

GUIDE TO TIBET MOTORBIKE TOUR

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Lhasa to Kathmandu

A RIDE ACROSS THE TIBETAN PLATEAU

WITH

Extreme Bike Tours

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TIBET RIDE

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Map of the Ride



See <http://goo.gl/maps/Zix4E> for interactive map of the ride.

Kathmandu Valley



Kathmandu

Although the ride starts in Lhasa, the adventure begins in Kathmandu while we get visas and entry permits before flying to Lhasa. Kathmandu is also the ride's final destination.

Kathmandu is not only the capital of Nepal but the central city amongst a conglomerate of satellite cities, notably Patan (aka Lalitpur) and Bhaktapur, and urban areas within the bowl-shaped Kathmandu Valley and spreading outside the valley. The city has an elevation of 1,400m; and the valley is surrounded by four major mountains.

There were times when the term 'Nepal' referred only to the Kathmandu Valley. It has a history going back over 2,000 years as evidenced by several inscriptions found in the valley.

Durbar Square

Durbar Square is a generic name used to describe plazas and areas opposite the old royal palaces in Nepal. Durbar Squares consist of temples, idols, open courts, water fountains and more. They are the



most prominent remnants of the small kingdoms that once constituted Nepal. The most famous Durbar Squares in the Kathmandu Valley are: Kathmandu Durbar Square, Patan Durbar Square, and Bhaktapur Durbar Square. All three are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

According to Lonely Planet, Bhaktapur's Durbar Sq is larger than Kathmandu's, much less crowded with temples than Patan's and less vibrant than either...!

Kathmandu Durbar Square is made up of two sub-areas. The outer complex is renowned for numerous interesting temples, while the inner complex comprises the old palace area. Contrary to Lonely Planet's back-handed compliment, Bhaktapur Durbar Square is said to be one of the most charming architectural showpieces of the valley as it highlights the ancient arts of Nepal. Patan is the oldest of all the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley and is the best known for its artistic heritage. Patan Durbar Square is full of Hindu temples and Buddhist monuments with bronze gateways, guardian deities and impressive carvings.

Swayambhunath



Swayambhunath (Monkey Temple) is an ancient religious complex on a hill in the Kathmandu Valley, west of Kathmandu. It is one of the most sacred Buddhist sites in Nepal, second only to the Boudhanath Stupa. The Swayambhunath Stupa is a golden spire crowning a conical wooded hill. It is the most ancient and enigmatic of all the holy shrines in Kathmandu Valley. Located on a hill on the outskirts of Kathmandu, the temple affords magnificent views over the city and on a clear day to the mountains beyond. At the heart of the temple complex is the stupa, topped by the painted eyes of Buddha, surrounded by prayer wheels and numerous smaller temples.

Boudhanath Stupa

Boudhanath Stupa (or Bodnath Stupa) is the largest stupa in Nepal and the holiest Tibetan Buddhist temple outside Tibet. The stupa is located in the town of Boudha, on the eastern outskirts of Kathmandu. It was probably built in the 14th century after the Mughal invasions. After the arrival of thousands of Tibetans following the 1959 Chinese invasion, the temple has become one of the most important centres of Tibetan Buddhism.



From above, Bodnath Stupa looks like a giant mandala, or diagram of the Buddhist cosmos. As in all Tibetan mandalas, four of the Dhyani Buddhas mark the cardinal points, with the fifth, Vairocana, enshrined in the centre (in the white hemisphere of the stupa). The five Buddhas also personify the five elements (earth, water, fire, air and ether), which are represented in the stupa's architecture.

Nagarkot



Nagarkot is situated 32km east of Kathmandu at an altitude of 2,200m. It provides a panoramic view of the major peaks of the eastern Nepal Himalayas including Mt. Everest and Annapurna. From here one has a fascinating and mesmerizing view of the sunrise. When the sun reflects on these snowy peaks the view is said to be absolutely spell binding.

Lhasa

The Potala Palace is undoubtedly the focus of interest in Tibet. Originally built in the 7th century as an imperial palace, it has been reconstructed a few times since. It contains the living quarters of the Dalai Lamas and their sumptuous golden tombs.



Other key attractions in Lhasa include: **Jokhang Temple**, located in the city centre and said to be the best combination of architecture of Tibet, Han, Nepal and India; **Norbulingka Summer Palace**, originally constructed by the seventh Dalai Lama, with each successive ruler adding his own buildings; the **Barkhor Street market**, the oldest street in a very traditional style, around the Jokhang Temple in the centre of the old section of Lhasa - also one of the most important religious paths along which pilgrims walk around Jokhang Temple; **Drepung Monastery**, founded in 1416 by a disciple of Tsong Khapa, formerly the biggest and richest monastery in Tibet; and **Sera Monastery** which became famous for its tantric teachings and its notorious monks who were considered clever and dangerous.

Lhasa to Gyantse

The ride itself begins by heading south-west out of Lhasa following the Yarlung River on the Friendship Highway for about 60km. We'll cross the Yarlung River and pick up the S307, which was part of the original Friendship Highway between Lhasa and Nepal. The new highway stays with the Yarlung River to Shigatse, where we will rejoin it.

Not long after joining the S307, we climb to the first pass of the ride – **Khamba La at 4,794m**. From here there are spectacular views of the luminescent blue-green Yamdrok Lake (aka Yamdrok Yumco or Yumsto) – all meaning *jade lake*, one of Tibet's three sacred lakes (it is said to be the incarnation of a goddess). After following the lake and passing the much smaller Kongmu Co (lake), we come to Nagarze.

As we head further west we'll cross **Karo La at 5,074m**. The road over Karo La provides views of Nojin Kangsang, which at 7,206m is the highest mountain in the massif around Karo La. Coming down from Karo La, two huge glaciers can be seen close to the highway. As we approach our destination of Gyantse we'll pass several typical Tibetan villages.

Gyantse

After overnighiting in Gyantse, we spend the next morning here before heading for Shigatse.

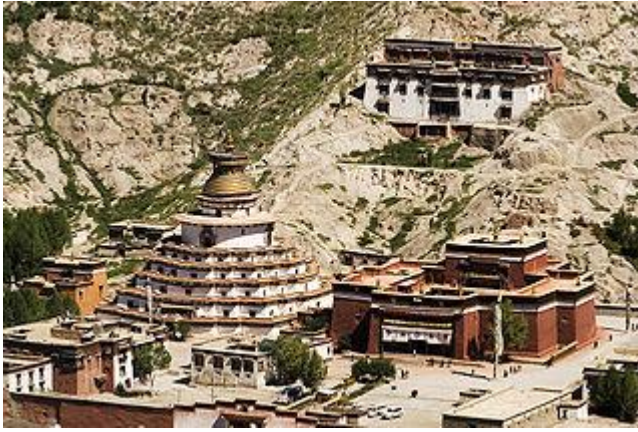
Gyantse is noted for its restored Gyantse Dzong and its unique Kumbum of the Palcho Monastery, the largest chorten in Tibet.

The Dzong is a 14th century historical fort that overlooks the town. It became a central focus of British attacks during the Younghusband expedition (1902-03) and was defended to the end by its Tibetan occupants until little remained of the walls.

What remained was further destroyed by PRC authorities in 1967. However, restoration work has subsequently been undertaken.



Tibet conquest: meeting between English officers and Tibetans. (*Petit Journal*, 14 February 1904)



The Palcho Monastery is a complex of structures, which includes its Kumbum (Pelkor Choede), a multi-storied aggregate of Buddhist chapels. The Kumbum is believed to be the largest such structure in Tibet. It has nine tiers, each with its unique chapels and Tibetan Buddhist murals.

Gyantse to Shigatse

This is a relatively short (half day) run over fairly flat terrain. We are likely to encounter local villagers working in the fields or transporting themselves and their produce in horse and carts, providing an insight into rural life on the Tibetan Plateau. There are lots of barley and canola fields; and small villages with low but characteristic Tibetan buildings.

Shigatse

Shigatse is the second largest city in Tibet.

The centrepiece of Shigatse is the Tashilhunpo Monastery, founded in 1447 by the first Dalai Lama. The monastery is the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, the second head of Tibetan Buddhism. It remains one of the largest functioning monasteries in Tibet.

Also in Shigatse is the imposing castle of the Shigatse Dzong (or Samdrubtse Dzong), a smaller version of the Polata Palace in Lhasa.



Probably built in the 15th century, it was completely dismantled at the instigation of the PRC in 1961; but has since been restored.



Shigatse to Xegar

Today's ride starts with a continuation of the open, flat plains we experienced from Gyantse before some initial gentle climbing through picturesque valleys and over **Simi La** 4,500m and back down to wide valleys.

After about 150km, we pass through the town of Lahtse situated in the Yarlung River Valley. From there we start some more serious high altitude riding traversing **Gyatso La/Lhakpa La** at 5,250m – it seems to get called by both names. **This pass is the highest point on the Friendship Hwy between Lhasa and Kathmandu.**



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It's here that we'll get our first view of Mt Everest, which the Tibetans call Qomolagma or Chomolungma or variations of either.

The descent from Gyatso La/Lhakpa La offers great scenery as we pass through several villages along the valleys before reaching Xegar.

Xegar

Xegar, also called Shegar and New Tingri, is about 7km NW off the Friendship Hwy.

Xegar was built at the foot of the ruins of the impressive Xegar Dzong (fortress), which was destroyed during the Chinese invasion of the 1950s. Xegar was once the capital of the Tingri region and used to be an important trading post where Sherpas from Nepal exchanged rice, grain and iron for Tibetan wool and salt. Today, it's mostly known as a starting point for climbers of Mt Everest and other mountains in the Himalayan region, including Mt. Lhotse and Mt. Makalu.



Xegar to Rongbuk Everest Base Camp



From Xegar we continue along the Friendship Hwy for a short distance before turning south and heading for Rongbuk Everest Base Camp.

Before long we'll be into the 42 switchbacks that take us to the top of **Pang La** at 5,200m. If the day is clear, the view from Pang La spectacularly takes in several of the *Eight Thousanders* (the 14 peaks >8,000m): Makalu (5th highest),

Shishapangma (baby of the eight thousanders at 14th highest), Cho-Oyu (6th highest), Lhotse (4th highest) and, of course, Qomolagma (highest).

From Pang La, we ride down 54 switchbacks into a deep canyon where hamlets hang precariously from the side walls before we ride up the Rongbuk Valley on a pretty rough dirt road to the Rongbuk Monastery, said to be the highest monastery in the world.

Rongbuk Everest Base Camp

The term 'Everest Base Camp' on the Tibetan side can mean one of two places. One is the group of dining and accommodation tents for tourists just past Rongbuk Monastery. The other is the base camp for climbers 8km further up the road and about 200m higher. The latter is only accessible by park buses.



There are several references to a monastery or sacred places of worship being here for hundreds of years. The current Nyingmapa sect monastery was rebuilt in 1901 by the Lama Ngawang Tenzin; and two of the golden and copper images of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche in Tibetan) are the most sacred statues in it since after the reconstruction. It was destroyed by fire in the 1970s and has been rebuilt in more recent times.

The monastery is only 200 metres lower than the north side Everest Base Camp of Mount Everest; and in the background of Rongbuk Monastery is the top of the world - Qomolangma

Rongbuk Everest Base Camp to Nyalam

We start by heading back up the valley towards Xegar, but after about 10km – long before the road begins its climb back over Pang La – we turn out of the valley and soon begin to climb to **Lamna La, at 5,150m** – about the same height at Pang La, which we crossed the day before.

This road takes us over high altitude plains and stunning mountain passes before finally bringing us back to the Friendship Highway near (Old) Tingri – a lot further west than when we left it .



From (Old) Tingri, we head westwards across the Tibetan plateau, with spectacular views of high snow mountains and deep valleys, confronting the double passes of **Lalung La at 4,950m** and **Shung La at 5,200m**, the last pass in Tibet. Both passes provide great views of Shishipangma (the baby of the *Eight Thousanders* at 8,013m). Then there's a 40km downhill ride into Nyalam.

Nyalam



Nyalam is situated at 3,750m. A town of stone buildings and tin roofs, it was nicknamed 'The Gate of Hell' by the Nepalese traders because the trail from the Nepalese border to Nyalam was so treacherous to negotiate.

The only cultural sight close to Nyalam is Miarepa's Cave. Milarepa was a famous Buddhist mystic and composer of songs (Tibet's St Francis of Assisi, says one site) who lived in the late 11th and early 12th centuries. During his time

spent in long meditation in this cave he renounced all luxuries and survived on a diet of local weeds (famously turning green as a result). The cave, however, is about 10km out of town.

Nyalam to Kathmandu

Heading south from Nyalam the road drops abruptly through the gorge of the Matsang Tsangpo, dropping some 1,000m over 30km to Zhangmu. The road is very steep with lots of sharp turns. The road provides views of ancient trees and fast-flowing waterfalls. We'll need to do some border crossing formalities at Zhangmu (Tibet) and Kodari (Nepal), crossing the Friendship Bridge between the two locations.



We then start our final ride into Nepal to Kathmandu.

This segment of the day's ride starts with pleasant scenery of small villages, old temples on river islands, stupas with prayer flags and local trading places. Eventually, we get into the Kathmandu Valley for the final climb through the sprawling metropolis of Kathmandu to our final destination of the tour.



Prayer Wheels at Swayambhunath Stupa, Kathmandu
(Monkey Temple)



Durbar Square, Kathmandu



Namaste!