

Central Asia Trip Report

Aug 15-Sept 29, 1993

Introduction

From mid-August until early October, Jane and I have been touring parts of Central Asia. During the first part of the trip we were accompanied by Luree Miller and Elizabeth ("Ben") Booz. We started in Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan, and spent a couple of weeks in Kyrgyzstan. Then we drove over a high pass in the Tien Shan mountains to Kashgar in westernmost China. Ben and Luree went back from Kashgar, while Jane and I continued east along the old Silk Route as far as Urumchi. After thus touring the west-central portion of Xinjiang, we flew via Chengdu to Tibet. We spent several days in Lhasa, then drove around south-central Tibet to the Nepalese border, and came home via Kathmandu.

Only Kathmandu was already familiar--the rest was new territory as far as I was concerned. I kept running notes and most of this chronicle is based on them. Thus the account that follows is made up of first impressions; I offer them as that and that only. Take them for what they are--anecdotal flashes and broad-brush inferences about a large and unfamiliar region, part of which is just beginning to move out of a deep freeze imposed by a state socialist system, and part of which is still paralyzed but getting ready to follow suit--if it can.

We spent a couple of days in Kazakhstan before going on to Kyrgyzstan. Jane, who joined me in Frankfurt en route, had already spent ten days or so in Turkmenistan, and I absorbed some impressions of that new country from her. We heard enough about Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to give me a sketchy feeling for those states. These five countries, more or less united by language and culture on the one hand, and by recent history on the other, can be considered to form a distinct region-- a trans-Caspian grouping of Muslim, largely Turkic-speaking states spun off from the former USSR. Culturally and historically, this region relates in turn to the Uighur-speaking populations that form a majority in the western parts of the neighboring Chinese province of Xinjiang. If, after Deng and his cohorts leave the scene, China spins off its peripheral areas, as Russia did when the Soviet empire collapsed, then much--not all--of Xinjiang province may find its destiny (to use a Gaullist term) with the Turkophone countries that have recently spun off from the former USSR. It is thus possible to envision an eventual federation or confederation of Turkic nations stretching all the way from Turfan to Istanbul. But that dream is likely to prove little more than a dream for as far ahead as anyone can see. For one thing, Deng is still around, and the course China will take in the future is impossible to predict with any assurance. Another factor is that economics combine with recent history and, to a considerable extent, current demographics, in ways that are likely to tie the CIS states to Moscow for many years to come, while much the same will hold true for Xinjiang's ties with Beijing, even if the Chinese empire follows the example of the USSR and falls apart. And finally, each of the five trans-Caspian Turkic CIS states is rapidly developing its own separate sense of national identity, its own personality so to say, based on its particular geography, history, and ethnic composition.

Tibet is totally different from the others, and from just about every other place in the world, for that matter. At present it is a continuing tragedy; the Chinese rule is an offense to humanity; and my visit only reinforced my hope that in the fairly near future, Tibet will once again be independent.

Profiles of the CIS's Central Asian States



Kazakhstan is huge and sparsely populated--the size of Australia, with a population of only about 17 million. It is truly a multi-ethnic state, with the Kazakhs themselves constituting just under half the population, while ethnic Russians are almost as numerous--over 40%. The government appears to be controlled by the Kazakhs but its policies are sensitive to and solicitous of the interests of this large Russian minority. The ethnic Kazakhs are Muslim, but Islam is weaker, taken less seriously here, than in any of the other Muslim spin-off states. There is only one mosque in Almaty, the capital--a large and spacious city. Kazakhstan has enormous natural resources--notably petroleum and a wide variety of minerals, and Almaty is turning into a boom town, full of Texans and Germans and other Western entrepreneurs hoping to cash in on some of this natural bounty.

Kyrgyzstan is much smaller and less populous. There is a substantial Russian minority, though the proportion is smaller than in Kazakhstan. Much of the country is mountainous, like Nepal. The Kazakhs were traditionally pastoralists out on the steppes, whereas the Kyrgyz are mountain folk, also pastoralist, but showing the same kinds of differences in temperament from their Kazakh cousins that one observes in other parts of the world, eg, Nepali hillsmen vs the Indians to their south, Berber hillsmen vs plains Arabs in the Maghreb, and so forth. They are naturally independent and have embraced democracy more enthusiastically than any of their neighbors. Their women seem to be more independent and assertive than in a more typical Muslim society. They laugh a lot, and like to drink and gamble. Their main problem is that they are almost totally disorganized, and lacking any resource base comparable to that in Kazakhstan, the eyes of Texas are not upon them; there is no army of carpetbaggers in Bishkek, as there is in Almaty, eager to help them become a modern state.

The Uzbeks are harder to warm to, from all I hear. They worry their neighbors because there are so many of them, twenty million or so, and because they appear to their neighbors to be dogmatic and sullen. They take their Islam pretty seriously, yet communism continues to thrive in Uzbekistan, albeit under somewhat different colors than before. They say they want tourists but make it almost impossible for tourists to get visas, because the stench of bureaucratic paranoia that beclouded the whole Soviet system in the bad old days still persists. They look like the heavies in the unfolding Central Asian drama.

The Tajiks are the odd man out in this grouping, both because their language is not Turkic, but related to Farsi, and because they are so thoroughly divided amongst themselves that their main interest seems to be in killing each other. Their tribes relate to ones south of their border in Afghanistan, and I would hazard the prediction that their "destiny" for better or worse is to become a kind of northern extension of Afghanistan, a place to be visited only if you are wearing a bulletproof vest, rather than as a functioning member of this grand Turkic confederation or region I alluded to earlier. One problem with excluding them in this cavalier manner, however, is geographic: they have tentacles of their territory intertwined with pieces of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the fertile, densely populated Fergana Valley. Somebody in Moscow, way back, did a pretty cynical job of gerrymandering when they divvied up that populous area between the three states, with the result that it's nearly impossible to get anywhere there without crossing what are now international boundaries.

Turkmenistan resembles Kazakhstan in that it is fairly big and sparsely populated, but has considerable natural wealth, notably oil, and a corresponding interest on the part of Western investors to come help develop it. By contrast, it takes its Islam somewhat more seriously, and is more exposed to Iranian and less to Russian influences than is Kazakhstan.

The Chinese Side: Xinjiang and Tibet

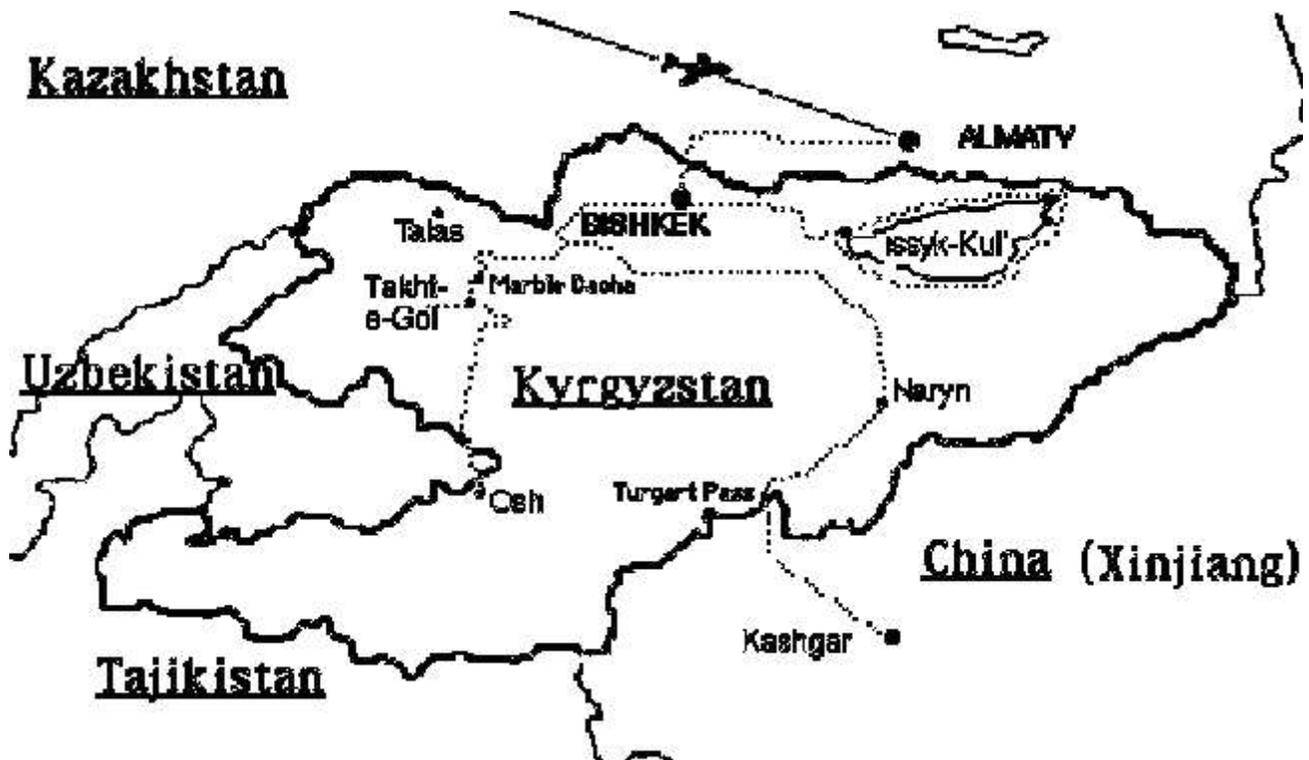
Xinjiang: Like Kazakhstan, Xinjiang is a huge region, arid, sparsely populated, and endowed with considerable natural resources. The indigenous population is mostly Uighur (pronounced Wee-grr), though at least in the far western portions one sees Kyrgyz and Kazakh and other Turkic minorities. Uighur are just as much Turkic, culturally, linguistically, and historically, as the Kazakhs and the others; they look like, and dress like, not only the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, but the Azeri Turks of Iran's Azerbaijan province whom I knew when I was consul in Tabriz, many years ago. I was told that during the area's golden era a few centuries back, the Uighur constituted the real brains of the Mongol Empire. There is also a substantial Han, or Chinese population, particularly in the eastern regions, close to the Chinese heartland. If the Chinese empire should follow the route of the Soviet one, I have no doubt the Uighurs would be delighted to set themselves up as an independent state, do an about face, and start associating in various ways with their Turkic cousins across their western frontiers. I doubt, however, if they could take the whole of the province as presently demarcated with them--the Chinese are simply too well entrenched over in the eastern portion.

Tibet: The colonial nature of the Han presence in Tibet is much more obviously oppressive than in Xinjiang. The Chinese don't belong there and it is pretty apparent that the people that do all wish they would get the hell out. Tibetan society has to be one of the most religious societies ever; there is simply no distinction there between religious faith and observance on the one hand, and daily activities on the other. They don't just go to church on Sunday, they are in church, mentally, all the time. When the Red Guard ravaged

their monasteries, it was a deliberate act of cultural genocide that should rank in humanity's hall of infamy right up there with Hitler's Holocaust. The Tibetans will not forget. If, after Deng, Beijing's imperial grasp falters, I would expect that Tibet would be the first to go. Meanwhile the naturally cheerful Tibetan people are sitting around sullenly, rebuilding their monasteries and growing their food, biding their time, while their resident Chinese overlords are twitching nervously.

That will have to do by way of background. Let's get on with the trip report.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan



Tuesday, August 17:

Our grand expedition to Central Asia has started reasonably well. The flight from Washington to Almaty via Frankfurt was efficient and uneventful, two qualities Lufthansa can practically guarantee.

We arrived at Almaty airport at 5 am; it was still dark. The facade of the terminal building was a surprise, in that some architect with a little talent had been allowed to alleviate standard socialist design with an Islamic, central Asian motif or two, and the result was almost attractive. Alas, it was only a facade. Inside all was grim confusion. The plane had been full of earnest entrepreneurs, many of them American, and they had brought along an enormous amount of baggage, including some pretty sophisticated-looking electronic equipment. There was a great deal of milling about; the airport was ill-designed to handle the load. Lines moved slowly when they moved at all. It

was after 7 when we got through. Having come straight through from Washington, I was semi-catatonic.

Luree's friend Susan Johnson Khan, the American wife of Riaz Khan, the Pakistan Ambassador, had offered to put us up, and Riaz had sent his car and a driver and an interpreter to the airport to pick us up. Jackson MacDonald was there too, the Charge at the American Embassy. This was clearly above and beyond the call of normal duty, but Jackson had worked for Jane in Dhaka, and evidently thought well enough of her to bring him to the airport at that frightful hour. The Foreign Service is a pretty small world, and we still profit, almost ten years after retirement, from these old associations. (I wonder how much longer it will last?)

Riaz' driver took us in a southerly direction across a flat plain into the gathering dawn, and we soon found ourselves in a sprawling, open-spaced city. Presently we saw a range of high mountains limned against the horizon. Almaty is at the junction between the vast plains that stretch west for much of Kazakhstan's territory, and the Tien Shan Mountains to the east and south. We went through the city, began to climb, and entered what looked like a vast construction project. Cranes and derricks, piles of bricks and cement, and many buildings in various stages of construction. One structure only looked more or less finished--that was our destination.. Riaz is evidently the envy of all the other ambassadors, in that he has the only finished house. The rest live in crowded apartments downtown, eagerly awaiting completion of more houses in this brand-new residential area, born out of Kazakhstan's new flirtation with capitalism.

Riaz shuffled downstairs in his pyjamas to greet us. He was the genial host, though 7:30 am was clearly a bit early for him; he expressed surprise that we had cleared the airport in a mere two hours. We staggered around for a bit, breakfasted, and slept till noon.

After a robust Pakistani lunch, Jackson dropped by and took us all up the mountain to a sports center and ski resort. Both structures looked as though they were uncertainly poised between not being quite finished yet and being about to fall apart. Jackson explained that this was normal thereabouts, nobody worried about maintenance, nobody felt any sense of personal responsibility for preventing the collapse of useful things, though they all shared a strong propensity to blame each other after the collapse actually took place. A hallmark of the Soviet system generally, I was given to understand. It figures. We took a short walk beyond the ski place and I found myself a bit breathless, it being about 8000' altitude. What will I do in Tibet, I wondered?

That evening Susan returned from a trip she had been on, with three friends, all female, so the ladies outnumbered the gentlemen seven to two as we sat down to drinks and dinner. I gather that during the immediately preceding invasion of Susan's friends (she has quite a few), it was more like eight to one, and Riaz showed his gratitude for having a bit of male company this time by sharing his scotch with me, while the ladies, bless their liberated little hearts, drank soft drink. Likewise, mostly, with the wine at dinner. I was glad to see there are still a few pluses to this business of belonging to the downtrodden male gender.

Wednesday, August 18:

I got off to a bad start. I leaned on the sink in the guest bathroom and it broke. A fine spray filled the bathroom and was well started on flooding the place when I found a faucet down in a corner someplace and turned the whole shebang off. Evidently the sink was attached to the rest of the world only by the thin lead pipe that rose vertically off the floor and brought the water. The sink had been swaying for some time like an inverted pendulum and picked the moment of my advent to rupture. Socialist plumbing and all that. Susan, bless her, was philosophical.

After breakfast the indefatigable Jackson MacDonald arrived and took us on a long drive out into the steppes to the northwest of the city. We went by a small Russian city (Kapchagai) associated with a big hydro project, on into a vast treeless steppe, to a sunken

river valley where we surveyed some Buddhist rock carvings and inscriptions from a long bygone era. Ben sketched. Jackson is my kind of FSO--wherever he is posted, he likes to knock around and explore--and then show off his findings. It was a most pleasant day.

On the way back to our quarters we stopped by the Embassy, a rather makeshift affair, squished into inadequate space in an apartment building. This, I gather, is the norm these days, in the peripheral remains of the Soviet Empire. Meanwhile Jackson gave us a series of insights into the nature of the Kazakh state and society as it is just now emerging from its communist cocoon. One has a sense of birth here, and in the other newly emerging states; while each of them already shows unmistakable signs of developing its own individualistic, even indiosyncratic personality and sense of identity, everything is still loose, pliable, unstructured, even chaotic...Jackson's insights were reinforced at supper, where various guests, and our hostess Susan herself, supplied further anecdotes and details. I got the impression there are really two distinct power structures operating in Kazakhstan, the formal government apparatus left behind by the Soviets, and a shadowy, informal tribal structure that governed the region before the Russians arrived. Somebody mentioned five tribes, or tribal confederations. That ancient power structure is beginning to stir, and assert itself, now that the pie is coming out of the oven. Foreign aid agencies ought to be dealing with it, but can't get a handle on it. Small wonder. For a hundred and fifty years, it was ignored... Islam is weak in Kazakhstan. Only one mosque in the entire capital. Animism still is prevalent, and the woods are full of Baptist missionaries, who are going after the Kazakhs, not the Russians...The centralization of the Soviet economy led to absurdities all through the USSR, and Kazakhstan is no exception. The main torpedo factory for the entire Soviet military is located in this extremely landlocked newly independent state. But of course the components are made in all sorts of other locations remote from Kazakhstan. Now that directives are no longer coming from Moscow, and components from other places, what to do?

Thursday, August 19:

It rained all day, in this allegedly semiarid region. The construction area around Riaz's palace is a mess. We visited the national museum downtown at one point, and I admired the good collection they had there of Kazakh rugs and kelims, all for sale at moderate prices. But mostly we stayed home and conferred, laid plans, and read books. We had a splendid dinner--in many ways the best of the whole trip--chez Jackson MacDonald, cooked personally by his French wife.

Friday, August 20:

For \$120, a muscular Russian named Constantine picked us up in a Ford van and drove us at whirlwind speed from Almaty to Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan. Constantine was a former champion cyclist in the Tour de France bicycle rallies, spoke a little English, and was quite helpful and amusing. If only we could have kept him for the rest of the Kyrgyz saga! We first drove west along a flat and dull plain within Kazakhstan, then south to the Chu River valley and the border. After the border, which we crossed without difficulty, the first fifty-odd Kyrgyz citizens I saw were blond. It seems that much of the substantial Russian minority in Kyrgyzstan is concentrated there in the northwest, in the Chu Valley. Pretty soon we reached Bishkek itself, a fairly big and reasonably presentable city, spread out in park-like fashion like Almaty, which it resembled on a smaller scale. We went to the American Embassy where we found Ambassador Ed Hurwitz, who gave us an impromptu briefing. Then we went off in search of the Kyrgyz Government staff which allegedly was poised to give us a five-star, super de luxe tour of the fabulous mountain republic of Kyrgyzstan.

I should note at this point that we had been working on plans for the Kyrgyz portion of our trip for several months. The first contact was the Kyrgyz ambassador in Washington, Rosa Otunbayeva. Rosa is an enormously energetic and enthusiastic person, already cutting a wide swath in Washington, and allegedly wired in at the very summit of the Kyrgyz state command structure. She is intent on developing tourism in Kyrgyzstan, and seemed to attach great importance to our visit, in view of Luree's status as travel writer for the Washington Post and other newspapers. We'd called on her at her office and even had her over for lunch. She had returned to Bishkek in late July and said she had fixed up our tour to such an extent that it would be a repeat of one that Susan had just taken, or was about to take, along with Mary Vance Trent and a couple of other ladies, which would be under the direct supervision of the Minister of Tourism. Mary Vance Trent returned to Washington in early August, and gave Luree and me an enthusiastic account of her Kyrgyz tour. Saktanbek Kadryaliev, the Director of the new Kyrgyzsayakat National Tourism Agency, an official arm of the Ministry of Tourism, had personally led the group, and interpreted for them, as well as making all the arrangements.

The last development before our arrival was word from Susan confirming that our tour would be personally handled by Saktanbek.

With some difficulty, Constantine found the Ministry of Tourism, and we waited for rather a long time outside it while he discussed our case in languages we did not understand with sundry individuals who popped out of the building and then popped in again. Finally an individual named Shakir appeared, an older man with good wrinkles and a benevolent manner. Shakir, it seemed, was in charge of our program and would be making the first part of the tour with us. His boss, Saktanbek, had had to go to Korea and hadn't yet returned, but would be back before we returned from the first part of our visit (Lake Issi Kul), and would take over then.

Shakir took us to the "Special Hotel" where we would be staying while in Bishkek. This consisted of two thirds of an upstairs flat in a rather rundown building near the edge of town--three bedrooms, two for our party and one already occupied by someone else, with a shared toilet and kitchenette. It wasn't quite what we'd been led to expect, but what the hell, it was home, for the present at least. It was now after 4pm and Jane and Luree collapsed, while Shakir took Ben and me off to a Korean restaurant for "lunch". (I'd like to insert the idea, and here is as good a place as any, that mealtimes had no fixed hours for our handlers in either Kyrgyzstan or China. Depending on their convenience, breakfast could be anywhere from 6 to 11, lunch from 11 to 6, and dinner any time at all). It was a fancy lunch, with caviar and other delicacies, and Ben and I dug in, regretting Jane's and Luree's absence.

Enter Keinard, a pleasant and intelligent young Kyrgyz who, *mirabile dictu*, spoke quite good English! Keinard was one of the Kyrgyz Republic's very few diplomats, and had attended a seminar in Salzburg the year before at which Jane had lectured. Jane had asked Constantine to send runners out to contact Keinard, during all the palaver that was happening outside the Tourism Ministry, and one of the efforts to communicate had paid off. We sent word back to the "Special Hotel" and Jane and Luree appeared and joined us. We finished our "lunch" and Keinard took us to his flat, a couple of blocks away, where he fed us an excellent bottle of local champagne, and some melon and other fruit, while he filled us with all sorts of useful information and insights about his country. Meanwhile we had made clear to Shakir, using Keinard as interpreter, that we absolutely had to have an interpreter throughout our Kyrgyz program, since Shakir and we enjoyed no common language. Finally, we left Keinard, returned to our quarters, and collapsed for the night.

My notes at this point turn from a chronology of events to speculative impressions; presumably a blend, mostly, of what I'd heard from Hurwitz and Keinard, viz: There is an

analogy between the mountainous, landlocked kingdom of Nepal, and the mountainous, landlocked Republic of Kyrgyzstan. Ambassador Rosa had started me along this line of thought by saying she hoped that in a touristic sense, her country would become "the Nepal of Central Asia"... Back in 1951, when India kicked the Rana regime out of power, it enjoyed great influence in Kathmandu, and had its own border guards established in checkpoints at the mountain passes joining Nepal's northern frontier with Tibet (and China). This eventually became a point of friction in Indo-Nepalese relations, and during the 1960's the Nepalese managed to ease the Indians out of these checkpoints. Right now, it is Russian troops, not those of the Kyrgyz Republic, who control the traffic across Kyrgyzstan's mountainous border with China. Will this eventually become an issue in Kyrgyzstan's relations with Russia? Not now, anyway; the Kyrgyz acknowledge they aren't up to the job of controlling the traffic themselves, and at least profess to welcome the Russian presence there...But this doesn't mean that the Kyrgyz attitude toward their Russian neighbor is one of unmixed admiration. There was a hell of a rebellion against the Russians in 1916, that implicated far more of the Turkic tribes than just the Kyrgyz, though the Kyrgyz started it. (Keinard researched this revolt while in college, and got in trouble for it). Pasturage had been organized amongst the indigenous tribes along traditional lines. Everyone knew who belonged where, but there was no formal documentation. The Russians came in, and found the land ownerless in the context of their own laws. They started owning it, and squeezed the tribes more and more, until the lid blew off. A coalition of over 100 tribes arose suddenly, slaughtered outlying Russian settlers with pitchforks and flintlocks, and were in turn slaughtered by regular Russian forces rushing to the scene. Some 40% of the Kyrgyz population was killed at that time, according to Keinard. That sort of thing is hard to forget.

The Nepal analogy is badly flawed, however. In 1951, when Nepal opened its doors to the rest of the world, almost nobody was literate; many of the hillsmen had never seen a wheel. When Kyrgyzstan became independent, the literacy rate was 90%, and the country already had a modern infrastructure in place: roads, cities, power, etc.. But the Russians ran everything, and all economic and business decisions came from Moscow, leading to a kind of "cargo cult" psychology among the Kyrgyz. This set of mental attitudes persists, and constitutes a major roadblock to economic progress.

Saturday, August 21:

The day turned out to be marginally less chaotic than the previous afternoon. Shakir picked us up and took us back to the Korean restaurant where we had a multi-course breakfast that again included caviar, plus cheese and sausage and other delicacies. We strolled a bit through parkland studded with heroic statuary and buildings in the standard forbidding socialist style. A tall, slim, dark-haired young lady joined us, and was introduced as Luisa, our interpreter for the day. Luisa was loquacious and cheerful, and despite the fact that her command of English left much to be desired, she filled a major need. We visited an art gallery, then the opera house, which turned out to be filled with Seventh Day Adventists being harangued in German by some high priest, with a translator rendering his exhortations into Russian. Luisa reassured me by telling me she was a Baha'i (with a Persian father, Uighur stepfather, and Kyrgyz mother). We visited a department store, and Shakir exchanged some of our dollars for local currency at a semi-legal black market around the corner. Then off to a big open-air food market, where Shakir stocked up for a "picnic" he had planned for us in the mountains. We returned to the Korean restaurant for another heavy lunch, after which Shakir introduced us to the vehicle and driver assigned to carry us around the country for the next ten days or so. Neither was impressive. The van was an old Toyota minibus, rather beat up; the driver was a snotty, supercilious youth named Sultan who insisted on playing hard rock at maximum volume on the Toyota sound system, at all times.

Then we all took off in the Toyota for the picnic Shakir had planned. We drove up a mountainside, into a national park area, and on to a picnic spot. I'm sure it would have been a lovely spot, except it was alternately raining and drizzling, and cloudy and chilly. Some of us walked up the valley a bit, while Shakir opened things and Sultan blasted the neighborhood with his hard rock. We returned and ate the picnic, which was mostly melon, plus a bottle of local cognac Shakir produced, announcing that he and I should each drink half of it. I did the best I could, but didn't fulfill my quota; he had no trouble with his. Fortified by the cognac, I ordered Sultan to turn off his damnable noise-box, and he did, for a while. We got back in the car and Sultan careened down the mountain, mostly in neutral, apparently determined that if he couldn't play his music he'd kill us all. We survived somehow, and were delivered to our guest house. I asked Luisa to tell Shakir that on the morrow, when we started out on our grand tour, I wanted another driver. Shakir looked pained, said there wasn't anyone else available. I said ok, but hard rock was verboten. Shakir readily agreed. Luisa said farewell, she couldn't come with us, another interpreter was being recruited for the trip. Exeunt omnes, and so to bed.

Sunday, August 22:

We arose early, all packed, and at 8, on schedule, Shakir appeared with our new interpreter. Her name was Svetlana and she was so sweet and innocent and young and tender that all three of my ladies started pumping maternal juices. Sultan meanwhile took a look at her and started pumping some juices of his own. Her eyes were wide with innocent wonder at being so fortunate as to find herself in the company of these wonderful people. Her complexion was peaches and her mouth a rosebud. I swear, she was too good to be true. The only flaw was that her English was rotten, but at this point we weren't too particular. We loaded our bags in the back of the old Toyota van, piled in, and sallied forth.

After another multi-course breakfast at ye olde Korean restaurant, we set off for the resort area of the beautiful Lake Issi Kul. We hadn't even gotten out of town when Sultan furtively turned on his squawk box, at low volume, and then, like a taxi meter, increased the volume just ever so slightly, every half kilometer. Luree took him on this time. With a look on her face that would have stoned Medusa, she clawed her way up to the back of the front seat and hissed NYET!!! in Sultan's ear. I have seldom heard a more declarative statement; I have never before seen Luree so fierce, and hope never to again. Shakir lunged for the machine and turned it off, and for the next three hours it stayed off. Sultan, white-lipped and scowling up a storm, tried to reassert his authority by scaring the pants off us with truly reckless driving. Luckily the other drivers on the road were alert and prudent, and we survived.

For about an hour and a half we drove along a main artery, with only occasional potholes, east through fairly heavily settled country. Then, still following the Chu River, we turned south and wound our way through hilly and less populous terrain. We turned east again, and soon reached the west end of the lake. It was indeed a large and sparkling lake, handsomely framed by mountains on both its north and south sides. A few more miles up the northern shore of the lake, and we reached our destination, one of those famous "dachas" you hear about, where in the bad old days, high communist officials were wont to disport themselves when they felt a need to relax. There were, however, two problems. One was that it was already occupied. The other was that it was filthy, and incredibly run down. Shakir solved the first problem, after about an hour of arguing while we sat around waiting, by asserting enough authority to kick the other occupants out. Then the awful condition of the place became more evident, and all four of us began to roll our eyes around and utter harsh thoughts. Svetlana shared our discontent, though used to a humbler standard of living. Sultan stayed in the car, music box back in operation. Shakir baa'ed like a sheep, a mannerism he used when embarrassed, and vanished, along with Sultan and the vehicle. We sat around for what seemed like a very long time. Lunchless, we attacked a delicious melon that Shakir had picked up during the morning ride. Thank God,

melons were in season. Travelers should beware of any trips in Kyrgyzstan outside of the melon season; they could starve.

It often seemed during our peregrinations through Kyrgyzstan that we spent much of our time sitting around waiting while Shakir argued at great length with some local authority over whether we should or should not be admitted to whatever sleazy accommodations desperate circumstances had driven us to. This in part reflected the absence of any hint of organizational support or backing, let alone planning, on the part of Shakir's tourist organization. But it also reflected a cultural and linguistic phenomenon which as far as I know is particular to the Kyrgyz nation, namely the practice of spending ten or fifteen minutes to communicate an idea that in another language might take ten or fifteen seconds. We first noticed it early in Svetlana's incumbency. Shakir would talk for a long time in Russian, which Svetlana would then translate as follows: "He says ok". We quizzed her as to whether that was really all he said, and she allowed as how he tended to get a little "abstract". Another informant, perhaps Ed Hurwitz, confirmed that long-windedness was an outstanding Kyrgyz cultural characteristic. I have noted earlier that the Kyrgyz seem to have taken to democracy like ducks to water, and wonder if the two conditions are related. Would Shakir not make a great Congressman?

At any rate, Shakir and Twit (our new name for Sultan) and the Toyota returned and Svetsky brokenly explained we were going someplace else. We went around to the other side of a little cove, where two huge, apparently unfinished, apartment-type buildings desecrated the view of the lake. The entry to these buildings was via a cluttered dirt alley. When we got there we learned that they constituted a "House of Rest" where in the bad old days deserving workers, the ones that had fulfilled their quotas, were sent for a well-earned vacation. The worker's paradise that was the USSR had collapsed, but not this vestige of the system. The place was full of paunchy middle-aged proletariat in bad shoes and whatever else their culture considered appropriate garb for compulsory relaxation. The place was jammed. Shakir and had had to use all his influence to get us two rooms on the second floor. We installed our luggage and hastened to the mess hall for lunch. It being after 5 pm they had stopped serving same, indeed were getting all geared up for supper, but Shakir screamed at them and they sullenly produced some grub. It was not a gourmet meal. We strolled down to the beach, which we found bedecked with bulging bikini-clad blondes and their hairy consorts. Shakir, somewhat shaken by the day's events, drew me off into his room for a little male bonding over a vodka bottle. We ate supper at the last possible moment, about 7:30, and it was lousy. And so to bed.

Monday, August 23:

Well, we had a day in a Soviet workers' paradise, and it was probably better than a typical day for a typical worker, and even if it wasn't, I can understand why the typical worker didn't bother to work very hard while he was on the job.

Ben and I went down to the beach and had a swim before breakfast. The water was clear, alkaline, a bit buoyant, and nippy--gave us an appetite for a breakfast that didn't deserve it. After a while we drove up the lake a few miles and visited a really posh workers' paradise, one that used to be reserved for high officials, and now was available for anyone willing to pay 100,000 Rubles a day (about \$75). It looked great, compared to our digs--the equivalent of maybe a two-star hotel in an American town. I wished we could be staying there but didn't complain; we expected to be paying substantially less than 75 bucks a day for everything, including transport and staff as well as food and lodging. Then back to our own digs for another quite dreadful meal. Then, after a rest, another big deal, we were going to a riding stable to see and maybe even ride the fabled Kyrgyz horses. As it turned out, the stable was a bit of an aberration, a place where they kept thoroughbred English racing horses. How these capitalist equines got shipwrecked in the heart of socialism wasn't explained. They were too high-spirited, and just too high, for us. There

was one nag which I rode around a ring, once. Then we went back to the lake, to a beach festooned with more bulging bikinied blondes. At one end were a couple of motorboats and an equal number of small sailboats. Somebody rigged some sails on one of the latter, oh goody, we were going for a boat ride. There wasn't any wind in the harbor, so Shakir got one of the motorboats to tow us out into the bay. There wasn't any wind out there either, so we sat around, becalmed, for half an hour or so, then hailed another motorboat which towed us back in. Story of our lives. Meanwhile Shakir was utilizing the services of a friend of his named Hiram to get a fire going and roast some mutton on it--he had a fixation about getting us a kebab dinner. We finally got to eat a little underdone roast meat, and some other food, but the main part of the meal was more vodka, served up by Hiram and friends. At least we didn't have to eat supper in our house of rest--two meals there in one day was already quite enough. We got back there after supper and tried to sleep. It was a bit difficult, as some of the worker-guests had imbibed enough vodka to decide they really were in paradise, and there was loud singing and carousing much of the night.

Tuesday, August 24:

We got up quite early, ate a quite dreadful early breakfast at our house of rest, and hit the road for our big tour around the lake--east along its north shore, that is, and around its eastern end and part way back along its southern shore. The mountains were obscured by heavy clouds, which was a pity, and as we approached the lake's eastern end it began to rain quite hard. Shakir came from that region and we did a little detour to see what we could of his natal collective farm. We stopped at a town and did a little desultory shopping. The main event was when a heavy-set, red-haired Russian woman in charge of a store saw a beat-up old Kyrgyz in a heavy overcoat try to steal a sheet. She vaulted over the counter, charged past me, caught the thief, and boxed his ears to the point I thought she was about to kill him. I'd never really understood the expression before. What she did was sock him on both sides of his head, first one side and then the other, until all our ears were ringing in sympathy. There was a good-sized crowd there and we all enjoyed the show. I'm glad we don't feel we have to fight the Russians any more.

The next stop was a little park enclosing the Pjreleski (sic) museum. P. was a great explorer, and the museum documented his exploits in detail. His dates were 1839-1888 and he discovered substantial parts of Siberia, Mongolia, and northern Tibet during his heyday, for the benefit of other Russians and the West generally. The people that were already there regarded him as an advance man for Russian colonialism, and their descendants are less enthusiastic about him than are the Russians. I only wish he had a simpler name. If he had emigrated to the US he probably would have changed it to Miller or some such thing, and would be more famous.

We stopped and had a pretty good lunch at the provincial center of Karakul, then turned south into the mountains, to a house of rest called something like Djery Ozer. Shakir had told us that this was where they sent the Soviet astronauts to recover, and had assured us it would be the creme de la creme, a high point of luxury. The place was in fact full when we arrived, and he had to negotiate for quite a long time to get us in. But we got a suite--living room, two bedrooms, and a sink. There were toilets down the hall but the men's room was locked, kaput, out of action. I explored and found another one, just below in an unused part of the basement, that worked. Traveling in these parts, you have to be resourceful...Djery Ozer's main claims to fame derive from its setting, a gorge of considerable natural beauty, and from its radon bath facility. As to the former, the buildings, that look half-finished like everything else in this country, are scattered in an ugly jumble through incongruously manicured park festooned with silver-painted statuary of heroic figures. The whole thing fits the natural environment like a cancer fits in a human body. And then there is the radon bath, which is a fancy name for a place where you can soak in hot mineral water. We told Shakir we wanted to try one. He ascertained that the facility was only open at dinner time, and you had to have a blood pressure test first. We

took our tests, dashed to dinner at 6 sharp when the dining room opened, and were able to squeeze in our radon baths afterwards, just before that facility closed. The bath was just what I said, a hot soak in mineral water, and we all felt relaxed. The dinner, by contrast, did not fulfill our (diminished) expectations. Its only saving grace was the other clientele, a remarkable gaggle of proletarian types from all over, old weather-beaten types in funny hats and all.

My notes diverge at this point to focus on our sweet young interpreter. *The ladies are getting quite maternal about Svetlana, who is 23 but looks 16, and very innocent...* When we settled into our rooms there was outrage at the prospect that Svetsky would have to sleep off in a barn someplace with Shakir, and, horrors! the odious Sultan, aka Twit; and Svetsky ended up on a cot in our living room. We are all working on her faltering English; Ben in particular is a good teacher, and has been spending long hours drilling her in vocabulary and the idioms she'll need in dealing with future tourists. Svetsky is an apt pupil, takes notes and studies them; her eyes sparkle as she uses a phrase she has just learned, and her teachers pat her on the back. I too make a contribution from time to time; I taught her to use the phrase "jerry-rigged excrescence" with reference to any bit of Soviet architecture situated in a place of natural beauty, like our sanatorium here at Djery Ozer. The ladies are encouraging her to think of herself as a grand mistress of some future tourist agency specializing in interpreter services, and with our help, she'll go far. For sure, there isn't much competition.

Wednesday, August 25:

We took off early, returning to the lake and continuing west to a fairly good-sized town, where we paused while Twit got a tire repaired. I noted, prophetically, *Our Toyota is getting tired, Japanese engineering seems unlikely to hold out much longer against Kyrgyz maintenance...* We bought a couple of Kyrgyz felt hats and waited out a rainstorm. Then on to a rather fancier spa, where as I recall, Susan and Mary Vance Trent and their group had stayed. The heroic statuary there was painted gold, presumably a socialist way of establishing superiority over humbler facilities like Djery Ozer, where the statues were only silver. By way of consolation for our not staying there, the ladies got a facial and I got a brief massage. We proceeded still farther along the southern shore of the lake, to a beach where we swam a bit, and up from there to a private hotel-resort on a bluff overlooking the lake, where the owner, another friend of Shakir's, fed us lunch and showed us around. He wants and needs a foreign investor with money to sink in the facility. I would judge that if said investor has not only a lot of money to burn, but good taste, and insists on exercising it, the place could become a terrific attraction for Western tourists--if, and it's a big if, the national infrastructure for tourism develops to a point where it can support this kind of thing. You know, hire some interpreters, fill some of the potholes in the roads, and establish johns that work, and lights you can read by, in at least three or four other strategic points around the country...

After lunch there was a long dull drive back to Bishkek and our "guest hotel", which looked much better than it had when we first saw it. Jane and Luree collapsed, while Ben and I went out for supper along with Shakir and Svetsky and Twit. This was supposedly Svetsky's last stand, but we persuaded Shakir that we needed her for the following day. How right we were...

Thursday, August 26:

This was to be our last full day in Bishkek. In particular, it was the day the great Saktanbek was to take over and assume command: enough of this broken plumbing and wiring at greasy third class hotels of rest! From here on, we'd be traveling first class, like Susan and Mary Vance did...Hah!

At 10:23 am I wrote the following: *This is unconscionable. At 8:55 Shakir and Sveta arrived, awaiting the great man. We still await the great man, who has sent word his father is ill. We have today only in Bishkek, to do many things, eg consult Hurwitz, sort out Ben's visa problem, and see Keinard, plus agreeing on our itinerary from here to Turgart, and extracting some notion of how much we are to pay for all this "service"...*

Finally all four of us jumped on poor Shakir, who was baa-ing like a whole herd of sheep at this point, and insisted we at least talk on the phone to the great Saktanbek (now referred to as "Sweatsocks"). After much difficulty, Shakir actually got him on the phone, and embarked on a long and apparently painful conversation. I used my elbows and got on the phone with the great man myself (as billed, he spoke quite good English). After reviewing the bidding, I demanded to know if we were going to see him at all. He said he really couldn't make it, and we should continue dealing with Shakir. I reminded him we had neither negotiated the final itinerary for our visit, nor, even more important, the price. We had been holding off to do this with Saktanbek directly. The great man weakly responded that Shakir could do the negotiating for him. I settled for that, hung up, and turned on Shakir, with Svetlana interpreting. We agreed we'd visit Osh in the Fergana Valley, then drive up and around to Naryn and thence to the Turgart Pass, exiting to China on September 2. We further agreed that Svetlana would continue to serve as our interpreter for the duration, until China. (Svetsky cheered and did a dozen pirouettes on hearing this). And we finally agreed that for all this service, we would each pay \$30 a day (the rate that had been our hope but not necessarily our expectation). We wrote all this out and Shakir, trembling slightly, signed it.

Jane and I went to breakfast, it then being 11:30, while Ben and Luree went to the Foreign Ministry. There they found a congenial English-speaking official who sorted out Ben's visa problem so expeditiously that by noon they were able to join us for a bit of breakfast themselves. We gave Svetsky a few hours off to prepare for her trip. That evening Ed Hurwitz took us to a new restaurant, Chinese, for dinner and further conversation. We were all pretty upbeat, saying horrid things about Sweatsocks, but pretty happy on the whole about how things had worked out. For Shakir had clearly been the victim of Saktanbek's bad management; Shakir had time after time used the extensive personal friendships he had around the country to bail us out of impossible situations. He was professionally an author rather than a flunky, and out of his element running our tour. What had become evident was that he had absolutely no organizational structure to work within, and no resources back in Bishkek to fall back on when things went agley, as they usually did. Saktanbek had simply thrown our tour into his lap and cut him adrift.

Friday, August 27:

Our happy trio of handlers, Shakir, Svetlana, and the sour Sultan seem to have felt outnumbered by the four of us; they turned up in the morning with a fourth staffer in tow, a gangling, pimply adolescent named Islam. Islam walked like a marionette on loose strings and had trouble with his voice, which turned into a powerful, commanding basso at odd intervals, surprising all of us. His glands were in a state of total confusion and he positively snorted every time he looked at Svetlana, who huddled as closely as she could to our three ladies for protection. Islam's role in our group wasn't clear at first, but as we progressed, it was seen to be that of mechanic and helper in the increasingly difficult task of keeping the Toyota in motion.

We went to the market and loaded melons and other fruit aboard, then drove eastwards out of Osh in high fettle. After an hour or so heading down the Chu Valley we turned south and up a steep mountain gorge, on a road that was more potholes than otherwise, beset with constant switchbacks, over a 10,000 foot pass to a high plain running east-west below us, with another subrange of the Tien Shan mountains on the other side. While the Chu valley had been green and fairly densely populated, this high plain was

brown, semiarid, and populated mainly by flocks of sheep and goats scattered around thinly. And there were occasional horsemen and yurts. I felt we were finally getting into real Kyrgyz country. The impression was reinforced when we stopped at a couple of yurts and Shakir introduced us to the half dozen inhabitants. They showed us around, and an amiable, large, middle-aged Kyrgyz lady sat us down in one of the yurts and fed us *kumiss*, the fermented mare's milk that is the favorite drink in that culture. It was not quite as bad as I'd expected. Conversation revealed that it was good for just about everything that ailed you, from dandruff to sore toes. I decided the hell with the Greeks and Romans, Central Asia was where you had to come, for the original Mare Nostrum. (I bet you didn't see that one coming, did you?)

There followed a long gradual ascent up to another 10,000 foot pass, rendered longer by the fact that the Toyota died on us while we were in mid-ascent. Lousy fuel, they explained, water in the carburetor. Islam and Sultan took things off the motor and made sucking sounds and after a while we were puffing and wheezing upwards once again. But it was a portent, a bad sign...when we reached the pass we began a long, precipitous, and spine-jarring descent, around innumerable switchbacks on a truly abominable stretch of road, until we finally debouched on a plain and reached the town of Takht-e-Gol. By now it was nearly 6 pm and the accommodations Shakir thought he'd arranged just were not there. He found an inebriated relative who ran a restaurant and fed us, although the restaurant was closed. It was not a gourmet treat but the vodka helped compensate. We backtracked 25 km. into the mountains we'd just succeeded in coming from. It got dark, and the Toyota's lights weren't working, so they commandeered my flashlight. Eventually we arrived at an establishment that we came to know well, if not love, as "The Marble Dacha". It was by no means clear that the dacha could take us; on the other hand, there was no alternative, and Shakir argued mightily for a half hour or so, and eventually we stumbled into our new quarters and slept. The others did, at any rate, and so did I, until a little after midnight.

Saturday, August 28:

The day began for me about 1 am, when I woke up with an urgent case of diarrhea. It was pitch dark, and there was neither electricity nor plumbing anywhere. The closest thing to the latter was a good-size river rushing along down the mountain right next to us. Fortunately, the river made so much noise that people couldn't hear me as I took certain desperate measures to relieve myself, which shall be unrecorded, except that I really don't want, ever again, to have to rinse my bottom off in an ice-cold torrent in the middle of the night, in total darkness...My condition returned several times during the course of the night, until I finally paralyzed it with a stiff dose of paregoric. By the dawn's early light we all arose to take stock of our new and latest home away from home.

The Marble Dacha (so-called because there was a marble quarry half a mile down the road) had evidently belonged to one of the top communists in Kyrgyzstan (or maybe the very top one). If it was a love nest, it had the advantage of complete privacy in idyllic sylvan surroundings. It was maintained by a couple of elderly Kyrgyz women, who had their own quarters, an outbuilding that also contained the kitchen. It consisted of several buildings, including a separate structure housing a billiard table (but no balls or cues), some related facilities, and about an acre of what used to be well-manicured walks and gardens. Evidently the state still supported it, in order that government officials could use it as a guest house, but they supported it on very meager rations. The grounds were totally overgrown and run down. The facilities included a mini-hydroelectric plant which resembles a ruin but still cranks out a little wan power during the evening. Also a rather spectacular little bridge across the river, which included a kind of carnival-style gazebo affair in the middle, suspended right over the rushing stream, with a small dance floor. There had once been piped water, as evidenced by rusting pipes scattered around, and indoor plumbing, as hinted at by a locked door next to the master bedroom. That room had

a peculiar window arrangement: A kind of a square tunnel led off from one wall out to a window ten feet away, so looking (or shooting) into the room from outside would be next to impossible. All in all, an evocative, if no longer cozy, nook in which to spend a night, or two, or, as it turned out, even more...

The rest of us joined me in wakefulness quite early, and we drove back into town where Shakir's friend, evidently somewhat hung over, scraped up breakfast for us. Then we headed west, in search of a museum commemorating the works of Takht-e-Gol, a famous Kyrgyz citizen after whom the town was named. I rather doubted it was possible to have a museum in such bleak surroundings, and indeed we had to drive a lot farther than Shakir had expected before we found it. Once we found someone to open it, we rather enjoyed the exhibits. *Felt floors and lots of pictures of big black mustaches.* Takht-e-Gol was a Kyrgyz nationalist poet, orator, and troubador who died in the 1930's. We signed the book; we were the first Americans there since that record began, early in the calendar year. A number of locals had signed, but the only other foreigner was a solitary German. No doubt he will write a book. The place remains to be discovered by the international tourist business.

This museum business took a lot longer than expected, and it was still a long way to the city of Osh, our destination. I foresaw getting there at midnight, if we were lucky. We drove back through Takht-e-Gol and on around the big artificial lake that lies immediately to its south. Then up over another pass--and the Toyota died again. This time it took the better part of an hour for Sultan and Islam to get it going again. (I should add that Sultan, among his other bad habits, was a chain smoker; how he survived when he was both sucking gas through the fuel line and indulging his habit boggles the mind. I figured if he blew his head off, I'd drive myself, and we'd be well ahead of the game, but it didn't happen).

Once we got rolling again we went careening ahead over an only moderately bad road until we reached Fergana Valley and, soon afterwards, the Uzbek frontier. The Uzbek guards checked us over pretty carefully but let us through without much bother. The little finger of Uzbekistan we transited was hot, densely populated, heavily farmed, partially industrialized, and a bit smoggy; the road was good, and the whole transit took much less time than I had foreseen. By the time it was getting dusky we had transited the next border and were back in Kyrgyzstan. It was only a short hop from there to Osh, and before 8 pm we drew up in front of the Intourist Hotel.

The hotel would only accept foreign exchange; we paid twenty dollars each in green and were booked in for two nights. The hotel's facilities were better than the ones at the Marble Dacha, but only because the ones at the Marble Dacha no longer existed at all. No hot water. Great trouble with door locks, and also window locks (we were cautioned to keep our windows locked as the local thieves were both hungry and ingenious). Dinner was bad, but I was being pretty careful and hardly ate anything anyway. I sat next to a friend of Shakir's named Ganesh, or something like it; I was too exhausted to tell. We slept hard, as it had been a long day.

Sunday, August 29:

The city of Osh turned out to be a winner. With a population of about 300,000, it is doughnut-shaped, on completely flat terrain. In its center is a remarkable hill, whose sides rise almost vertically for several hundred feet, then round off to a kind of dome, with ruins on top. Osh is the oldest city in the former USSR, per Russian archeologists who have been excavating in and around it for the last twenty years or so. It is also one of the least well known, and during our day and two nights there, we saw only a very few Russians and almost no western tourists at all. It used to be a major caravan center but is now quite hard to get to, the easiest access being by air from Bishkek. Its population is probably mainly

Kyrgyz, but there are substantial minorities from the other Turkic countries, especially Uzbekistan, which as we saw lies just a few miles away. I gather there were serious inter-ethnic riots a few years back, resulting in many casualties. Traveling through the bazaar, I sensed it was a tough neighborhood. Osh is its own town, with its own personality, and it knows it.

We arose early and hit the bazaar, which stretches for ten kilometers along the local river. Shakir's friend Ganesh joined us, and after perambulating around stalls with a million gorgeous melons of various shapes, sizes and colors, and a lot of other fruit and nuts, he took us to a little private dining room overlooking the river, with a table laden with all sorts of goodies, fruits and bread and honey, figs and sour cream and yogurt among other things. We stretched out and gorged on this splendid "breakfast", thinking we were in paradise. Our host was not really named Ganesh, it was Kanesh something-or-other, and it turned out he was a retired KGB colonel. His English was heavily accented but pretty good, and soon he was bragging about how much traveling he had done. He said he'd visited almost every country in Africa, and much of Southeast Asia, and had been to Kabul over thirty times. Jane picked him up on that and drew him out a bit about the Soviet role in Afghanistan. Gradually it became clear to him that she was no ordinary tourist with an ordinary curiosity, and she confessed her role as DAS for South Asian Affairs from the late '70's to 1981. This led to a very interesting conversation, as far as I could tell, though I was on the other side of the table and couldn't follow it all. I do know that when she asked him about Spike Dubs' murder, he just dropped the whole Afghan issue--though he continued to charm us all with his remarks about other subjects. He is clearly an enterprising individual, determined to roll with the punch of the Soviet demise, and come out on top. Maybe all retired KGB colonels are capitalists at heart. Anyway, he has been making ends meet lately by various enterprises. One that he described: he and a couple of partners have rented a three Tupolev passenger aircraft (TU-154's) from Aeroflot and are running local pilgrims to Mecca for the hajj. He wants to find a rich American partner to back him in opening Osh up to western tourists. Meanwhile, he is full of advice about what is happening in his region. China, he asserts, will break up in about 10 more years, post-Deng. Xinjiang will realign itself, joining some kind of Turkic grouping with the Kazakhs and Kirgыз, and perhaps more...Down south, Tadjikistan way, tribalism will reassert itself. It is hard to say how matters will work out down there, as the tribes are very different from each other...there are no Shias around, the whole region is solid Sunni...Kanesh is not above dropping names...I asked him how he felt about leaving the Russians in charge of guarding Kyrgyzstan's border with China, and he replied, "President Akirev and I agree it's a good thing, we can't afford to do the job ourselves just now..." But unlike some name-droppers, he does have clout. Later in the day, when we were driving back to the bazaar, he told Sultan to drive through an entrance to the bazaar with a sign excluding motor vehicles. There was a police guard there and as Sultan drove toward the gate the cop waved us off. Then he saw Kanesh, gulped, and in evident embarrassment waved us on in. It helps to have the right friends.

We wandered around various parts of the bazaar for a while and made a few purchases. By and large, things were cheap, especially if you paid in dollars and bargained. After a brief rest stop at the hotel, we returned to our little private dining room by the river for a pleasant lunch that was essentially a repeat of breakfast. We visited the museum, located on the flank of the mini-mountain in the middle of town. It was interesting, and reasonably well laid out; we were given a guided tour by a competent attendant who spoke a little English. We walked around the mountain, along its flank, to a small mosque, where a mullah intoned some Koranic scriptures in a nasal sing-song. Osh apparently is where the great Babar came from, the one who colonized India in the 16th century. His mosque on the mountain was a great landmark, but apparently was kaput, the one we visited being some later construction. Anyway, after absorbing holy thoughts from the mullah, we repaired to the hotel to get ready for a dinner that was to prove both a high point of the trip, and a disaster.

I had the entirely erroneous impression that I had recovered from my gut problem, and was in a mood for celebrating. Shakir was similarly inclined, of course; he was always ready for a little male bonding with me (is that where they got the term, bonded whiskey?) The rock band at the end of the hotel restaurant was blaring out more or less American dance music. Our table was laden with bottles of champagne and cognac, which obscured the inadequacy of the solid fare being provided. I sat at one end of our table with Shakir and Svetlana, who interpreted for us, while Jane sat at the other with Kanesh and his wife, who was an English teacher, and Ben. Luree stayed in her room. Jane and Kanesh evidently had a good talk, but I cannot report on it as I was far too busy bonding with Shakir to pay attention. After a while, Shakir succeeded, despite his Kyrgyz long-windedness, in making several points. First, Sweatsocks was an A number one son of a bitch who had left Shakir and the rest of us twisting in the wind when he should have been providing support, and he, Shakir, would never work for the bastard again. Second, he as a writer and my good self as a composer were fellow-artists, and he felt a great obligation to make my music known, and my name a household word, throughout the length and breadth of his country. He had friends in the Kyrgyz state radio system, and if I would give him a couple of tapes, and my picture, he would do the needful. There may have been a third point, but I can't remember that Shakir ever got around to it. By the time he finished #2 we were well into the third bottle of champagne, and a fair amount of cognac had gone down the hatch, and maybe some vodka, and while the other end of the table had accounted for some of this, Shakir and I had done more than our share. And unbeknownst to me, a fair mata hari was hovering, waiting to pounce. She appeared originally as the maitre d'hotel, a curvaceous blonde Russian lady with bedroom eyes, and took our order herself. Then toward dessert, when Shakir had almost finished point #2, she swooped down out of nowhere and literally picked me up and dragged me to the dance floor. Jane whooped with sadistic delight, as she always does when I am forced to dance, but it would have been a different kind of whoop if she'd seen the way the mata hari smooched me as soon as we danced our way around a pillar and were out of sight. It was an unforgettable experience. If I ever start writing romantic songs about Osh, watch out, children, tie me down or something!! Anyway, pretty soon Jane and the KGB colonel were dancing, and the ice got not just broken but crushed, and I ended up in bed after a while with an uneasy feeling I would pay an awful price in the morning...

Monday, August 30:

We started at the incredibly early hour of 7 am, and left Osh with the light of very early morning behind us. I felt frightful. In addition to my hangover, my gut bug had returned, plus I had another bug, a 24 hour flu bug, that I didn't even know was there. We stopped briefly in Uzbekistan and I contributed to the soil of that state from both ends. It was a long drive up the gorge and around the lake to Takht-e-Gol, but we pressed on, and made the town by about 2pm. We ate lunch at the same old restaurant, or rather the others did. I had been too sick to worry about our destination for the day, but it soon became apparent that Shakir planned for us to spend yet another night at the Marble Dacha, without toilet or running water, and me with galloping diarrhea. I felt pretty depressed at the prospect, but nobody paid much attention to me, as Luree and Ben had both come down with the flu bug by then and were suffering acutely. We reached the dacha and Jane put the three of us to bed in a dormitory room downstairs in the main building, which then resembled a hospital ward. We took pills, sweated, and slept. Jane, the only survivor, faced a gorgeous supper, a veritable banquet, that Shakir had ordered up, and that he and Svetlana had helped the local staff to prepare, by way of a peace offering to all of us. When I heard about it I realized that whatever frustrations we had had during the course of the trip thus far, they were nothing compared to the tribulations Shakir had faced. And I realized that he and Svetlana had formed a kind of anti-establishment support team that was totally on our side, and doing their level best, in spite of the lack of support from Sweatsocks and his organization, to keep our show on the road and somehow bring it to a

successful conclusion. Not just because they were doing their duty, but because as one bunch of real people to another, there was a bond. (And not just the bonded bourbon kind of bond).

Tuesday, August 31:

This was to be the day of the big push, over the mountains and across half the country to Naryn, where we planned to spend the night. From Naryn it was just a couple of hours more up the hill to the tourism ministry's special yurt at Kerbet Saray, where Susan and Mary Vance Trent had been royally entertained on their tour, and where we planned to spend Wednesday night. From there it was only another hour or two to Turgart Pass, where we were to cross over into China. So we felt we had time to spare, and would have no trouble in keeping our rendezvous with our Chinese hosts-to-be, around noon on Thursday.

We started out in fairly good spirits. Ben and I had mostly recovered, and Luree, though still feeling poorly, was better. Shakir had found us a bucket of fresh yogurt, which was just what we all needed. And it went well with the jam the Uzbek crones that ran the dacha provided us--made from wild raspberries that grew in profusion on the adjacent hills.

Alas! About an hour on up the road, at 7400' altitude, our Toyota lost power and ground to a halt. At first I thought it was a repetition of the bad gas syndrome, and a little pumping and sucking would get us back in motion. But Sultan and Islam looked very grave, and the sadness soon spread to Shakir and then Svetlana, who informed us, with all the sense of tragedy that only a Russian heroine can carry off, that the Toyota had died, forevermore. It was not the gas, it was the engine itself; it had given up the ghost, and the vehicle was hors de combat for the duration.

Shakir made several baa-ing sounds, hailed a passing car, and took off back to Takht-e-Gol. He said he was going to try to get another vehicle and bring it back to us so we could continue our journey, and get to Naryn if possible, even if it took half the night. Jane and I wandered around a bit; Ben put up a sheet to protect herself from the sun and started to sketch; Luree collapsed in the back seat of the Toyota; Sultan and Islam chain-smoked and ogled Svetlana, who took refuge with Ben; and time passed, albeit slowly. A couple of Kyrgyz horsemen stopped for a while and tried to chat with Ben; Luree started to feel a bit better; I read, and wrote doleful notes as to the current state of affairs. We ate a little of our trail food. Eventually, well into the afternoon, Shakir appeared in a gray sedan, with the bad news that it was a national holiday, nothing at all was open in Takht-e-Gol, and anyhow he had pretty well ascertained that the whole town contained not one vehicle both available for hire and capable of taking us on toward Naryn. He hailed another passing car, and we managed to squeeze all of us (except for Twit and Islam), plus our luggage, into the two vehicles, and we headed back to the Marble Dacha for yet another, third, night. The only silver lining in an otherwise thunderously threatening cloud was that we had seen the last of Sultan, aka Twit. He and Islam had exited our lives, and we saw the last of them without regret.

We installed ourselves once again in the Marble Dacha and Shakir continued on into Takht-e-Gol to try once again to rattle up some transportation. We said he should go for two cars, not a van, and we'd pay for the second one. He said he'd do his best, and aim to be back in time for us to take off at 8 am at the latest. That way, by pushing hard, we could still make our date with the Chinese...

Wednesday, Sept 1:

10:45am: ...here we sit. In little more than 24 hours we are due at the frontier. I am finally beginning to grasp the fact that we may not make it...The good news is that we have recovered our health. And none of our party is a complainer. We occasionally harbor malevolent thoughts about Satanbek, who set us up for all this and then abandoned us to our fate...Shakir has vowed he'll never work for the s.o.b. again. Poor Shakir, I wonder what has happened to him. I hope he hasn't committed hara kiri, leaving us marooned like the Swiss Family Robinson, in our decaying dacha...

Shortly after I wrote the above, a much bothered Shakir came back from Takht-e-Gol, in the same gray sedan. That car wasn't available for the trip to Naryn and beyond, and he hadn't been able to find any other vehicle whatsoever, of any description, that was. In desperation he had finally phoned Sweatsocks in Bishkek. Sweatsocks had promised he would make everything right. They had a good Toyota van, almost new, which he would despatch immediately to our rescue. He himself was leaving shortly for Osh, for a rally, and would stop by at the dacha and reassure us personally. I checked with the driver of Shakir's gray car who told me the trip from Bishkek took about four and a half hours if the vehicle was reasonably sound. We sat around and waited, while precious time slipped away.

Toward mid-afternoon a natty individual appeared and instructed the help to clean up, the top official of the local district was coming our way and would want the dacha for his own use. People appeared and started moving out our luggage. We had a pretty full head of steam at that point, and moved it right back in. There was a bit of a confrontation, which we won. I must say Ben and Luree presented a pretty formidable appearance, and Jane was no slouch either.

At 6 pm Sweatsocks himself appeared, in a gray Volga sedan with two other passengers. He didn't deign to come to the dacha, but stopped at the side of the road, where the driveway to the dacha came in. He was tall, youthful, handsome, well-dressed, well-spoken, a personality kid. We all got the impression he had risen to his present station through charm and connections rather than through any mastery of substance. He said all was well, the good van had left at 9 am and would arrive any minute, he was glad to see us all looking so well, and if we would excuse him, he had to hurry on, to keep to his scheduled appearance at the rally at Osh. To his evident consternation, Jane and Ben and Luree surrounded him, all screaming at once like fishwives, and more or less physically propelled him down the driveway to the dacha, where he was plunked down on a bench while the three took turns cussing him out in very strong terms. The main points they made were: a) he was a liar, had lied to him consistently on previous occasions, and we had no reason to believe his story now, about the good van leaving Bishkek this morning. (If it did, and if the trip only took four and a half hours, why wasn't it here?) b) We were able and quite willing to destroy all prospects of tourism ever developing in Kyrgyzstan in the foreseeable future, while pinning the blame on him personally (Luree trotting out an impressive array of credentials as a travel writer as we made this point). c) We were good friends of Ambassador Rosa and Susan and had other connections in Bishkek, and would use them to destroy him utterly if necessary. d) He wasn't going to Osh or anyplace else as long as we remained in our present pickle. We were not going to release him. He was our prisoner, until he bailed us out.

Sweatsocks was a pricked balloon; he looked as though he was about to cry. He turned to me and complained piteously about his staff, which was responsible for our mess, not him personally. I gave him a dutch uncle talk about my experiences as ambassador, what it meant to be in charge, taking responsibility, and so forth. He sadly acknowledged that it was his office and he had to take responsibility. He tried his best to suggest that this time he really would try to help us. He added that he would, however, have to get to a telephone to call his office and ensure that the good van really was on its way. Therefore he had to go on to Takht-e-Gol, the nearest place with a telephone. All right, said the ladies, fiercely, but Jane and Carl will go with you, and you must come back

with them, no going on to Osh until we are in our good van heading for Naryn. He said with a deep sigh that he would just not go to the rally, he would stay with us all the way to the border, and see that we got across it in good shape.

Well, there wasn't room in the car for both of us, so Jane pulled the vulnerable female act and shoved me in the car, to ride guard on our prisoner by myself. I tried to strike up a conversation but Sweatsocks said he was too "dispirited" to talk. We reached town and headed for the telephone office, where we waited for a while until Sweatsocks got himself installed at a telephone and connected with someone in Bishkek. There was a great deal of screaming and expostulating at his end of the line, and though it was all in Turkic, it sounded very like: "Look, I'm on the spot, you guys get rolling and get out here right away or I'll have you for breakfast when I get back...". It was pretty evident from his whole behavior that the van was still in Bishkek and he had been lying through his teeth about it. So I took it with a grain of salt when he assured me the van had already left and should reach the dacha by midnight.

Sweatsocks' car had already left for Osh with the other passengers, and it took a while to find someone able and willing to drive us back from the dacha. Meanwhile I'd glommed on to a bottle of cognac, on the principle that you never know. A car was located but it was out of gas. We went to a government gas station and Sweatsocks had to pull rank to get 20 liters put in the tank. On the way up the mountain Sweatsocks glumly declined to have a snort with me. I concluded that in Kyrgyz culture drinking together strongly involves bonding, and S. wasn't up to it, not with me, though he probably needed a drink even more than I did. We got back to the dacha about 9pm, and Jane was quite glad to see me; evidently she'd had second thoughts about her wisdom in kicking me out as she had, into the dark of the night, surrounded by the enemy.

I did some careful calculating at that point, using all our maps, and figured that if we got off by midnight, and drove straight through, we had a fighting chance to reach Turgart Pass before the border closed the following evening. The ladies said I was incurably optimistic, it was all over, we'd missed our date with the Chinese, we'd just have to get to the border as soon as we could and hope they'd still be there waiting for us a day later, or would come back for us from Kashgar. They went to bed in the dormitory downstairs, Jane included (we'd lost the upstairs bedroom to the provincial delegation). I stayed up until midnight, hoping; then sacked out in the dormitory too, sick at heart. I really hated to lose this one, after all our adrenalin and excitement in the last few hours.

Thursday, September 2:

About 2:30 am there was a bit of commotion outside. I awoke, sprang up, and yes! indeed the good Toyota van had arrived. It was driven by two tough-looking Russians, and as the van was a size smaller than our other one, it took a bit of cramming to get us all in, and our luggage. It was dark and there was much confusion, but by 3:30 we were on the road, heading up the mountain again, Turgart or bust!

It was amazing what a difference it made to be in a viable vehicle, as opposed to our old Toyota, which had puffed and wheezed along and had frequently broken down completely. We jounced up over the pass and then down the long high valley where an eon or two earlier we had quaffed kumiss in a friendly yurt. By the end of the valley it was daylight and we turned south down another high valley. When we made this turn, we left the main north-south road link between Bishkek and Osh, and the road improved--far less truck traffic, and far fewer potholes as a result. We made a quick comfort stop and Sweatsocks himself took over the wheel. At first the road was washboard and he went very slowly, until I muttered something about how we'd never make it at the rate he was going. I didn't really think we'd make it at any speed, but it bothered me that he didn't even seem to be trying. It was as though Sweatsocks had been waiting for that signal from me. We

suddenly started whizzing along at a breakneck speed, which continued hour after hour as we burned up the kilometers, until we reached a major junction southwest of Lake Issi Kul and stopped for a half hour for a quick picnic lunch. Then Sweatsocks got behind the wheel again and we whizzed on. He was a very skillful driver, and I concluded that driving a racecar in a rally was really where he belonged. He actually got stopped twice by policemen, who to his great annoyance gave him speeding tickets. Traffic police are practically nonexistent in rural Kyrgyzstan, and two tickets in one day must be some kind of a record.

We came to Naryn, a substantial town in a high valley, and whizzed through it, hardly slowing down. We came to another plain with a gradual ascent, and passed the yurts where we were supposed to have spent the previous night. And on, through increasingly bleak, arid and rocky upland, until we were stopped by some Russian soldiers at a checkpoint and then, a few kilometers farther, we came to an untidy mess of semi-finished buildings that was the Kyrgyz side of the frontier. It was then a bit after 5pm, the post was open until 6, and we cleared through it in about three quarters of an hour. I remember a mishmash of bureaucratic confusion, with Ben trying to sort out some problem as to whether her visa would allow re-entry, and different offices giving confused and mutually contradictory instructions. Finally we were cleared, and the moment of truth arrived when we had to say goodbye to our faithful friends, Shakir and Svetlana. There wasn't much time for histrionics, but Svetska and her "aunties" did their best. Sweatsocks drove us several kilometers farther, through no-man's land to the actual line across the road that marked the border. We acknowledged that no normal driver could have gotten us to the border that day before it had closed, and that he had partially redeemed himself. The Chinese at the small outpost at the border said a vehicle had been waiting there for us, all day; they phoned down the mountain to the main border post, and told them we'd arrived. We piled our luggage on the actual border line and Sweatsocks left. I watched our next vehicle, a Toyota Land Cruiser, toiling up the road from China to the pass, and wept with sheer fatigue and relief.

Xinjiang

In one sense, when we crossed the border into China, we were merely crossing an artificial modern line dividing two parts of the same cultural continuum, the principal difference being that instead of seeing a minority of blond Russians, there was a minority of Chinese, or Han. There were the same yurts on both sides, and Bactrian camels, sheep and goats. The Uighur physically resembled the Kyrgyz people, and the Kazakhs and Uzbeks, and they all spoke dialects of Turkish. Islam was the predominant religion on both sides. The weekly market was a central feature of social as well as business life in the towns and cities on both sides.

Each side presented a vivid series of contradictions--but here the similarity ceased. For the elements that made up those contradictions could not have been more dissimilar. On the Kyrgyz side were the crumbling ruins of a socialist system that had failed, with nothing yet apparent to take its place. The people were free, but hadn't yet figured out what to do with their freedom. The Russians were more or less holding the infrastructure together, what was left of it, but wondering whether they belonged there, or back in Mother Russia. The Turkophones were declaiming, and concocting business deals with the West, or hoping to. By contrast, on the Chinese side, there was tight discipline, concerted

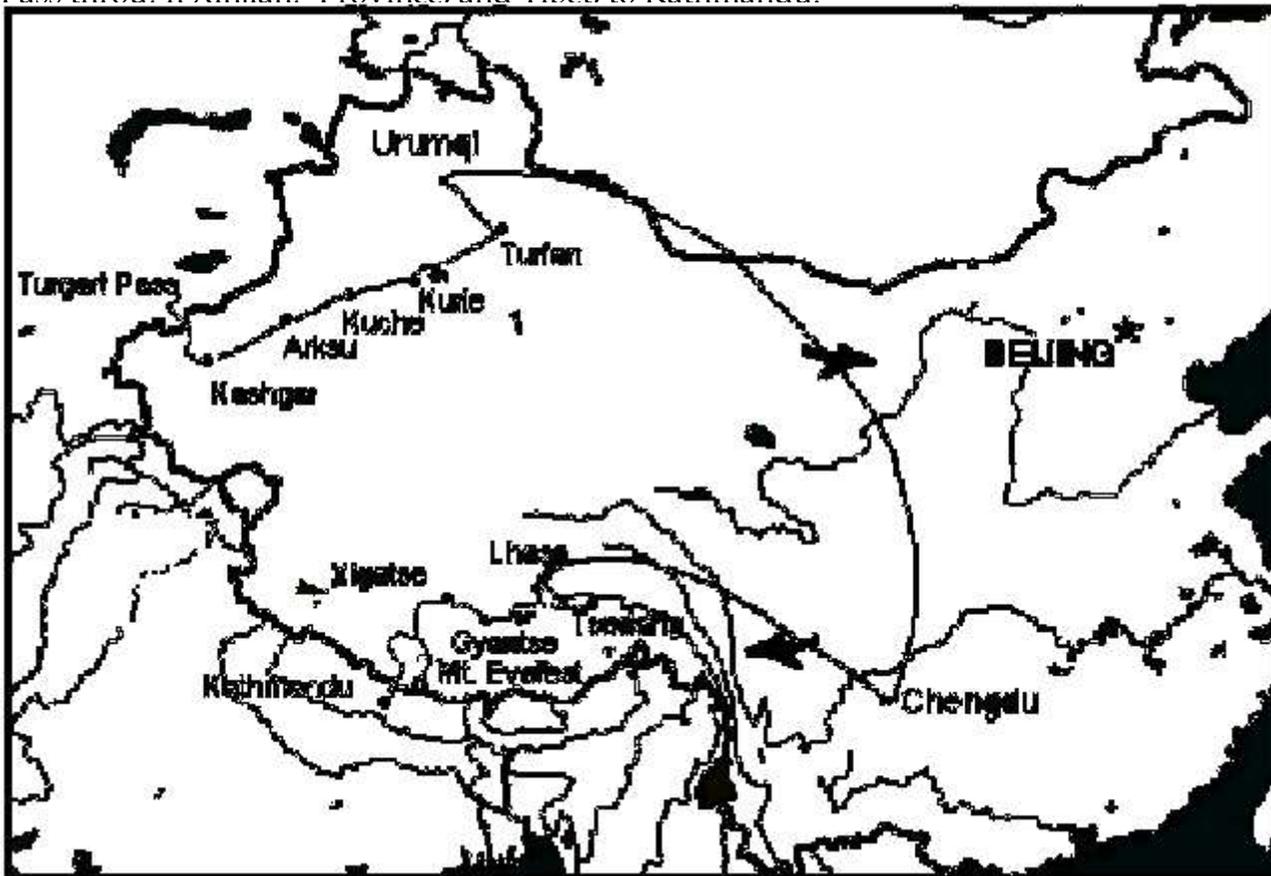
economic activity, and a growing sense of prosperity, but a total absence of freedom. It was not exactly the stillness of the grave that one sensed in the old days, because the notion that everything would change, when Deng and the other old men that rule China passed on, was very much in the air; but there was great uncertainty, and a certain amount of unease, as to just what that change would involve.

The experiences and impressions that I record in this section will relate mostly to the Chinese, not to the Uighur, for the simple reason that Jane and I were picked up by Chinese handlers at the border and kept in a kind of cocoon the whole time, including Chengdu and Tibet as well as Xinjiang. It was next to impossible, normally, to engage in any meaningful conversation with either Uighur or Tibetans. But I had plenty of time to get used to the Chinese character, as seen its least flattering light. For no culture shows itself to advantage when it is in a colonialist mode. The British Raj, the French colon in North Africa, the Ugly American in Vietnam--none of us wants to be judged by that kind of experience. When I saw the Han in Xinjiang and Tibet, it was like seeing the Romans in some outer march of empire. There was an arrogance, an assumption of cultural superiority; a penchant for petty bureaucratic behavior; and an underlying defensiveness. All roads led to Beijing; even beyond Kashgar, the kilometer stones measured the distance to China's capital, the figures running up into the 6000's. Kashgar was a good 3000 miles west of Beijing, yet had to follow Beijing's clock: there are no time zones in China; in Kashgar the sun gets up at 9, and you follow the sun, assuming that meals and every other daily activity occur a couple of hours or more later than what you are used to. And so on. Colonialism is passe almost everywhere else, and its residual manifestations, here and elsewhere, are ugly.

We had arranged the Chinese portions of our trip with a small government organization, China Explorations International, rather than with the China International Travel Service (CITS), which handles the great majority of such tours. We did so on the advice of an old friend, a mountaineer, who felt that the smaller organization would give us more personalized and better service. He was probably right. Nevertheless, what we saw in China was limited mainly to landscapes and buildings and people in funny hats; almost everything we experienced relating to people, we imbibed through the lens of the handlers appointed by China Explorations International to take care of us. We had three such handlers for the Xinjiang portion of our China experience. Two were pleasant and cooperative, the third was a pain. Little Lee, our interpreter, was a remarkable bantam-weight woman, probably weighing not more than seventy or eighty pounds dripping wet, but full of fire and energy. She spoke a very peculiar form of English, but unlike Svetlana she didn't recognize her linguistic limits and was a bit reluctant to learn. Still, her general attitude was positive and enthusiastic, and we got on very well. Likewise with Big Lee, the driver. He was large and soft-spoken, and by far the best driver we had working with us anywhere on our trip. He had good judgement as well as driving skills, and despite the fact that he spoke only Chinese, we learned to attach great value to his presence. Then there was a third Lee, Lee Wei, who carried the money and arranged and paid for our food and

lodging. He was young, only about twenty-two or so, insecure, and more or less unpleasant. We figured he must have gotten the job through communist party connections. By the time we reached Urumchi Big Lee and Little Lee were ready to throttle him, as were we.

The next map is the last one for this report. It will show our route from Turgart Pass through Xinjiang Province, and Tibet, to Kathmandu.



Thursday, Sept 2 (continued):

At the Chinese post at Turgart, a key official was eating his dinner, and we had to wait for him to finish. Ben, who has lived in China, explained that eating is a crucially important function for the Chinese, more or less analogous to sex in Western society. A favorite Chinese saying is "Eat slowly". So I had time to wander around and form some first impressions: *...lots of Han at the border post, very few Uighurs or other Turkic types...lots of very labor-intensive work, Han pulling carts full of tar or gravel, and lots of machinery too, and other evidences of national wealth, such as fancy cars...a complex and different society, wealth and overpopulation, a strange mixture...*

By the time we cleared the Chinese side of the border it was 7 pm Kyrgyz time, 9pm Beijing (ie, local) time. You would think that we had already had enough driving for the day, having done two days' worth in the previous sixteen hours, but in fact the best--or worst--was yet to come. The motor route between Turgart Pass and Kashgar is still in the blueprint stage for many stretches. The actual route varies by the half-kilometer, and

sometimes by the hundred meters, from smooth black-top to heavy construction to nothing at all. In the latter cases, the norm was to descend into a shallow river that drained the valley down which we proceeded, driving through the water and sand and pebbles, following whatever traces the immediately preceding vehicles had left, and hoping for the best.

Big Lee did it all after dark, for dusk fell just as we were leaving the border post. He drove creatively and magnificently, using all the assets the Toyota Land Cruiser possessed with great skill, and finally delivered us at our hotel at about 1 am local time. We were ready for bed.

Friday, September 3:

We breakfasted about ten and the ladies went sightseeing. I stayed home and recorded certain impressions and events, to be incorporated later in this record. They found the old British Consulate, which historical records identified as the "Chini Bagh" and arranged for us to have supper at the restaurant it has now become. (Lee Wei balked at the cost, so we agreed to pay the difference). After lunch at a rather plain Chinese restaurant, we visited a splendid piece of 16th or early 17th century Islamic architecture, the Ahmak Hoja mausoleum. It was beautifully proportioned, with original and harmonious colors, based on blue tiles mostly. The various signs around the site were in Chinese, Uighur, and English, the latter being a rather quaint Chinese version of my mother tongue. I gathered that this magnificent building was built by and for an incredibly naughty society populated mainly by brigands, cutthroats, turncoats, sycophants, and tyrants--and I wondered whether great art, in those days, didn't flourish best in such soil...

That evening the three Lees hired a horse cart to carry us off to dinner, and I had a rare opportunity to communicate directly with a Uighur. None of the three Lees spoke any Uighur, and Little Lee was trying to tell the driver where she wanted to go in Chinese. The Uighur driver was looking at her stonily, without any sign of comprehension. I stuck my oar in, and said "Chini Bagh". The driver came alive, twinkled at me with great friendliness, said the Uighur equivalent of "Of course, hop right in", and we did, and had an entertaining if clattersome ride through some fascinating urban scenery to our destination. The driver waited for us, and on the way back I uttered some of the standard Koranic phrases in Arabic. He understood, and more or less embraced me. His whole stance expressed the sentiment that he had figured out I wasn't Chinese, so I must be ok.

The Chini Bagh must have been a stately old place in its heyday, with a formal garden out front as well as to the rear, but someone had stuck a modern hotel in the front part of the garden, spoiling the view. The hotel was full of Pakistanis, including many fierce looking Pathans in their turbans and baggy pants. The new road from Pakistan coming north over the 16000 foot Khunjerab Pass runs straight to Kashgar, and has stimulated a lively truck traffic; this is where the drivers and their passengers stay.

It is appropriate that the new trade route opening up from Pakistan should run to Kashgar. Kashgar was historically a focal center of the east-west caravan traffic that ran along the so-called Silk Route. If you look at the maps, you see that this "Silk Route" is many routes, not just one--but they all converge on Kashgar. To the east, the route has branches running up between the Takla Makan desert and the Tien Shan mountains towards Urumchi, and a southern branch running south of the desert. To the west, the route has many branches, eg the one leading directly to Osh to the southwest, and northwest to the Turgart Pass and beyond. Kashgar today strikes me rather as Tabriz did when I was consul there, thirty years ago, a natural trade center that in modern times has lost most of its hinterland, so its importance has dwindled, and it has become interesting more to historians and tourists than to businessmen. For me, Kashgar was quite fascinating, like Osh--a place off the beaten track, with a well-polished patina, a personality

all its own. I hope that one of these days the road between Osh and Kashgar will open, as our KGB friend in Osh predicted, and that tourism built around a visit to both cities will become possible. It will be a winner.

Saturday, September 4:

We arose early and drove for over four hours south on the road to Pakistan, across a dusty plain, and then up into the high Pamirs. At 12,500 feet, we stopped at a handsome little lake, nestled between two 25,000 foot peaks. It's called Karakul Lake, and caters to such tourism as exists in those parts. There were the inevitable camel rides, plus a restaurant and a series of little stalls where local entrepreneurs flogged local handicrafts. I noted that the dominant group were Kyrgyz, not Uighur. They are the mountain people here, the same as across the border in the former USSR. A lot more Kyrgyz types (judging from their hats) were driving sheep and goats down from the high country toward the plains, both as we ascended to the lake, and on our return.

That evening we supped at a Uighur restaurant, a very ordinary one where we sat on the sidewalk and watched them steam our dumplings and roast our kebab. The fare was tasty, filling, and presumably cheap. Lee Wei was pleased.

Sunday, September 5:

Sunday is the big market day in Kashgar, famous enough so we were building our schedule around being in Kashgar on a Sunday even before we left the USA. We started our grand tour outside the bazaar, where I found a shop where five generations of craftsmen had been making musical instruments. I bought a "dawap", similar to a small mandolin, and two small drums ("dap"). We went on into the bazaar, which was huge. We went through acres of cloth bazaar and found hats, hats galore. We also ran into various groups of Western tourists, including one with some old friends from the US. Ted Eliot, formerly a colleague of ours in the Foreign Service, was with that group. We one-upped all these groups, in that they were all coming up from Pakistan; none had come over Turgart as we had. And they were all larger in numbers, and managed by Cits.

After lunch we hit the bazaar again. The knife bazaar was interesting, and I ascertained that Uighur knives are sharp. Then rugs. The Uighur are not noted rug weavers themselves but there were a few old Tibetan rugs for sale, and I bought a small blue one after some serious haggling...eventually we went back to the hotel for a small celebration, as Ben and Luree were leaving the next morning, returning via Turgart to Bishkek, Almaty, and home.

Monday, September 6:

Ben and Luree left on schedule, with Lee Wei, Big Lee and the Toyota. Little Lee rented a taxi and we visited the principal mosque in the center of the city, near the bazaar. The afternoon was spent resting and repacking. Big Lee finally made it back, with a note from Ben and Luree; noone had been at the border, but they had found transportation to the Kyrgyz customs post, and hopefully all would go well. (Later we learned that Shakir had had an automobile accident going up to the pass to meet them, and had broken his arm rather badly, but had persuaded a friend in Naryn to go in his place and do the needful. So Ben and Luree were met after all. Once again, Shakir had snatched victory from the jaws of catastrophe, not by invoking the organization he worked for, but by exploiting his vast network of personal friendships.)

Tuesday, September 7:

_____ We spent nine hours on the dusty, bumpy road to Arksu. The Tien Shan mountains were on our left, but mostly invisible through the haze, and to our right was a string of oases, fed by underground water channels bringing water from the mountains. Arksu itself was a largish, undistinguished urban center, located in a big patch of greenery nourished by a confluence of streams flowing down from the mountains. It has a Uighur majority, but a more substantial Han minority than is the case in Kashgar. The hotel at Arksu was the first of a dreary long string of second-rate government hostels we encountered in provincial towns throughout Xinjiang and Tibet. We were to become familiar with the layout of the rooms, which was always the same, the lack of hot water (and frequently of any water at all), the dimness of the electric lights (making it impossible to read without a flashlight) and the drab uniformity of the cuisine. I suspect the caravanserais that lined this route in the good old days were equally uncomfortable, but more interesting.

My notes digress at this point: *I shall now discuss "Little Lee", our spirited, bantam interpretress. I understand her fully about 10% of the time, mostly when what she says is either "Yes" (a shouted attenuated yaaaa), or "No". The rest of the time both phonetics and vocabulary create major roadblocks. She scrambles her vowels and either omits or transforms consonants. I usually make her spell out key words, which helps. On vocabulary, she has learned certain malapropisms which she refuses to abandon. Something like "The tile is broken" can, with a little effort, be deciphered ("we have a flat tire"). But how about: "In Kashgar is much missionary", meaning "Kashgar is a predominantly Muslim area". She had it fixed in her mind that missionary was the right term for Muslim, and we couldn't get her to change. To communicate with her at all, we have had to relearn our native language from the ground up. Why is she so fixed in her ways? Until six months ago, she was an English teacher at a Chinese secondary school. She knows she is right, because she taught it. A lesson in hubris for all of us, especially teachers.*

As we drove into Arksu, we smelled a strong, pungent, fruity odor. Little Lee explained that we were passing a "winery". One should always pause to reflect before responding to a datum presented by LL, but I didn't, and exclaimed that it had been quite a while since I had enjoyed a good bottle of wine. So my handlers triumphantly presented me with a bottle at dinner. It was white lightning, and tasted like gasoline. It burned rather like gasoline too, when I set a match to some. The bottle came in a fancy box, looking a bit like the boxes the French use for Napoleon brandy, on which were inscribed the following encouraging words:

Yili Special Liquor is produced with sorghum, corn and various kinds of raw grain as its raw material, with Daqu made from wheat and pea, by the traditional process of "five old retorts method" and modern scientific technology. It is clear and transparent with the characteristics of agreeable fragrance together with mellow taste. It was named Fine Quality Product by the Ministry of Farming, Animal Husbandry and Fishery both in 1982 and 1988. In 1988 it won the Gold Prize of the First Food National Fair. In 1990 it won the Silver Prize at the Food Light Industrial Exhibition. In 1979 and 1988 it was rated as Provincial Quality Product and Xinjiang Local Famous Wine. It is often used for receiving guests who come to Xinjiang.

Despite the foregoing buildup, I couldn't bring myself to down more than a thimbleful, and Jane didn't even want to sit at the same table with it. Big Lee and Lee Wei drank a good bit of it, however, and Lee Wei became almost human.

Wednesday, September 8:

_____ My breakfast this morning consisted mainly of rice broth laced with pickled turnips. I am getting tired of second-class Chinese food. But anyway, we got off at a reasonable hour and drove for a couple of hours along a fairly good road across an alluvial floodplain with lots of traffic. The ubiquitous donkey cart was outnumbered by trucks, and particularly by small tractors being used as trucklets, with big carts hitched behind them,

carrying farm produce and building materials in all directions. We went through a large town called Baicheng, and on out of the green area into sandy hills, where the donkey carts now prevailed. Then into some sculpted badlands where there was no sign of human activity at all. Then back on a flat but arid plain, deserted, and from there into a steep gorge and our destination, the Kizil grottoes.

The Kizil grottoes are a large collection of small caves which Buddhist monks hollowed out of the wall of the gorge between the 4th and 7th centuries AD. They painted holy Buddhist paintings all over the walls and ceilings of these caves, in such profusion that when the Muslims came along with their customary antipathy to other people's graphic art, they were unable to obliterate or deface quite all of them. There was still enough left to attract French and German collectors, and Sir Aurel Stein. I saw several signs that indignantly accused these collectors of ripping off the caves, though they made no mention of the Muslim invaders--after all, this is Muslim territory right now. And there was still enough left over, even after Sir Aurel Stein had completed his depredations, to make the Kizil Grottoes a major tourist attraction, complete with government rest house, post cards, and ticket collectors.

We had an energetic afternoon. A handsome Uighur lady guide led us up and down several thousand steps from one grotto to another, until I had seen enough Buddhist art to hold me for quite a while. Ted Eliot's tour group was there at the same time, and as their group leader was a German art historian who had done his master's thesis on the Kizil grottoes, poor Ted and his companions saw even more than I did.

We spent the night at the government guest house at the grottoes. I had a sudden and vigorous attack of diarrhea which left me pretty shaken, and pretty uncomfortable at the prospect of the onward journey.

Thursday, September 9:

Braced with paregoric, I handily survived the morning's drive to the east, to the town of Kuche. The hotel was the same design as all the others, but quite new, and consequently much of the equipment had not yet had time to get broken. So it was possible to read, and take a bath, and use the toilet normally. The high point of our sightseeing around Kuche was a "ruined city". This was a series of piles of mud a bit north of Kuche, on the edge of the Tien Shan, that had flourished in the Buddhist era, prior to Islam, but had been going downhill ever since. It had little of interest to the non-specialist.

That night the diarrhea came back with a vengeance. I thought brown thoughts about amoebic, and bacillary, and salmonella, not to mention giardia and other beasties that I imagined were infesting my gut.

Friday, September 10:

I breakfasted on tea and rice soup and immodium. We drove a long way through varied terrain to a large city I had never heard of named Kurle. It was at the end of the main rail line to the Chinese heartland, had coal reserves, was heavily industrialized, and was almost entirely Han. Like many other large industrialized Chinese cities, it was heavily polluted and totally without any charm or other redeeming feature. It struck me that it constituted the geographic spearhead of the Chinese drive to Sinicize all of Xinjiang, and the Uighurs, who were nowhere to be seen, must needs regard the whole urban complex with dismay. The hotel was nothing to write home about either.

Then Little Lee showed her stuff. She said it was time to check me out, and led us over to the local hospital. For 6 Yen, about \$1, I got to see a doctor, a large Uighur lady, who finally figured out what was wrong with me when Jane did a sensitive pantomime of

me defecating. She then poked my tummy and prescribed a shot, and three kinds of pills which I was to take in varying quantities several times a day. For a little extra money I was able to get a new, wrapped, virgin needle, which was expertly inserted into my flank by another lady in a nearby room. The whole thing cost about \$5, and I started feeling better almost at once. I have no idea what the shot or any of the pills contained, but they did the trick.

Saturday, September 11:

We left Kurle soon after breakfast and proceeded through grim industrial suburbs onto a dirt track which soon brought us to Bosten Hu, allegedly the largest lake in Xinjiang, although you might have a hard time knowing it, as it is mostly full of reeds. It is a shallow fresh-water lake that drains out the Tarim River into the desert to the south. The part we came to supported a considerable reed-based cottage industry, producing the woven mats or "chicks" used extensively in local housing. We hired a motor boat and driver, and put-putted through about a mile of narrow channels until we came out of the reeds and into a more open space. There was little bird life, and we returned soon, as we had a fairly long drive ahead.

The road was very bumpy as we went through a lightly settled area, then improved as we came into the desert. We passed a small town and stopped at a mommoppa roadside restaurant for quite a good home-cooked Chinese meal. (This is where Jane received an interesting lesson in toilet etiquette--but I shall leave that to her to report). We entered a mountainous area with spectacular folded rocks, and ascended to a low pass, about 6500-7000 feet. The pass and the tortuous descent that followed were evidently too much for many of the Chinese trucks that were using it, for I observed more jackknifed semis and other wrecks along that stretch than I'd seen in all the rest of Xinjiang. Finally, toward evening, we emerged onto a long, low, sloping plain and we descended gradually to sea level, and Turfan.

Turfan was a sleepy place with tree-lined avenues and an old, comfortable feel to it, like Osh and Kashgar and quite unlike Kurle and the other relatively Sinicized towns we had recently encountered. Vineyards were everywhere; grapes hung in bunches from arbors that spread high across some of the streets. The population seemed more Uighur than Han. The low altitude made a difference: there was an unfamiliar heaviness in the air. I recalled that Turfan was one of the hottest spots in the world in summer, and was grateful that we were now entering autumn.

Since leaving Kashgar we had seen relatively few tourists, but here in Turfan, at the relatively new and presentable Oasis Hotel, we were definitely back in tourist heaven. The hotel was packed with them, as was another sizable tourist hotel down the road. The rest of the tourists almost all came in large groups, and many of the groups were Japanese. After careful observation I have determined that of all tourist groups, the Japanese ones are the silliest of them all, even more incongruous and ridiculous than the American ones. This is especially true when they take pictures of each other, which they do at all times.

We overlapped briefly with Ted Eliot's group, which was going on to Xi'an that evening, and on their advice strolled over to the other hotel to take in a show of Uighur song and dance. I was more interested in the music than the dancing, which was pretty standard tourist fare, replicable without surprises anywhere from Turfan to Tierra del Fuego. The music occasionally departed, but only momentarily, from square western dance rhythms and the diatonic scale into more exotic musical forms. I guess socialism frowns on complexity in art.

Sunday, September 12:

I arose feeling well, swallowed my assortment of Chinese pills, and sallied forth with the others to a mountain ridge about 25 miles to the east which was one of the standard tourist stops. It seems to have been the site of Turfan's origin myth, a place where a mythical monkey saved the world, and there was a modern statue there to that effect, plus an assortment of Buddhist grottoes, similar to the Kizil ones but less extensive. We ducked around and through armies of grinning Japanese taking pictures of each other and reembarked in the Toyota. A few kilometers farther south, we arrived at the former metropolis of Gaocheng, which was a great urban metropolis until about 1300 when the Mongols devastated it. It had not been used since then, and since the whole thing was made of mud, there isn't a whole lot left. We poked around a bit, then went on to a couple of tombs that had been opened up and cleaned out. We looked in at an agricultural structure where they were drying grapes; it seems that Turfan supplies raisins to most or all of China. Having thus "done" the prescribed day #1 for tourists visiting Turfan, we went back to the hotel. That afternoon we saw another mosque, and an empty market. In the evening we had another cheap dinner at an inferior Chinese restaurant, and another fight with Lee Wei over the issue.

Monday, September 13:

We were combining prescribed day #2 for Turfan tourists with our trip to Urumchi, since the sites for day #2 lay west of town and more or less on our way. The first attraction was another ruined city, similar to the one we had seen the day before, except that a little more by way of structures was still standing. There were a few places where you could actually get in out of the sun. We hired a donkey cart to help us perambulate around, and dallied at the site for an hour or more. The next and final attraction, for us, was a qanat or underground irrigation ditch, developed for tourists. I was already familiar with the qanat system from my Persian days--that is where they were developed to their highest form--and I was familiar with this particular site from reading Vikram Seth's book, From Heavenly Lake. Still, it was interesting to peer into the opened-up hole in the ground, that led off into a dark tunnel, bringing mountain water to an oasis--and think what a damn fool Vikram Seth was, to have jumped in the way he did. (That was his conclusion too, as recorded in his book).

The road to Urumchi led us west across a long arid plain, then north following a stream bed that cut through some mountains, continuing on through a relatively well-watered and thickly settled plains area to another mountain range where snow peaks were showing above the clouds. We circled west of the snow peaks and soon arrived in Urumchi, a huge metropolis. I forget what Little Lee said the population was (and anyway she was having trouble with her digits) but it was in the several millions. We had a very late lunch at a very inferior restaurant and another run-in with Lee Wei. We stopped by the museum, notable for its mummies. These were the very ones which had been taken from the tombs we had seen the previous day. They had remained sufficiently well preserved in the desert clime so that they still grinned at us in a toothsome way, looking rather like some of the Japanese tourists we had seen.

Our hotel was several cuts above anything we had previously seen on the whole trip--since Frankfurt airport at any rate: the four-star World Plaza Hotel. The sumptuous surroundings overwhelmed us. We ordered Lee Wei to get lost, and dined in style in the rotating restaurant on the 25th floor, all Urumchi sparkling at our feet.

Tuesday, September 14:

We were up at crack of dawn, for the drive to Urumchi airport and a protracted scrimmage there, prior to boarding a crowded TU-145 aircraft for a 9:30 departure to Chengdu. With regret, we bid farewell to Big Lee and Little Lee, and we also said goodbye to Lee Wei, without regret. The flight was uneventful.

Chengdu

Our three new handlers were right there at the airport to greet us and take over. Mr. Wei was the interpreter, Mr. Fu the paymaster, and then there was a driver, whose name I didn't catch. We got our baggage and drove for what seemed like hours through mile after mile of undistinguished, hopelessly overcrowded, polluted urban landscape to the center of town, where we checked in at a fairly good but by no means distinguished hotel, appropriately named the "Tibet". We lunched at a decent restaurant next to the hotel, rested, and then went off like good little tourists to see the prescribed sights. First was the "thatched hut" of an ancient and venerated poet whose name I forget, which turned out to be an extensive and highly manicured park area, dotted with buildings in the old style, and full of photos and other memorabilia--a kind of cross between a garden and a museum. Then we went to the so-called "Temple of Wu", a series of shrines full of statues of ancestors and other religious objects. Yours truly has trouble, as you may have gathered, in generating a properly reverential attitude during such opportunities, and in this case I amused myself by concocting the following: "The loo in the Temple of Wu//Has a seat that is too big for you//You pay in your nickle//And start in to trickle//And Bingo!! You're falling straight through!".

Jane forewent dinner, so I ate an indifferent dinner in the hotel restaurant with Mr. Wei and Mr. Fu. The former spoke English a little better than Little Lee had, but not much; while Mr. Fu spoke very little, though he understood fairly well. The three of us engaged in serious conversation, which improved, as did their English, with the second and third bottles of beer. I'll summarize their views a little later in this account.

Wednesday, September 15:

Jane and I had agreed with Mr. Wei and Mr. Fu that we had done enough of the standard tourist circuit the first afternoon. On our one full day in Chengdu, we wanted to visit the zoo and see the pandas. And I had suggested a visit to a music conservatory to talk to a composer or two of Chinese classical music, if that were possible.

We started the morning with a longish drive to the zoo. It wasn't that the distances were so great, but the traffic was bumper-to-bumper everywhere. The zoo, however, was worth it. There were four young pandas in a cage together, wrestling and falling all over each other and generally horsing around. Evidently twins had been born to two mothers about the same time--quite a coup for a zoo. The large audience was delighted. Then we went on, a little farther out of town, to what Mr. Wei had advised us was an arboretum. It was a largish, walled-in, largely wooded area, and you had to pay a small sum to get in, but it did not resemble any arboretum I'd ever seen in any other important respect. It was muddy, the plants were ordinary and unlabeled, and it had little by way of paths. Its main virtue apparently was that it was deserted, except for two lovers coupling in long grass toward one side of a grassy field. But Mr. Wei waxed almost rhapsodic about the beauties of nature that surrounded us. Then I realized that this poor human being had been born and raised under conditions of such extreme crowding that this few wretched acres of undistinguished countryside was, for him, the equivalent of primeval wilderness for an American. There but for the grace of God et cetera--and I despaired for the fate of my grandchildren's grandchildren, if the demographers are right and the whole bloody planet ends up mired under a sea of swarming people. The official US posture of holding its nose at the more extreme manifestations of the Chinese population control program reflects ignorance, stupidity, and a profound failure of the imagination.

This sense of crowding, momentarily relieved in Mr. Wei's wilderness, came back in spades during the two hours it took us to drive fifteen miles or so back to our hotel.

China is full of new motor vehicles, more are coming, and total gridlock looms. (If Chengdu is bad, how much worse it must be in even larger urban centers!) Maybe if enough Chinese starve in traffic jams, or are asphyxiated, the population problem will go away, but it seems like a Draconian solution. Meanwhile the authorities seem to be focused on the least important element of the problem, namely the fact that motor vehicles coming into the city bring dirt and dust with them. When our car had inched its way to the city limits, we had to wait in line for a car wash. The facility was identical with American ones, tunnels squirting soapy water with big brushes, followed by hordes of little people with rags, wiping you off. The main difference was it cost 5 Yen, less than a dollar--and it was compulsory for any vehicle entering the city.

We finally reached the hotel and had a late lunch. Jane holed up in our room while my Wei-Fu team took me to the music conservatory, a collection of stone buildings behind a high wall looking rather like a small private college in America. Mr Wei had allegedly set things up in advance, and Mr. Fu went off into the campus to get us started, while we stayed out front, just inside the main entrance, with hordes of curious young music students milling around and past us. After quite a long wait, Mr. Fu reappeared with an irate young lady who was busy giving him a tongue-lashing. When they reached us, she turned to Mr. Wei and chewed him out too. I had noticed on previous occasions that Chinese appear much less restrained in screaming at each other in public than is the case with other cultures I know. Is this a relatively recent phenomenon, another effect of continual crowding?

The irate young lady, who evidently was somebody's secretary, stomped off towards one of the nearer buildings, and we followed. She marched us up several flights of stairs into a hallway, where we met a dignified, middle-aged lady who was introduced as head of the strings department. A man from her department also appeared, and providentially, he spoke some English. This was particularly fortunate as Mr. Wei had panicked by this time and had become almost incoherent. I explained to the new man that I wanted to meet someone in the theory or composition department. He translated this, and went back to his class. The head of the department took us to another building, and turned us over to a new group, which included Zheng Yu Zhang, a well-spoken young woman recently back from Canada and fluent in English. Her card identified her as "Interpreter in the President's Office", and she was a godsend. She introduced me to Mr. Hwang Huwei, head of the theory and composition department, and a "famous composer", and also to Mr. Tian Gang, another composer. I identified myself, explained my musical interests, and showed them a copy of the program of the concert of my music held in 1992 in Washington, Va. I had my Walkman along and played them "Lakota's Rain Dance". We talked about using computers as aids to composing, and it turned out they use them too. Hwang Huwei writes his scores out longhand, then has his students transcribe them onto a computer program, so they can be played back through synthesizers. I asked about Chinese scales, particularly pentatonic ones, and produced my little Casio keyboard, and some staff paper. Hwang Huwei took the keyboard and absentmindedly played some Stephen Foster tunes. No, no, I say, please, Chinese...and he presented a concept, entirely new to me, of differing "passing tones", which can give the same basic pentatonic scale entirely different qualities. I said, quite truthfully, that this concept, that he had given me in about two well-used minutes, could add a new dimension to my future composition. I gave him a copy of my concert flyer and two tapes of my music. They in turn gave me a couple of tapes of their music, most of which had been written by the conservatory President. We drank tea, exchanged addresses, and parted with acclamations of high mutual esteem.

We returned to the hotel and had a decent supper with Wei and Fu, who had recovered from their battering at the conservatory. Then and earlier, our conversations had made it clear that they both yearn for the political liberalization they assume must eventually follow on the recent economic liberalization and upturn in economic activity. They appeared to accept the "one family, one child" principle as difficult but necessary.

Wei told me that someone in his position could express liberal political ideas quite freely these days within the family or among friends, but doing so in public or in the workplace could lead to trouble. Mr. Wei in particular badly wants to go to America.

Tibet

Thursday, September 16:

We arose well before dawn for an early morning flight to Lhasa on a jampacked Boeing. The flight was less scenic than we had hoped, as a cloud cover, heavy at first, obscured much of the view. After about 40 minutes of flight, we saw our first snow peaks poking through the clouds, then we saw more, and finally, shortly before coming in for a landing, the clouds broke up and we saw Tibetan villages and terraced rice paddies nestled in mountainous terrain.

The airport is a long way east of Lhasa, two hours drive. Our new team met us there, just two of them, mercifully, no new "gang of three". Mr. Yang, a cheerful Han with fairly good English (by the standards we had become accustomed to), and Pasang, a grouchy Tibetan driver, were to take us in hand for our entire two weeks in Tibet. Our vehicle, as in Xinjiang, was a Toyota Land Cruiser, and we made the trip to the Holiday Inn in Lhasa in relative comfort. But I was keenly aware of the altitude, and had to go slowly, and puff, even when climbing a flight of stairs. Jane and I were glad we had several days to acclimatize before pushing on to even greater heights.

The Holiday Inn in Lhasa is the best hotel in Tibet, without question. The plumbing, the lighting, and other arrangements all worked. The yakburgers it serves are slightly obscene and only moderately edible, but at least they provided a contrast to the third-rate Chinese fare we'd been eating for the past several weeks.

I would go a bit further, and say that the Holiday Inn in Lhasa is the only hotel in Tibet worthy of the name. The rest of them are caravanserais with modern machinery that doesn't work, grafted on in the wrong places. Pretty much like the provincial hotels in Xinjiang, except that in the latter area there are usually one or two people per hotel who would prefer that things work as they should. In Tibet, nobody cares at all. And why should they? The Chinese staff has job security, by virtue of the socialist system that employs them; they are interested only in getting out of a hostile environment where they are both physically and psychologically uncomfortable, into a position closer to their homeland. The Tibetans who work in these hotels resent working for Chinese, and have no interest in making tourism effective and profitable, since they know that whatever benefits accrue from the tourist trade will go to the Chinese, not to them. By contrast, the Tibetans who work at the Holiday Inn are working for Americans, or Germans or other Westerners--and that makes a profound difference. A German lady on the hotel staff told me that for her, the Tibetans were lovely people to work with, cheerful, loyal, willing--except that they had no sense of time, and if they didn't feel like working they just didn't show up. By contrast, it was the Chinese help that was sullen and uncooperative. But I am getting ahead of myself...

Friday, September 17:

_____ We spent the morning at the Potala, the ancient monastery-fortress-administrative center on a little mountain that dominates the city of Lhasa. It didn't matter that most of it was closed, and that what was open had been carefully manicured to accommodate the swarms of foreign tourists that trooped through it. It was unique and wonderful; here are first impressions, as recorded in notes I took that noon: *I've never perambulated a place so complex, yet so suffused with an inner harmony. Everything sang to me in the same key. Serenity,*

composure, grace, good humor...The Tibetan people are special, and no amount of Chinese pressure will change this...

That afternoon, rather exhausted from climbing up and down stairs at the Potala, we took a gentle stroll around the parkgrounds of Norbulingka Summer Palace; a pleasant but less breathtaking exposure to more classical Tibetan architecture.

Saturday, Sept 18:

Somewhat fortified by another twenty-four hours at altitude, we "did" the Drepung Monastery in the morning, and the Sera Monastery in the afternoon. These sites had been damaged during the Cultural Revolution, but only in part, and had been substantially restored. They were built in 1416 and 1419 respectively, or rather started then--they must represent many centuries of accretions. Drepung is bigger--it had 10,000 monks at its height, as opposed to 7,000 for Sera. They both nestle on flanks of bold mountains, so exploring them is as much a vertical as a horizontal enterprise. There are many buildings in each, containing chanting rooms and assembly rooms and many other rooms filled with Buddhist iconography, plus dormitories and other more mundane facilities. Each of these monasteries was a power center during important parts of Lhasa's long history. Drepung's larger size was offset by Sera's greater feistiness. According to our guide books, it had more Tantric influence, and hosted a troop of quasi-military monks, whose battle cry, I presume, was "Que sera, sera!"

Lhasa continues to leave me breathless in at least two ways. My physical strength improves, but slowly, and clambering up and down steep stairs in these marvelous monasteries leaves me anxious to sit down for a while. But I feel compelled to go on, because every time I turn a corner I see some new and exciting aspect, thoroughly in harmony with what I have already seen, but fresh and stimulating. It's like listening to old Ludwig, whose music is almost always fresh too. Any other ecclesiastical environment I can think of would have left me thoroughly churched out by now...

Actually, I was already getting "churched out", in that I was developing a mild case of battle fatigue from my efforts to keep straight the various aspects of the Lord Buddha, the statuary depicting sundry disciples and great leaders from bygone eras, the mandalas painted on the walls, the portraits of four heavenly kings, and a whole host of related data which I came privately to group under the heading of "Buddhist glitch". Inside the buildings I came to walk faster and faster, and then sit outside while Jane and Yang finished their more careful inspections. What kept me going was the outdoor scenes--the mountain backdrop, offset by towering gray clouds, and the strength of the buildings, with their tapering walls, their total absence of straight lines and right angles, the textures of the various parts of the buildings and the spectrum of old brick-red colors--and the people, the big monks and the little monklets, in their deep red robes and yellow neckpieces and sandals...I was to see a lot more monasteries after leaving Lhasa, but these sights never palled.

Sunday, September 19:

Our last day in Lhasa was devoted to Jokhang, the ancient temple and spiritual center of Tibetan Buddhism, and to the older parts of the city, which encircled it. The temple was impressive, partly because it had an extraordinary concentration of Buddhist glitch inside, but mainly (for me) because it was full of living, breathing Tibetan pilgrims doing their prayers and devotions, as they worked their way around it, proceeding in a slow timeless shuffle from one holy shrine or deity to the next, until they had done the entire temple. Drepung and Sera and Potala had been similarly vital, but the Chinese had killed them, then allowed them to be partially resurrected. Seeing them in their present condition, with more tourists than monks in most cases, was like seeing Lenin's mummy in

Red Square--evocative, but hardly the real thing. Drepung's former monk population of 10,000, for example, now stands at perhaps 200 (I forget the exact figure), enough to give a semblance of reality, but a far cry from the original. Jokhang, however, was the real thing. It too had been heavily damaged during the Cultural Revolution, and there was still some reconstruction going on, but enough had been restored... Even the courtyard outside the entrance was paved with prostrate, praying pilgrims.

We spent a couple of hours in the temple, total Buddhist immersion, then staggered out into the sunlight and wandered around the old city, which functions as a central bazaar for the Tibetans and a prime tourist trap for merchants trying to flog new antiquities for the coveted dollar. I was playing a kind of cat and mouse game with Jane, as I was trying to find purveyors of old Tibetan rugs, while she was trying to keep me away from them. I eventually escaped her, but was disappointed--as far as I was able to tell, Kathmandu has considerably more to offer by way of old Tibetan rugs than Lhasa does.

That afternoon we were visited by Jian Yongning, the acting head of China Explorations International, who was doing a tour. It was good to meet the man I had been exchanging faxes with for the last six months, and to let him know all was going reasonably well. Then we went down for our last supper at the dear old Holiday Inn, where the management made a valiant effort to pretend it was serving western food.

I would like to digress here, and point out that all Tibet, and particularly all monasteries, are suffused with the smell of rancid yak butter. It is an essential part of the experience of being in Tibet, as I foresaw (foresmelled?) from earlier knocking around gompas in Kathmandu. The Holiday Inn makes a valiant effort to smell like America, but even there, the buns, rolls and croissants are tinged with the universal aroma of yak. And there are other problems. One morning at breakfast, Jane turned over a piece of bacon on her plate, to find five or six black hog bristles staring up at her. I noticed she took no more bacon after that. Frankly I am just as happy that I am not in charge of the Holiday Inn's kitchen. It must be a thankless job.

Monday, September 20:

We left the Holiday Inn and Lhasa in mid-morning, and retraced our steps eastwards past the airport and past the village of Gonggar from which it took its name. We continued eastwards down a wide and fertile valley, past villages and villagers, the latter busily harvesting and threshing their staple barley crop. We were following the path of the Brahmaputra, known here as the Yarlung Tsangpo; the altitude was somewhere between 12,000' and 11,500', and falling slowly. Our destination was Tsedang, the third largest town in Tibet, but we had been reading Ben's guide book and had asked Yang to let us do a side trip to the monastery at Mindroling. That monastery was about the only one left in Tibet of the Nyingmapa, or "red Hat" sect, which had been the Kyentse Rinpoche's denomination, and was the denomination of our friend Ani Marilyn and her gumpa in Kathmandu. So we turned south after the town of Danang, and after about a half hour of very bad track, reached our destination.

The monastery was far smaller than Drepung and Sera, but like them was perched on a slope overlooking a village. It was not set up for tourism; there was no ticket booth, and nobody was outside but a bunch of dogs cooperating in the fertilization of a bitch, and a very small monklet. The monklet summoned a larger monk, who took us through a side door, where another monk who seemed to be in charge took us through a number of rooms with the predictable Buddhist iconography and decor. I saw pictures of Kyentse Rinpoche amongst the larger number of photos of the Dalai Lama, and proclaimed my friendship with and respect for the great man. The instant response was to request me to give the monastery pictures of the Rinpoche. I had to decline, as I hadn't any, but they pressed on and I had to promise to mail some. We then were taken to an office of sorts and fed Tibetan

tea, the poisonous beverage they make with salt and rancid yak butter. I'd managed to avoid that beverage until then, but there was no escape; we quaffed minimally and with feigned enthusiasm.

The Tibetans, I might add, are all totally infatuated with pictures of their spiritual leaders, especially the Dalai Lama. The Chinese only recently legalized display of such pictures and the temples are already full of them. Everywhere we went we were asked for pictures of the Dalai Lama, which seemed strange as they were on sale in bazaars. Later on, Ani Marilyn explained that as the ones on sale were authorized by the Chinese, they were suspect; but as Americans, any pictures we donated would be considered clean, and legitimate. The favorite pictures on display showed the Dalai Lama with either President Clinton, ex-President Bush, or Vice-President Gore.

I was off by myself in a temple area when a tall monk approached me nervously and with great care started to unwrap an object which turned out to be a set of ritual cymbals, about ten inches in diameter, an old set of fine workmanship as far as I could tell. Yang appeared and after a short conversation in Chinese with the monk, explained that he wanted me to have the cymbals as a gift. I was a bit suspicious as well as embarrassed, and stalled, while the monk, also evidently embarrassed, went through a remarkable set of facial contortions. Finally he confessed to Yang that his gift could appropriately be matched by a gift from me--of, say, about 700 Yen. I said I thought the cymbals were so fine, and obviously old and authentic, that in all probability the Chinese authorities would confiscate them when I left Tibet. Yang explained graciously and the deal fell through, without further embarrassment or loss of face.

There was a fair bit of driving still, but toward evening we reached Tsedang. It was a thoroughly Sinicized and rather ugly town, with a bazaar that contained little beyond T-shirts and thermos bottles. We checked in at the hotel, which constituted yet another example of a Chinese project gone a-gley. The dinner was as expected for such a hostelry. And so to bed.

Tuesday, September 21:

_____The big item on the agenda was the monastery at Samye, across the Yarlung Tsangpo and a few miles upstream. It was supposedly the oldest monastery in Tibet and intersecarian, having connections with the red hats and two kinds of yellow hats. The problem was getting there, the river being very wide and quite swift. We drove back upstream for about 40 minutes, to a place where three big flat-bottomed ferry boats were moored. Each was powered by a small diesel tractor engine. Yang hired one, and we waited, and waited, while a) the owner chucked out a lot of rainwater that was sloshing around in the bottom, b) the owner broke a beer bottle and used it as a funnel, to put oil in the crankcase, c) the owner and one helper tried to get the motor started, d) the owner and two helpers, plus Yang, finally got the motor turning over and put-putting along on its own power, and e) the rest of the boat filled up with Tibetan pilgrims who wanted to get to Samye too. Then we chugged across the river, which was two miles wide at that point. The ride took a full hour, as there were numerous sandbars, and the boat had to maneuver fairly delicately at times. There was a big truck waiting for us, and Yang managed to get Jane and me in the cab with the driver, while he and the pilgrims rode in back. It was raining off and on. The ride was long and strenuous, as the track was very bad. Finally we reached the monastery, which was situated on a flat alluvial plain, between the river and a long valley leading up into the mountains. It was a picturesque site, and the monastery itself was full of antique Buddhist iconography, embellished by numerous pictures of the Dalai Lama, plus one picture of Kyentse Rinpoche. It had suffered considerable damage during the cultural revolution, but quite a lot had been preserved as well. Then, about 1 pm, we turned back. The boat ride went faster, as we were going downstream, and we had a picnic lunch in the car about 3.

We went right through Tsedang and off to the south for about 10 miles, into increasingly hilly country. Our destination was the "castle" of Yambu Larkhan, which was basically a miniature gumpa perched like the point of a needle on a very spiky, Matterhorn-shaped outcrop. It was picturesque from a distance and even more so close up. We took the several hundred steps slowly, and made it to the top without too much difficulty--we were indeed adapting to the altitude; we'd never have made it five days earlier. The gumpa was, according to guide and guidebooks, the very oldest building in Tibet. We saw on close examination that it had been partially destroyed, and then partially rebuilt, and contained a mixture of old and new iconography. The views of the mountains in the background, and a myriad of barley fields closer in, many in process of being harvested, were stunning. I had to marvel at the industry of the Tibetans, ancient and modern, who had hauled those building stones up that peak in the first place, and were now rebuilding it. And once again I cursed the Red Guards for their pertinacity as well as misguided zeal, in carrying their crusade of cultural annihilation even to this rocky summit.

There are worse crimes than murder. Genocide is one, and cultural genocide is another. The Red Guards' performance in Tibet will always have a special place in humanity's Hall of Infamy...They blew up a good bit of the two sites...[Samye and Yambu Larkhan]...There are many other total ruins around...The monk population was decimated. But the Tibetans are as religious as ever, and restoration goes on apace...There is a principle operating here, as also in such cases as Hitler's holocaust, Genghis Khan's conquests, the Crusaders who ate the Saracens, the Turkish destruction of the Armenians...to what extent can you say "They should have known better?" ...it's unfair to judge figures who lived in pre-modern times with modern values...but the Red guards should have known better...

Wednesday, September 22:

It was cool and cloudy, with scattered showers, as we retraced our path westwards, all the way to Gonggar and the airport and a few miles beyond. Then at the junction, where the main road to Lhasa turned north, we continued west for a short distance, almost to a Chinese factory town which sat on the shore of an artificial lake, looking extraordinarily ugly and totally out of place. Here we turned south and began a steep ascent. The road was gravel and full of holes, and it was fairly heavy going, as we were ascending from 12,000 feet to a 15,700 foot pass. But we were rewarded with two breathtaking views from the top: back north past the Chinese town and the lake to the mountains beyond; and to the south, much closer at about 14,000 feet altitude, was the scorpion-shaped lake of Yamdok Tso, and hundreds of square miles of high altitude pasturage all around. We descended easily to the shore of the lake, and followed its northern shore to the west, and then its west shore to the south. Thousands of sheep and goats were off in the middle distance, grazing up and down the mountain slopes. We stopped for a brief picnic lunch near a small village, where we were besieged by children and dogs. One of the older children amused us by hurling stones incredible distances with a sling; it was the first time I'd seen that Biblical weapon employed by someone who knew how to use it. Then we turned west again, away from the lake, and drove up a long gentle incline to a still higher pass--16,500 feet--and on down through increasingly populous farming areas to Gyantse. We arrived about 5, but the lateness of the hour did not deter our guide, who took us past a ruined castle on a ridge, to what was left of the Gyantse temple, and to the Kumdum Stupa, the latter showing familiar traces of Nepalese influence. We finally settled in to the Gyantse Hotel, which was built on the same model as all the others, but a bit worse. Magnificent views out the hall windows, but our room, of course, faced on a courtyard littered with trash. I can only say that the view from our room was better preparation for the food they served than the other one would have been.

Thursday, September 23:

We left Gyantse fairly early, and drove north-northwest, up a broad, fertile, and populous valley toward Xigatse. It was a particularly scenic drive, with solidly-built farmhouses distributed fairly evenly among fields bedecked with haystacks. Many Tibetans in traditional clothes were in the fields, working with the grain, or occasionally pulling up potatoes. There were beribboned donkeys everywhere, pulling carts full of straw or other commodities. When we had driven most of the way to Xigatse, we turned west off the main road and followed a bumpy dirt track several miles to the monastery of Shalu. This monastery's patron was one of Tibet's all-time leading intellectuals back in medieval times, and Ben, in her guidebook, attributed considerable importance to it. We went around and through it and if I had been more alert I could describe it in some detail. But I had seen quite a few monasteries by then, and was getting "churched out", at least for the swarms of Buddhas and other objects of worship that abounded in their interiors.

Xigatse is the second largest city in Tibet, and the seat of the Panchen Lama, the second most important ecclesiastical figure, after the Dalai Lama. Unlike the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama stayed in Tibet after the Chinese takeover, and was widely regarded, perhaps unfairly, as a Chinese figurehead or stooge. Whatever the truth of the matter, there is visual evidence that in recent years the Chinese Government has seen fit to lavish considerable resources on temple restoration and construction in Xigatse. Perhaps they were trying to make amends for the destructive rampage of the Red Guards; certainly they concentrated their effort in Xigatse because that was the seat of the "good" lama, who had cooperated with them. Anyway, as we approached the city, we were dazzled by the splendor of the gilded roofs of the temple area, which ran along a contour on the slope of a hill, a little above and behind the city. As we drew closer, we saw that all that glittered was indeed gold, or at least a pretty thick coating of gold paint. There were three or four major buildings thus bedecked, all in a row. The one that was most ornate, inside and out, was a relatively new mausoleum built in honor of a Panchen Lama who had died earlier in this century. Yang told me how much the Chinese had put into the building. If he was even in the right ballpark it was a staggering figure, well over \$1 billion. There were many monks in evidence, more than I had seen at any previous monasteries, and the whole complex had the feel of a going concern, rather than a ruin in process of reconstruction.

At Jane's insistence, we spent the latter part of the afternoon shopping in the bazaar for a down jacket and perhaps other warm clothing. The weather was getting nippy and she correctly foresaw that it would get quite cold indeed when we reached the northern approaches to Everest. Unfortunately the bazaar, which was drab and unexciting, had plenty of Dayglo T-shirts and fake Nike sneakers, but not much else. She finally found a magenta outercoat, well padded, and bought it for perhaps a tenth of what it would have cost in the USA. It served its purpose at Everest, and later in Kathmandu, where she gave it to Ani Marilyn.

The Xigatse Hotel was about as bad as the one at Gyantse, and not worth taking time to describe--particularly as I need to save my descriptive powers for the one that follows.

Friday, September 24:

_____ We drove west through mostly arid valleys, along a fairly good gravel road, for about three hours, then turned south on a very bad dirt road that took us to the monastery at Sakya. The Sakyas are one of the established sects in Tibet, and have significant numbers of adherents among Tibetan Buddhists in America. They were once advisers to Kublai Khan, and ruled vast areas back around the 12th or 13th centuries. Like Hungary and other nations in that area, they have a distinguished past which only they and a few historians remember. We had only a hasty opportunity to appreciate the considerable panoply of iconography in the chanting room, assembly room, et cetera, for the place was closing at 1 pm and we only arrived shortly before that hour. I was not particularly displeased; I had

just been exposed to a considerable amount of similar fare, in Shalu and Xigatse, and my mental cup was running over.

We picnicked in a field, surrounded by urchins badly in need of baths, and drove on to the main road. We went southwest along a long gentle incline to a pass at 17,000 feet, where we ran into storm clouds and some rain and sleet. The country beyond the pass was hilly and bleak; there were lots of goats and some yaks. Eventually, in the middle of nowhere, we came on something that at first glance looked like a Chinese factory, but turned out to be our destination, the Everest Hotel. It had been placed in this bleak wilderness, halfway between Xigatse and the Nepalese border, by a Chinese government solicitous of the needs of foreign tourists, and had been constructed to the same specifications as those used for all the other government tourist hotels in Tibet, and Xinjiang too for that matter. What the government had not provided was motivation that would inspire anyone of any degree of competence whatsoever to want to work there. Yang had warned us not to expect much, but this particular caravanserai turned out to be the absolute pits. Nothing worked at all, including the help. The toilet was broken in three places. There was no hot water or power, and they only turned on the cold water the next morning, after most of the tourists had left. Breakfast consisted of old sponge cake and ketchup. Another frustrated tourist, whom I had never met, and I met in the hall at one point and affirmed quite spontaneously that the Everest Hotel was the worst hotel in the world. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Saturday, September 25:

We escaped from the hotel rather early and continued down the main road, past a checkpoint, until we reached the turnoff to Rombuck and Mt. Everest. This turned out to be a rough dirt road that ran down a valley, then climbed precipitously to a high pass (16,500 feet). We would have had a magnificent view from there of Mt. Everest and indeed much of the whole central Himalayan range, but unfortunately the clouds covered just about everything. We descended into a long valley, where we forded streams and crossed irrigation ditches and other obstacles; eventually we ascended into a bleaker and less populous region, where we actually saw our first and only wild game--a small herd of wild sheep, grazing within a couple of hundred yards or so of the road. They fled as we approached. Finally, about three and a half hours after we left the hotel, we rounded a corner of a mountain and arrived at our destination, the Rombuck monastery.

Rombuck Monastery, at exactly 5000 meters or 16,500 feet, is supposedly the highest in Tibet. It is situated on one slope of a V-shaped gorge that stretches south-southeast, directly toward Mt. Everest, whose summit lies about fifteen miles away. It consists mostly of ruins, the legacy of the Red Guards' attentions, plus a half dozen or so restored stone buildings. These include a couple of dormitories set aside for the use of tourists, longish buildings which contain rows of cell-like rooms with raised pallets set along the inner walls as beds. The principal dormitory has three such cells, each with pallets for five or six sleepers. There is no electricity or plumbing. Fresh water comes from a spring, and flows out of a pipe a couple of hundred yards away. A stone courtyard is in front of the three cells, and just below it, like the orchestra pit in an opera house, is another little courtyard, divided by a low wall into two sections, which has been dug out underneath, and paved over irregularly with flagstones, so that there are numerous holes in between. This is the official toilet. Anyone using it does so in full view of the assembled campers above, and furthermore risks, like the lady in the loo at the temple of Wu, falling straight through, as the holes between the flagstones are mostly quite large.

When we arrived, a blond lady in bright blue bicycle tights was energetically sweeping up the central court just under the dormitories. She was Sondra, and Dutch, and she had actually ridden her bicycle to that awesome place, and being Dutch, naturally she was cleaning it up a bit, or trying to. She was in the middle room. We were installed in the

one on the left, while Yang and Pasang took over the third. We hauled luggage and broke out warm bedding and clothing and generally settled in, while talking to Sondra, who was a goldmine of information coming from a perspective quite new to us. For we had been traveling on the "rich tourist" circuit, rubbing shoulders only with other "organized" groups, all with their Chinese managers and handlers, and always staying at hotels that, however inadequately, had been designed for the organized tourist trade, with flush toilets (even though they usually didn't flush), hot and cold running water (even though it was usually turned off), and dining rooms where meals were served (even though they might consist of nothing more than sponge cake and ketchup). Sondra, by contrast, was on the *wandervogel* circuit, unorganized, without any handler at all, strictly on her own. I marveled at her guts, as well as her muscles.

Three male German cyclists whom we had passed down the road arrived, and settled in. Then a truck lumbered up with six more visitors, three more handsome blond Dutch girls with three strapping Dutch boy friends. They moved into our room, though there were only four pallets left, and it soon got pretty steamy. I decided there must be some special bond linking people who live in the flattest and lowest country on earth with the region that is least flat and highest. Jane and I quietly slithered out, with our belongings, to a room in the next dormitory, where there were only two pallets. More tourists arrived, mostly German, plus a pair of young men from Israel. Everyone was cheerful and sociable, the opposite of the crowd we had seen before, the ones traveling in what was allegedly first class. They argued amiably with the monks that ran the place over the nightly charges (the equivalent of two or three dollars) and the wood they were supposed to get as part of the price. They hacked the stubborn old stumps and roots the monks provided until they had reduced them to pieces small enough to fit in the primitive wood stoves found in some of the rooms, and got fires going somehow, and warmed up some provisions and sat around half the night talking.

Yang remained firmly in control of his room, with Pasang guarding his flank. He had been joined by a young German named Helmut who was complaining of headache and vomiting, and by a lady named Anita, who was studying in Germany to become a homeopath and was fussing mightily over Helmut, plus a Tibetan guide or driver. Yang had a brand new Primus, and he was trying to cook our supper on it, though it kept going out, and his matches were damp. I gave Helmut some bouillon, which he kept down, and soon he felt better, and both he and Anita were my buddies from then on. We eventually ate something ourselves, and went to bed while it was still barely light enough to see.

Sunday, September 26:

Jane and I were both puffing pretty hard because of the altitude, but were getting around pretty well on the whole in spite of it. I had found a small ruin some distance removed from the main monastery complex, where I could go and squat in private. And we had our liter flasks of drinking water, for toothbrushing and other toiletry. Our little cell was back to back with the main dormitory, so we had some privacy from the army of Dutch and other young visitors. On the whole, therefore, we were no worse off than we had been in the Everest Hotel, and perhaps it was a bit better.

We had caught a few tantalizing glimpses of Everest when we first arrived, but when we got up, there was nothing but clouds in that direction. We ate a light breakfast and drove on up the valley to Base Camp, which consisted of a lot of tents and muscular men and women in fancy mountaineering garb. As far as I could tell, the population there was essentially similar to what we had had for company at Rombuck; there was no organized expedition of climbers in evidence. We drove on for perhaps another half kilometer or so, and stopped at the foot of a big glacial moraine. We got out and walked slowly onward and upward, in the general direction of Advanced Base Camp and the summit. Sondra, who had hitched a ride with us, bounded on ahead as though she were

still at sea level. Jane and I puffed and snorted onward for what seemed an unconscionably long time, with the fog swirling around us, occasionally laced with a little sleet and snow. We couldn't see much of anything, beyond the moraine we stood on and the hills going up on both sides, and finally Jane said she'd had enough and we turned back. Sondra came bounding down the mountain and rejoined us in time for the drive back. She hadn't quite made it to the summit but she had surely gotten a lot farther than we had. If anyone ever makes it to the summit on a bicycle, odds are that that person will be Dutch.

I have an excellent map of the Everest region, prepared about ten years ago by Brad Washburn, and can calculate from it just about how far we got. We were at 17,300 feet, give or take twenty feet or so. Not bad for a couple of aging goats, if I do say so myself...We cooked up a storm on the fickle Primus that evening, and socialized with the wandervogel. Then off to bed, Jane groaning betimes--bad tummy.

Monday, September 27:

Jane had a pretty bad night, and was definitely feeling poorly in the morning. It seems to have been some kind of Tibetan intestinal flu, which dragged her down for several weeks thereafter...so she was less than appreciative when Yang and I cooked up quite a breakfast. Yang made bread, which turned out to be pancakes, and I made a Western omelet, which turned out to be scrambled eggs and ketchup. It was pretty tasty, and Sondra consumed what Jane didn't. Meanwhile, I got even with Pasang... *I put about a teaspoon of Tabasco on his hand, thinking he was a fire-eater like other Tibetans I'd known...when he licked it his normal dead-pan took on an expression of deep pain, and he has regarded me as he would an assassin ever since. Can't say I mind, he is the worst driver I know as far as his choice of gears is concerned, and any pain the Tabasco gave him is nothing compared to the pain he regularly inflicts on the poor Toyota...*

Everest knew we were about to leave, and flirted with us with a bit of striptease. We would see first one part of her, then another, and for a moment or two we could see just the summit, sitting way up in the sky on a bank of clouds. I saw enough to be able to judge that from the north, Everest is a considerably more impressive sight than it is when seen from the Nepal side. It looms out, huge and severe, its enormous north face dropping sheer from the summit itself to the obscurity of the foothills. Later on in the day, of course, when we had gotten quite far away, we could see it standing out in all its naked glory--but by then we were too far off to see details, or feel the imminence of its majestic height. Murphy's Law.

I had hoped that we would continue on toward the Nepal border, but we just backtracked, back to the main road, the police checkpoint, and finally to the abominable Everest Hotel, where we spent another abominable night, Jane suffering worse than I did, due to her infirmity.

Tuesday, September 28:

When we got up there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the air as we left the horrid Hotel Everest was crystal clear. There were two clouds in the back seat, however: Jane was feeling wretched, and Yang's left eye was burned and his cheek abraded. He had tried to help another tourist the evening before to set up a bladder for breathing oxygen, and it had blown up in his face. He recovered over the course of the day, but slowly... Meanwhile Everest showed up in the distance, completely clear. The trollop knew we were too far away to see her to advantage.

We drove through sparsely populated country for a middling long distance, mostly in a westerly direction, then in a big curve around to the south, and finally ascended our last high pass, at about 16,500 feet. As we did so the whole backside of the

spine of the high Himalayas that I knew so well--the section west of Everest, running from Langtang and Ganesh Himal through Manaslu and on down to Annapurna, hove into view, for the moment entirely in the clear. I was transfixed; it was among the most gorgeous mountain views I'd ever enjoyed. We stopped at the pass as I scampered around and urged a reluctant Jane to take pictures, even as clouds began to form over the peaks.

Then Pasang took off down the mountain like the proverbial...bird. Not content with keeping the poor Toyota in too high a gear for the grade, he put it in neutral on straight stretches, and occasionally barreled down bumpy shortcuts between switchbacks that I swear involved twenty to thirty degree grades. Ouch! But we survived and the snow peaks got less and less visible, while the country became gorge-y and gorgeous...On both sides of the pass the people looked more Tibetan somehow than they had looked in the Lhasa-Xigatse heartland. The men wore traditional hats a lot more frequently, as was also the case with their other clothes...

As we descended into the gorge, we saw the first trees we had seen in a couple of weeks, other than light alders and such like along the rivers...of course, we suddenly realized, all Tibet is above the tree line! We stopped at the very last, final, terminal holy Buddhist site in the country, a cave where a semi-mythical wizard and saint named Milarepa had spent much of his long life. The site was close to the road, but down near the river--a couple of hundred steps down a series of stone stairs. More Buddhist iconography, in a cave and in a small temple built around its entrance. Jane was still feeling rotten and stayed in the car. Then on to the town of Nyalam, built into the side of the gorge, like a Nepali town. There were other resemblances to Nepal, but the overall impression was still Tibetan. This was not the case with Zamru, the frontier town we reached an hour later, after more gorgeous scenery and a further sharp drop in altitude. The people there were mostly wiry little men in topis, paharis for sure, who accosted me at once about changing money, carrying things, did I want a taxi, and so forth. I'm getting home, I thought. The hotel was bad, but not as bad as the Everest, and with the prospect that we were about to reenter a land where the plumbing and electricity worked, most of the time at least, we went to bed in a hopeful frame of mind.

Wednesday, September 29:

As we were farther west than before, and stuck at the bottom of a gorge, it was dark for a good bit longer a time than we expected. This was a nuisance, as both the electricity and water had been turned off, and the toilet had overflowed. Furthermore, our surly driver had picked this moment to go off about his own business--he showed up two hours late. He eventually arrived, and he and Yang saw us through the border posts on the Chinese side, and right out onto the Friendship Bridge itself, where a thin red line marked the physical boundary with Nepal.

Yang had been a good friend and companion throughout our Tibetan trip. He was interested in the monasteries and Buddhist iconography he showed us, and clearly embarrassed that his countrymen had wreaked such havoc and destruction a couple of decades before. He liked Tibet but confessed that he didn't want to stay there, because he felt the general antipathy toward Chinese and it made him uncomfortable. He wanted to write a guidebook to Tibet for Chinese, then get out and do something else. I sympathized then, and still do. I can only hope that Tibet gains its independence, or at least a substantial measure of autonomy, and that Yang does write his book, and that it helps other Chinese who may want to visit Tibet as guests, not conquerors.

Needless to say, my sympathy for Yang did not reflect any sympathy for the system that employed him. I was never an admirer of state socialism as it had been practiced in the USSR, and is still to some extent practiced in China. But I hadn't been downright allergic to the system, as I became during this trip. As I sat smoldering in my last Chinese tourist hotel, reflecting on all I had seen, I wrote the following pronouncement:

I learned enough about both Soviet and Chinese socialism on this trip to understand why the Soviet system collapsed. Change is taking place now in China, it is said, but at the center, not out here on the farthest marches, where the system still survives as a testimonial to the greatest social mistake of the twentieth century.

Epilogue--Nepal and Home

The trip to Kathmandu was an eventful one at first, and later, as we approached the valley, an emotional experience--at least for me. We had hired three be-tooped porters, and as we crossed the red line into Nepal, our spirits lifted. On the Nepal side was great good-humored bustling, jostling, negotiating. The contrast with the Tibetan side was powerful...Nepal is poor and crowded, but relatively free, and there is a vitality here that the glum Tibetans and their cross Chinese masters just don't have...we cleared passport and customs and learned that the road had been cut by a landslide 15 km downstream. We hired a pickup that took us to the washout, where we met Angie and Poorna in a rented Land Rover. We drove down to Dhulikel and lunched at an excellent hilltop restaurant there. And on into the valley, where every curve, every fold in the hills, evoked memories...

It is time to terminate this account. We spent three days in Nepal, saw many friends, and updated our impressions--but that is part of another story.

Why did we visit Central Asia? Because it's a big chunk of the planet that had been off limits until recently. Would I want to do it again? Not right away. Was it worth it? Yes, emphatically. Humanity has always woven a marvelously complex and colorful tapestry, and right now, in the Central Asian regions we visited, some new colors and patterns are beginning to show up--strong, different, unpredictable--and I'm glad I learned as much as I did...

Carl Coon
Woodville, Va.
October 20, 1993 (rev. 12/12)