

Tagong: A night with the nomads (7/20/2007 to 7/22/2007)

My cousin Josh flew in to Chengdu to join me on a trip to the Tibetan horse festival in the city of Yushu. He was the first person I had seen that I knew in over five and a half months. Our first stop on this journey was the small town of Tagong on the edge of the Tibetan plateau. Tagong is a monastery town situated on expansive grasslands which are home of many Tibetan nomads. Through the local Kampa Cultural center, we arranged a horse trek to stay over night on the grasslands with the nomads. Unfortunately the weather didn't cooperate and the first day of the trek was gray and it drizzled off and on all day. Despite the gray day the scenery was beautiful and helped us keep our minds of the pain of bouncing up and down on a wooden Tibetan saddle that seemed specifically designed to maximize the pain felt by non-Tibetan riders. Either the Tibetan nomads must have different shaped behinds than us, or their rear ends are so desensitized from years of riding that they could sit on hot coals for an hour and not notice. I'm guessing the latter. In any case we were very happy to arrive at the nomad camp around two in the afternoon and get off the horses. We hiked up to a 13,000 ft plus "hill" near the camp for a view over the valley dotted with nomad tents. Unfortunately the altitude started getting to Josh and he ended up heading back to the tent while I explored the area. I felt a little guilty as I walked from tent to tent getting invited in for tea and food at nearly every tent I passed while Josh was sleeping off his altitude sickness but what could I do. The people were incredibly friendly and hospitable. Unfortunately as much as I love the Tibetan culture, Tibetan cuisine is not one of its strong points. And while the mild salted butter tea is drinkable, the strong rancid yak butter tea ranks as one of the worst beverages I've had the unfortunate task of drinking. Fortunately during my tent hopping I was not forced to endure this beverage and I was even served some very tasty Yak milk yogurt. My luck did not



Grasslands around Tagong.



Wildflowers on the horse trek near Tagong.

hold up, and when I returned to the tent where I was staying. I was served the dreaded beverage with a floating hunk of rancid yak butter in it so large it nearly filled the bowl. I took a few swigs fighting off the gagging reflex and having flashbacks to eight years ago when I was last also forced to drink the heinous fluid.

In the late afternoon the nomads round up the yaks to milk them and bring the young yaks into the tent for the night. As I was watching the nomads continue this daily routine that has gone on for thousands of years. The sun broke through and a rainbow lit up the sky. As a photographer I couldn't believe my fortune and ran around, ignoring the thin air, trying to find good angles to photograph the beautiful scene. Again, feeling a little guilty that Josh was in the tent sleeping with the baby yaks.

There are plenty of interesting sounds at night when you're sleeping in a tent full of 8 people and about 15-20 baby yaks. Add the hard ground to the bodily functions of the yaks and it wasn't the best sleep I've had, but it was quite an experience. The next day the weather was even worse than the previous day, cold with a steady rain. Our guide, a 26 year old

Tibetan woman, really didn't want to go back, especially since she had been walking while we were riding, and said we should stay another day. But we were on a fairly tight schedule so another day with the nomads was not a possibility. Apparently the horses were in no mode for another trek through the rain with a couple of heavy foreigners on their backs since when the guide tried to put the saddles on the horses, they bolted for the freedom of the open grasslands. It took about an hour and a half for them to round the horses back up. So after a delay we were on our way. Our guide wanted to get this over as soon as possible and she had me ride behind her on the back of the biggest horse. As much as I hated the saddle the day before this was much worse. I was essentially riding bare back with the saddle in front of me and the horse's backbone grinding into my tail bone with every step. It got real exciting when we



Girl in one of the Nomad tents I visited near Tagong.



Nomad tent near Tagong.

road down a steep hillside as I slid forward into the back of the saddle. Let's just say I may not be able to produce offspring after that stint. Of course going up wasn't much better as I had to struggle to hang and avoid falling off the back of the horse. After we reached the top of the pass, I had the horse to myself again and the guide continued on foot, a much more pleasant arrangement for me. The weather never really improved and we arrived back at Tagong tired, cold, wet and sore. Josh would take days for his backside to recover, and while it was a great experience I don't think he'll be climbing on the back of a horse anytime soon. As for myself, I seem to have a short memory and am still leaving the option open if I make it to Songpan, an area famous for its horse trekking.



Horses on the Tagong grasslands.



Nomad woman near Tagong.



On of the Nomads who invited me in to his tent.



Eating in the nomad tent, near Tagon.



Woman milking a yak.



**Rainbow over the
nomad camp.**



Rainbow over nomad tents.



Woman carrying yak milk.



One more rainbow shot.