

Series of Basic Information of Tibet of China

# TIBETAN TOURISM

AN CAIDAN



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# Tibetan Tourism



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Scenery of the Nangbokangri Peak on the southern slope of Mount Qomolangma Nature Reserve.

## Preface

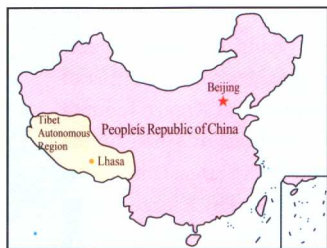
Tibet Autonomous Region lies in the south-western part of China, at a geological location within  $26^{\circ}50'-36^{\circ}53'$  degrees north latitude and  $78^{\circ}25'-99^{\circ}06'$  degrees east longitude. Covering an area of over 1.2 million square kilometres, the autonomous region takes up about one-eighth of China. Among all the provinces and regions of the country, Tibet is the second largest following the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Its area equals the combination of Great Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. To the north, it neighbours Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Qinghai Province; on the east and southeast, it is adjacent to Sichuan and Yunnan provinces; on the south and west, it borders Myanmar, India, Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal, as well as Kashmir on a border line of 4,000 kilometres stretching from east to west.

Tibet Autonomous Region has six prefectures: Shannan, Nyingchi, Ngari, Xigaze, Nagqu and Qamdo. Besides the two cities of Lhasa (prefecture status) and Xigaze (county status), there are 71 counties in Tibet. As the capital of Tibet, Lhasa is the largest city of the autonomous region, followed by Xigaze in size. There are also the towns of Zetang, Bayi, Nagqu, Qamdo, Shiquanhe, Gyangze, Zhangmu and others.

According to the fifth national population census conducted in 2000, Tibet Autonomous Region has a population of 2.62 million, with 96.4 per cent of the population belonging to the ethnic Tibetans, 2.8 per cent being Han nationality, and the remaining 0.8 per cent being consisted of Monba, Lhoba, Hui, Naxi and other ethnic minorities. With less than 2 people in every square kilometre on average, Tibet has the lowest population concentration in China.

Sitting on a highland, Tibet's climate is rather cold with sharply different temperatures between day and night. But due to long time of sunshine, winter is not unbearable. The annual temperature in southern Tibet is  $8^{\circ}\text{C}$ , while that of northern Tibet is below  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The middle part of Tibet has neither cold winter nor hot summer. From March till October, it is the best time to journey across Tibet.

Tibet is gifted with gorgeous natural landscape and rich cultural scenery. Along the snowy mountains, silvery peaks surge high into the sky; at the fountainhead of torrential rivers, deep blue lakes slumber in quietude. Various plants and animals thrive in the climatic zones ranging from frigid to temperate, sub-tropical and tropical. Described as having "four seasons within one mountain," and "different weather within ten miles," the mountains here have a vertical distribution of ecology systems. Tibet has a number of national-level cultural relic sites such as the Potala Palace, the monasteries of Jokhang, Tashilhunpo, Sagya and Drepung, the ruins of the ancient Guge Kingdom, the Tombs of Tibetan Kings and others. The autonomous region also has simple and kind local people with unique folk customs. The gorgeous landscape attracts people from across the world with bellowing snowy mountains, vast plateau pasture, lakes and rivers, ancient ruins and monasteries, unique folk customs and diversified culture. There are numerous sites and objects in Tibet gaining the title of "Number One" in China, Asia, or even the whole world. There is a great prospect in developing the natural scenery and cultural aspects for tourism. Many scholars in the field of tourism believe that Tibet may one day become an international tourism centre.



Location of Tibet Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China



Nyainqentanglha Mountains.

## **Richly gifted natural tourism resources**

### **I. Geological and topographic tourism resources**

The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau rose the latest in the world, but covers the vastest area at the highest altitude. Thus it is called the “Roof of the World.” It is also seen as the “Third Pole of the Earth” in addition to the North and South poles. The plateau is an ideal place for tourists seeking after grand natural scenery and comprehensive ecological systems. As the main bulk of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, Tibet Autonomous Region is also known geologically as the Tibet Plateau.

Tibet Plateau is the youngest plateau in the world's geological history. Scientists have found fossils of abundant ancient plants and the early Pliocene Epoch animals such as the hipparion—a mammal with three-toed front and hind hoofs smaller in size than the modern horse. These evidences prove that until the late Tertiary Period, this area was just 1,000 metres above sea level. The climate then was hot and humid, with forests and meadows thriving in the tropical environment. It wasn't until 3 million years ago that the region gradually rose to today's average elevation of 4,000 metres above sea level. In the past 10,000 years, Tibet experienced the fastest rising speed at about 7 centimetres per year, which means that Ti-





A bird's-eye view of Lhasa.

bet rose 700 metres in just 10 milleniums. The geological and topographical phenomena indicate that the Tibet Plateau is still in the course of rising higher. In fact, surveys show that some parts of the Tibet Plateau have been rising by several or a dozen millimetres in the past decade.

Today's Tibet Plateau commands an average elevation of 4,000 metres. Snow-capped mountains encircle the plateau, numerous peaks soar high into the sky. There are over 50 peaks above 7,000 metres of sea elevation, 11 of which are super giants over 8,000 metres high. The most famous of them is of course, Mount Qomolangma (known in the West as Mount Everest), the highest mountain in the whole world. The plateau tilts slightly from the northwest down to the southeast, displaying along the way various landscapes: gorgeous mountains, steep valleys, glaciers, frozen earth, naked rocks, clay forest, wind and sand, gobi desert, etc. It is no exaggeration to say that within one mountain, one will encounter all four seasons and experience different weathers in less than ten miles.

The complex geology and topography as well as different climate zones have bestowed Tibet with rich mineral resources. Over 90 kinds of minerals have been found here. Among the 26 minerals whose deposits have been verified, the deposits of 11 are listed among the top five in China.

## 1. Mountain landscape

Tibet is called the “Sea of Mountains.” In the north, the Kunlun Mountains and its branch - the Danggula Mountains, run for thousands of kilometres; in the south lies the world’s youngest but highest mountain - the Himalayas. The Karakorum Mountains guards the west and the Hengduan Mountains with vertical cliffs and deep valleys surges on the east. Within the boundary of these huge mountains, the mountain chain of Gandise-Nyainqentanglha and their branches stretch from east to west. The forest of snow-capped mountains forms quite a breath-taking view on the plateau.

The Himalayas, geologically speaking the world’s youngest but highest mountain range, winds for some 2,400 kilometres from east to west, and extends between 200-300 kilometres in breadth from north to south. The average elevation of its main peaks is above 6,200 metres. The elongated range boasts 50-plus peaks taller than 7,000 metres above sea level. This intense concentration of giant mountain peaks is rarely found anywhere else in the world.

The Gandise and Nyainqentanglha mountains mark the division of Tibet’s northern and southern parts. They also separate the rivers that are inland or flowing into the sea.

The Kunlun Mountains stands along the division line between Tibet and Xinjiang Uygur autonomous regions. Stretching across central Asia at a dazzling height and extensive length, the Kunlun Mountains is seen as the “Backbone of Asia.” This region sees the highest concentration of permanent snow and modern glaciers in China.

The Danggula Mountains stand between Tibet and Qinghai Province. Its highest peak Gêladaindong is 6,621 metres above sea level. Here lies the fountain-head of the Yangtze River, the longest river of China.

Due to the differences of elevation, geological structure and location, the mountains of Tibet have taken on various views with high tourism values. While all the mountains are silvery in winter, they put on colourful dresses in summer. The mountains in eastern Tibet wear dark green, those in the north have a yellowish tone, while the mountains in the



Glacier towers of Mount Qomolangma.

Shannan Region and around Lhasa are dark purple. Crimson is the colour for mountains near Xigaze, while dark brown reigns in Yi'ong.

Most of the famous mountains in other parts of China are dotted with architectures that display carving, calligraphy, painting and horticulture. But the mountains in Tibet have kept their natural face.

### **Mount Qomolangma**

At an elevation of 8,848.13 metres, Mount Qomolangma is the main peak of the Himalayas. This world's Number One peak rises high on the border of China and Nepal. Its northern slope lies in the Tingri County of Tibet. Commanding reverence from fellow giant peaks nearby, Mount Qomolangma is shaped just like a majestic pyramid propping up the sky for the Earth. Surrounding Mount Qomolangma, five of the world's 14 peaks above 8,000 metres stand guard within a sphere of 200 square kilometres. They are escorted by another 38 peaks above 7,000 metres of sea elevation. Together they form one of the world's most





grandiose landscapes.

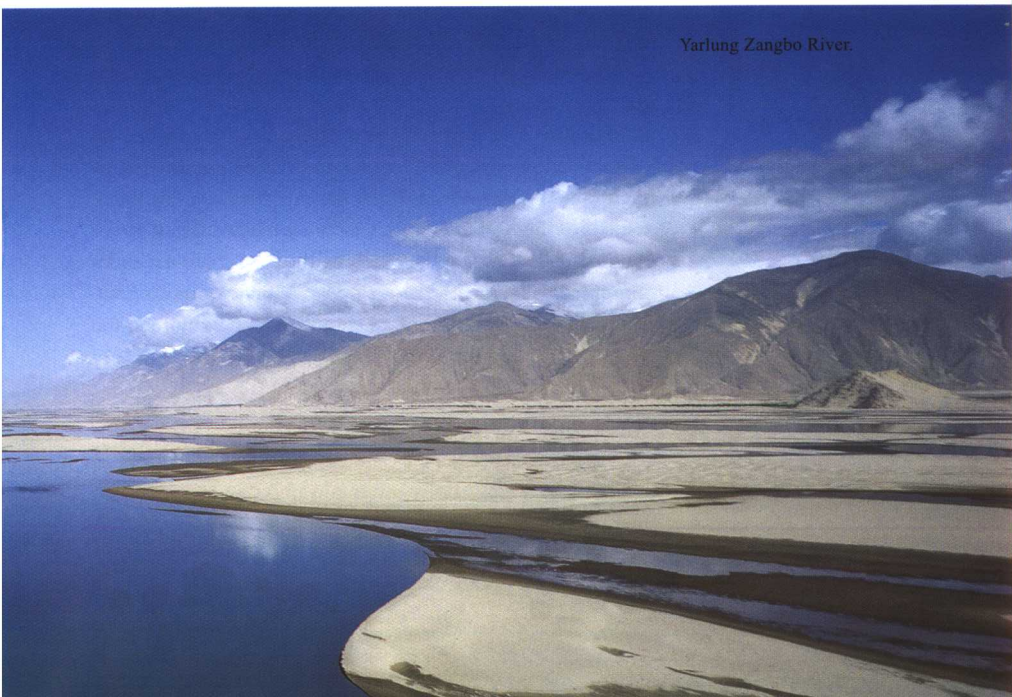
Analyses of geological structure indicate that in the Mesozoic Era about 230 million to 70 million years ago, the region where Mount Qomolangma stands now was part of the ancient Mediterranean Sea. Beginning from the late Tertiary Period of the Cenozoic Era, the region gradually rose. Chinese scientists have concluded that Mount Qomolangma is still rising at a speed of 3.2 to 12.7 millimetres per year.

At the top of Mount Qomolangma, there always hangs a wisp of cloud. It flies eastward in the fast western wind just like a flapping flag. This is the unique phenomenon of the area - the "Cloud Flag of Mount Qomolangma." At times, the cloud will change from surging waves into a thin cooking smoke, or from galloping steeds into the mysterious veil of a goddess. Gazing at Mount Qomolangma, one will immerse in a solemn ethereal mood.

In recent years, mountain climbers and explorers have focused on Mount Qomolangma. It has become many brave people's dreams to demonstrate their courage and skills by climbing onto this world's highest peak. The weather of the



A passage to Kashmir through the Kunlun Mountains.



Yarlung Zangbo River.



The sacred Kangrinboqê Mountain in Burang of Ngari.

region changes rapidly and it is very difficult to predict. In general, the weather is relatively mild and steady with less rain or snow from early March to late May, and again so from early September to late October. These are the two best seasons for tourists and mountain climbers.

Belonging to the Nyingma Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, Rongbo Monastery is the world's highest religious architecture. This monastery is unanimously seen as the best place to admire Mount Qomolangma. Sitting at the foot of the mountain's northern slope, the monastery is located at the tail of the Rongbo Glacier with a sea elevation of 5,600 metres. The monastery has become the base camp for expedition teams on the northern slope of Mount Qomolangma. With many rooms for tourists, climbers and explorers, the monastery is also the world's highest hotel.

### Kangrinboqê Peak

As the main peak of the Gandise Mountains, Kangrinboqê is the most famous holy mountain in Asian history. With four distinct sides, the gigantic pyramid has a round cap cov-



ered in eternal snow and ice. Standing far above surrounding mountains, Kangrinboqê is just like a majestic ruler of Nature.

At an elevation of 6,656 metres above sea level, snow-capped Kangrinboqê gives life to four grand rivers: Shiquan River (or Sengge Zangbo, meaning “Lion Fountain,” known as Indus River in the lower reaches), Maquan River (or Damqog Zangbo, meaning “Horse Fountain,” the origin of the Yarlung Zangbo River), Xiangquan River (or Langqên Zangbo, meaning “Elephant Fountain,” known as Sutlej in the lower reaches), and Kongqu River (meaning “Peacock Fountain,” the origin of the Ganges River). The four rivers gained their names from the geological features of their origins.

Kangrinboqê Peak gained the status of holy mountain well over 2,000 years ago. It still commands great reverence from Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Bon religion and Jainism. Hindus believe this mountain is the abode of the Mahabrahman; sutras of Jainism say that Lhexa Bahal, the world’s first one to be relieved of earthly affairs, lives on this peak; Tibetan Buddhism believes that this mountain symbolizes the Bde-mchog-rdo-rje and the Rdo-rje-phag-mo; and the Bon religion reveres it as a sacred holy mountain at the centre of the world and the residence of all gods. Circulating the mountain is the way most pilgrims show their utmost respect to the mountain. But the route and way of circulation differ accord-



Local Tibetan woman visiting a karst cave.



The world’s highest-located monastery, the Rongbo Monastery, sits at the foot of Mount Qomolangma.