

## Destination Tibet (If I Can Survive It)

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

I recently acquired a globe depicting the natural earth without countries or borders, only oceans and lakes, deserts and rivers, mountains, plains and lush lowlands. And on this work of art I observed an anomaly, like a blemish, on the Asian continent. It is so peculiar it made me wonder if my globe was a misprint.

You, too, can get a sense of this unique impression on the face of our planet if you direct your computer to Google Earth. The Tibetan Plateau encompasses about a million square miles of Asia, some 1,600 miles long and 620 miles wide. Larger than all of Western Europe, four times the size of Texas, and a third again larger than Alaska.

But it is remarkable not so much for its size as it is for its elevation, an *average* of 14,800 feet above sea level. For perspective, we in Colorado brag about having the highest mean elevation among all the United States, but our single highest peak, Mount Elbert, doesn't meet even the average of all of Tibet.

The plateau shares the Himalayas on its southern edge with Nepal and Pakistan, and the world's two tallest mountains, Everest and K2. Deserts populate much of Tibet, yet it has craggy peaks and canyons, glaciers, rivers and lakes, and beautiful alpine valleys low enough to sustain agriculture and human populations. Like the Colorado Rockies are for many of North America's rivers, Tibet's mountains and glaciers, at double the elevation, are the headwaters of mighty Asian rivers such as the Yangtze, the Yellow River, the Mekong and the Ganges. Known sometimes as the "third pole" with its many glaciers, many millions of Asians depend on the sparsely populated Tibetan Plateau, threatened today by global warming, for life sustaining water.

Since 1950 it has been occupied and ruled by China, but the Tibetans consider themselves to be an autonomous country with its spiritual leader, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama currently exiled in India. Its culture, though influenced by India, China and Nepal, is mostly a product of its own remote, inaccessible and high altitude. Tibetan Buddhism, similarly, has taken its own unique form and is represented in the country's art, literature and music.

Tibetan cuisine is also influenced by, but distinctly different from its neighbors, fitting the needs of the human body at high altitudes, with yak, goat and mutton providing meat, cheese and yoghurt. The Buddhist ideal of vegetarianism has never taken hold simply because of the difficulty in growing vegetables.

Sir David Attenborough, the British natural historian once inexplicably said, "I've been to Nepal, but I'd like to go to Tibet. It must be a wonderful place to go. I don't think there's anything there, but it would be a nice place to visit."

Personally, I think there is plenty up there, three miles above the sea, and I've put it on my bucket list. But first, I need to get myself an oxygen tank.