads.

In fact it is the vastness and variety which usually have most impact on overseas visitors. Deserts and mountains feature in the same landscape; Tibetans, Kazakhs, Uygurs and Mongolians share the same territory; modern air-conditioned coaches whisk visitors past camel-pulled carts and donkey-led waggons.

Advanced civilisations, which thrived as long as ten centuries ago, left cities that stand to this day. Jiaohe, high on a hilltop, is a fortress carved out of sheer rock, while Gaochang is a flat, grid-system metropolis with wide streets and clearly defined buildings and temples. The Gobi Desert city of Turpan, one of the lowest and driest places on Earth, is an oasis which is renowned for supplying juicy melons and grapes to the rest of China.

These are key stopping places on the ancient Silk Road, resting points for camel trains heading west, around the deserts and across the majestic Pamir mountains, into the territory which is present-day Pakistan. The ultimate destination for the prized China-made cloth was the courts of the West - Rome, Damascus and Constantinople.

Precious metals and crafts were swapped between the different cultures. Many influences can be found in the fabulously worked pieces of gold jewellery, silver artefacts and braided costumes produced by local artesans.

The Highlands region offers a smorgasbord of cultural and ethnic treats, which can be witnessed first-hand, thanks to the convenience of modern transportation and the easing of restrictions in once-forbidden areas. It is a marvel of diverse cultures and rich traditions managing to survive and adapt in the modern world.