

The “Divine” Lama and Me (8/7/2007-8/9/2007)

After Litang, I wanted to head towards northwestern Sichuan and the monasteries around Aba in route to Xiahe in Gansu province. As the area around Aba was not covered in my guidebook I only had a map to go on. I had a couple options at this point, go back through Kanding and work my way up from the south, or take a diagonal route back to Ganzi and approach from the west. Preferring Ganzi to Kanding, I chose the latter option. My map showed a major road heading west and a sizable city along the road to Aba which I figured I could get to by bus from Ganzi. I figured wrong, at bus station Ganzi I was told I'd have to go to a town almost as far south as Kanding and go up from there. Not liking this option I took a bus to Luhuo where the road split off to the west hoping to find further transport from there. Upon arriving in Luhuo I was only able to find a minivan going to two hours to the next junction in the road. I took it again hoping to find further transport from there. I arrived at a town, or rather village, called Ser-Ba at a junction in road. In surveying the situation my options looked fairly bleak for moving on that day. Not much more than a collection of



View of Ser-Ba.

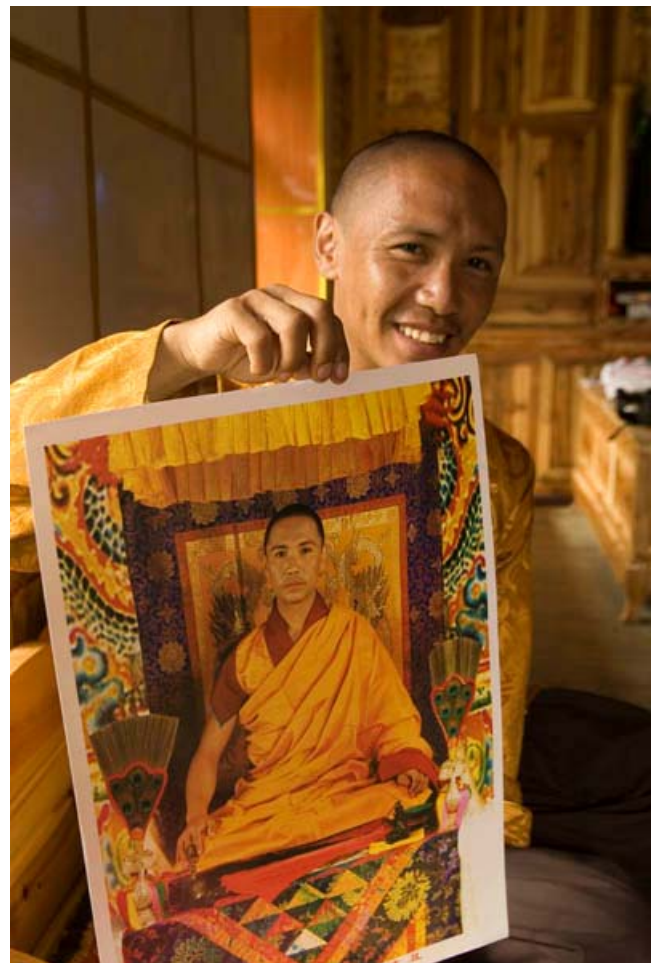


Typical Tibetan house in Ser-Ba.

Tibetan houses at a “T” in the road set in a river valley, Ser-Ba was certainly not a bustling transport hub. There were hardly any vehicles heading down the road I was interested in taking, removing the possibility of hitching. I ascertained from the locals that there would be a bus going in my direction at around 8:00 am the next morning.

Resigning my self to a night in this town I left my bag at the one guesthouse in town and took a walk to explore the area. As I walked a youthful 27 year old monk on a motorcycle enthusiastically greeted me and invited me into his house. He spoke a little English, very little, but more than my Chinese. He

asked me where I was staying and I pointed in the direction of the guesthouse and he then invited me to stay at his house. An invitation I accepted figuring this would be a much more unique experience than a random guesthouse. Although I did have second thoughts after being served a healthy portion of tsampa on my arrival (barley flours mixed with milk tea and yak butter tasting something like unsalted play-doh). The house was in the process of being built and it was very nice by Tibetan standards. After I chomped down the tsampa, the monk gave me a tour of the house which featured a large living area on the second floor above the barn, with a wood burning stove in the middle of the room and a large TV on one side of the room opposite the windows. In the stairwell on the second floor were a number of prayer wheels which the monk would spin as he made his way up to the third floor. The third floor had a small temple and also the bed rooms. I was fairly surprised to see that the monk had a laptop, digital camera, and digital video camera in his room. He showed me several pictures of a trip he had made to China, different from Tibet, which he considered separate despite the fact that on the map this area is part of Sichuan. I was wondering where his money was coming from, but I didn't ask him. His parents and little brother and older brother also lived in the house but it certainly seemed like the money was coming through him and not them. He had almost a regal air about him and it was clear that he ran the household. Eventually it came out that he was not just any monk but the designated reincarnation of an important Lama in the area. While the Dali Lama is the most famous and well known example of these beings who despite having reached enlightenment choose to be reborn continuously to help guide others on the path to nirvana, there are many of these such lamas associated with various monasteries throughout Tibet, and my new friend was designated from an early age as one of these. As I observed him I wondered what kind of effect



Lama I stayed with posing with a poster of himself.



Lama's father and mother in the living room/kitchen.

that must have on a kid to be told for as long as he can remember that he is the reincarnation of an enlightened being. While an incredibly nice guy, he did seem to have a manner of entitlement about him. He would always have his little brother fill the tea and wait on the rest of the family. To be fair, it was a similar situation in the monasteries I have seen, where the young monks have to wait on the older monks. His parents were very sweat pious and simple people who spent a lot of there time sitting on the floor spinning prayer wheels, but the certainly deferred to him. Unlike royalty where your good fortune

depends on your parent's position, in Lamaism, lamas are chosen out of the general population and I wondered how their lives had changed since this designation, as it had most definitely vastly improved there standard of living. While I was there he receive a large shipment which he said came from Beijing. In it was a large number of miscellaneous religious items such as rosaries, robes, and jackets. As well as a stack of posters of him in the lotus position like you might see in temples. In addition there were copies of a DVD made that showed his "enshrinement" ceremony where he assumes his position in the monastery. Clearly some of the money was coming from the Chinese government who had sanctioned his lama status. Perhaps in an attempt to bribe loyalty, an attempt which certainly did not seem to be working in this case, as my lama friend was very negative towards the Chinese.

I ended up staying another day with him; we visited a couple of near by temples, and again it was fascinating to see the respect given to him by the old pilgrims at the temples. They would stop there circumambulations and take of there hats slightly bowing there heads. Again I wondered what it must be like to be basically treated like a living god for as long as you can remember. While he certainly was not perfect and is subject to the same human frailties we all are, it is a testament to the instruction that the lamas are



Me with the Lama's parents trying my best to keep the prayer wheel going. "The family the prays together stays together."



Me and the Lama at Latse temple.

given that such divine treatment doesn't completely spoil and corrupt them. My stay with the lama was certainly a unique and fascinating insight in the practical implications of Tibetan Lamaism.



Lama in front of Latse temple.



Lama throwing paper prayer pieces in the air at a temple on top of the hill near his house.



Lama's little brother.