Tour Code
YT1

ADVENTURESABROAD

YUNNAN & TIBET

Taking the High Road: Shangri-La to Lhasa

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Kunming, China

Yunnan's capital receives us gently. Known as the City of Eternal Spring for its mild climate and year-round bloom, Kunming sits at 1900m/6,530 ft on the southeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau — though nothing here yet suggests what lies ahead.

Tonight is for arrival, orientation, and the particular pleasure of a first evening in a city that is entirely new.

Overnight in Kunming.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Kunming: Stone Forest, Green Lake Park & Jinma Biji Old Town

We begin with one of Yunnan's most singular landscapes. The Stone Forest — 270 million years of limestone karst sculpted by wind and water into a petrified woodland of towers, pinnacles and hidden caves — lies an hour from the city and rewards the early start.

Back in Kunming, Green Lake Park offers a different register entirely: a former royal garden where locals practice tai chi at the water's edge and red-crowned cranes arrive in winter to the considerable excitement of everyone present. We end in the old city around the Jinma and Biji Archways — Golden Horse and Jade Rooster facing each other across a Ming Dynasty street, still trading in pu'er tea and tie-dye as they have for centuries.

Overnight in Kunming.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Kunming - Dali: West Hill & Dragon Gate Grottoes

Before leaving Kunming we make one final ascent — Dragon Gate Grottoes, carved by hand into the cliffs of West Hill over 72 years of the Qing Dynasty. The narrow stone tunnels and shrine pavilions cling to sheer precipices above Dianchi Lake, and from the highest point the entire Kunming skyline spreads below us: a last look at the city that launched this journey before we turn west toward Erhai Lake and the Bai heartland.

The drive to Dali crosses the central Yunnan plateau, the landscape opening into a wide basin ringed by mountains. Dali has been a capital twice — first of the Nanzhao Kingdom, then the Dali Kingdom — and the old city carries that history lightly, its cobblestone lanes lined with white-wall grey-tile Bai architecture, red lanterns strung between the eaves, the 4,000-metre peaks of Cangshan Mountain rising directly behind.

Overnight in Dali.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Dali - Lijiang: Three Pagodas, Dali Old Town & Xizhou Village

Dali rewards an early start. The Three Pagodas stand at the foot of Cangshan Mountain — three Tang Dynasty towers arranged in a perfect triangle, their reflection caught in the pool before them on calm mornings. Built over 1,200 years ago, they are among the finest surviving examples of Buddhist architecture in southwest China, and the most enduring symbol of the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms that once made this city a regional power.

From the pagodas we move into Dali Old Town itself, a walled city of cobblestone lanes and Bai-style white-wall grey-tile buildings where the pace slows considerably. A short drive brings us to Xizhou Village on the western shore of Erhai Lake — far less visited than the old town, its courtyard mansions and painted screen walls offering a more intimate encounter with Bai domestic life. The Yan Family Compound is the most celebrated of these, but the village streets themselves are the real draw.

By afternoon we are on the road to Lijiang, the altitude climbing as Erhai Lake recedes behind us and the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain begins to appear ahead — a first glimpse of the high terrain that will define the days to come.

Overnight in Lijiang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Lijiang: Black Dragon Pool, Mu Family Mansion & Baisha Village

Lijiang Old Town earned its UNESCO World Heritage listing honestly. Built in the late Song and early Yuan dynasties, its 800-year-old canal system still runs clear through cobblestone streets lined with Naxi wooden architecture — a city designed around water, oriented by it, sustained by it. We begin at Black Dragon Pool, where the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain reflects in still water beside the Ming Dynasty Five-Phoenix Temple, one of those compositions that arrives fully formed and needs no improvement.

From the pool we make our way into the old town to visit Mu Family Mansion, the seat of the Naxi Tusi clan who governed this region through three successive dynasties — Yuan, Ming, and Qing. At its height the compound covered 16 acres and nearly one hundred buildings, earning comparisons to a miniature Forbidden City. Most was destroyed in the Qing Dynasty; what stands today is a faithful reconstruction, and a telling portrait of how much power this remote mountain kingdom once commanded.

The afternoon takes us north to Baisha Village, oldest of the Naxi settlements and birthplace of the Mu clan itself. Far less visited than Lijiang's old town, Baisha preserves centuries-old murals in its ancient temples — rare works that weave Naxi Dongba, Tibetan Buddhist, and Taoist imagery into a single artistic tradition, a reminder that cultural boundaries here have always been porous.

Overnight in Lijiang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Lijiang - Shangri-La: Tiger Leaping Gorge

The morning offers free time in Lijiang Old Town before we head north toward Shangri-La. The road climbs steadily, and within an hour we reach Tiger Leaping Gorge — one of the world's deepest canyons, where the Jinsha River forces itself through a gap barely 30 metres wide between the Jade Dragon and Haba snow mountains. The gorge drops nearly 3900 m/12,800 ft from peak to river; the scale takes a moment to absorb. We stop at the lower gorge viewpoint where the river's force is most viscerally felt before continuing north.

The landscape transforms as we gain altitude. Terraced fields give way to open plateau, the architecture shifts from Naxi timber to Tibetan stone, and the prayer flags begin to appear. By the time Shangri-La comes into view it is already clear that something has changed — not just the scenery but the cultural gravity of the place.

James Hilton invented his hidden paradise with this region in mind. Shangri-La is where the myth dissolves into something better.

Overnight in Shangri-La.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Shangri-La: Songzanlin Monastery, Potatso National Park & Dukezong Ancient Town

Songzanlin Monastery announces itself before we arrive. Built in 1679 and housing over 700 monks, it is the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Yunnan — a complex of golden roofs and whitewashed walls rising above the plateau in tiers, its silhouette closer to a fortified city than a place of worship. Inside, the assembly halls preserve thangkas, statues, and religious texts accumulated over three centuries. This

is the first monastery of genuine Tibetan Buddhist scale we encounter, and it sets a standard that even Lhasa will need to meet.

Potatso National Park lies 22 km south of town at an altitude of 3500-4159 m/11,483-13,645 ft — the first national park established on the Chinese mainland and a core section of the Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage Site. Wooden boardwalks trace the edges of Shudu and Bita Lakes through primeval fir forest and alpine meadow where yaks graze in unhurried silence. The air is noticeably thinner here, a quiet reminder of how high we have climbed since Kunming.

We end the day in Dukezong Ancient Town, whose white clay-painted houses earned it the name City of Moonlight. An important stop on the ancient Tea-Horse Trail that connected Yunnan's tea gardens with Tibet's high plateau, Dukezong was the cultural hinge between Han and Tibetan worlds for over 1400 years — and tomorrow we cross that hinge entirely.

Overnight in Shangri-La.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Shangri-La - Fly to Lhasa, Tibet

The flight from Shangri-La to Lhasa takes less than two hours. What it crosses is considerably more significant — the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, a geological upheaval so vast it altered Asia's weather systems and created the watersheds that feed a billion people. We land at 3650 m/11,975 ft into air that is noticeably thin and light that is extraordinarily clear.

The rest of the day is intentionally unscheduled. Altitude affects people differently, and Lhasa rewards patience — a gentle walk near the hotel, an early dinner, time to let the body adjust. Those who have spent a week climbing through Yunnan will find the transition easier than most, but Tibet operates on its own terms and today we accept them.

Overnight in Lhasa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Lhasa: Tibet Museum, Drepung Monastery, Sera Monastery & Norbulingka Park

We begin at the Tibet Museum, founded in 1999 and housing over 520,000 cultural relics — statues, thangkas, and ancient documents spanning millennia of Tibetan civilisation. It is a useful orientation before the monasteries, providing context that the coming days will fill with lived experience.

Drepung Monastery was once the largest monastery in the world, housing 7,700 monks at its peak across 61 acres of whitewashed buildings that give it the appearance, from a distance, of a vast heap of rice — the literal meaning of its Tibetan name. Founded in 1416, it became the intellectual centre of Tibetan Buddhism, its four colleges each presided over by abbots appointed by the Dalai Lama. Today several hundred monks remain, and the debating courtyards still ring with the percussive clapping that punctuates formal Buddhist argument.

Sera Monastery, a short distance north, shares Drepung's scholarly tradition — both are among Tibet's three great Gelugpa university monasteries. The afternoon debates at Sera are among the most vivid encounters available to visitors in Lhasa: monks in burgundy robes testing each other's doctrinal knowledge with theatrical intensity, the courtyard alive with motion and sound.

We end at Norbulingka Park, the summer palace of the Dalai Lamas since the 1740s — a walled garden complex of palaces, temples, and forested grounds that offers a quieter counterpoint to the day's monastic intensity.

Overnight in Lhasa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Lhasa: Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple & Barkhor Street

Everything in Tibet points toward the Potala. Rising 13 stories above Marpo Ri — Red Hill — and more than 300 m/985 ft above the valley

floor, it was the seat of the Dalai Lamas from the 17th century until 1959, when the 14th Dalai Lama fled into exile following a failed uprising. Over 1,000 rooms, 10,000 shrines, and 200,000 statues accumulate across its red and white facades — less a building than a civilisation made vertical. Tickets require advance arrangement and entry is timed; we have planned accordingly.

Below the Potala, the Jokhang Temple is Tibet's most sacred site — built in 647 AD by craftsmen from Tibet, China, and Nepal at the instruction of King Songtsen Gampo's Tang Dynasty bride, Princess Wencheng. The result is an architectural hybrid unlike anything else in Lhasa, its interior glowing with butter lamps and the accumulated devotion of 1,400 years. Pilgrims who have walked for weeks to reach it prostrate themselves on the stone apron outside; the worn hollows in the paving speak to the weight of that faith.

Barkhor Street circles the Jokhang in the traditional clockwise direction of Tibetan pilgrimage. We join the circuit — past incense braziers, market stalls, and elderly Tibetans turning prayer wheels — completing the day's journey in the most human way available.

Overnight in Lhasa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Lhasa - Gyantse - Shigatse: Yamdrok Lake, Karola Glacier & Pelkor ChÃ¶de Monastery

Leaving Lhasa we climb almost immediately to the Kamba La pass, where Yamdrok Lake appears below — one of Tibet's three sacred lakes, its turquoise waters extending in two long arms across 638 sq km of high plateau. The Tibetan name means Turquoise Lake Resembling a Coral Rosary, and from the pass the comparison is apt. Sacred lakes in Tibet are not merely scenic; they are believed to hold the life force of the land, and Yamdrok is among the most venerated.

The road continues to Karola Glacier, whose ice field descends to within metres of the highway — an unusually intimate encounter with one of Tibet's diminishing glaciers at 5560 m/18,241 ft. We stop briefly before continuing to Gyantse, where Pelkor Chöde Monastery and its remarkable Kumbum stupa await. The Kumbum — meaning One Hundred Thousand Images — is a nine-storey structure containing 108 chapels decorated with 15th-century murals and statues, one of the most complete examples of Tibetan Buddhist art remaining in Tibet.

By evening we reach Shigatse, Tibet's second city, settled into the broad Yarlung Tsangpo valley at 3840 m/12,598 ft.

Overnight in Shigatse.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Shigatse: Tashilhunpo Monastery

If Drepung belongs to the Dalai Lama, Tashilhunpo belongs to the Panchen Lama — the second-highest figure in Tibetan Buddhism, and in some traditions the more spiritually authoritative of the two. Founded by the First Dalai Lama in 1447 and expanded by successive Panchen Lamas, Tashilhunpo covers nearly 300,000 sq m at the foot of Drolmari — Tara's Mountain — its golden rooftops visible from across the valley. The Maitreya Chapel houses a 26 m/85 ft gilded statue of the Future Buddha, one of the largest such figures in existence.

The monastery remains active, its monks going about their routines with the unhurried confidence of an institution that has survived considerable history. The afternoon is free — time to explore Shigatse at your own pace, or simply to sit with what the past four days in Tibet have offered.

Overnight in Shigatse.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Shigatse - Lhasa: Yungdrung Ling Monastery

The return drive to Lhasa follows the Yarlung Tsangpo — Tibet's great river, which becomes the Brahmaputra as it crosses into India — through a valley that widens and narrows in alternating rhythms of farmland and cliff. En route we stop at Yungdrung Ling, one of Tibet's most significant Bön monasteries and a striking counterpoint to the Tibetan Buddhist sites that have defined our time here.

Bön predates Buddhism on the Tibetan Plateau by centuries, and while the two traditions have influenced each other profoundly, Yungdrung Ling preserves its distinctions: prayer wheels turn counterclockwise here, and the swastika — ancient symbol of the Yungdrung Bön faith, turning in the opposite direction to the Nazi appropriation — appears on walls and textiles throughout the complex. The assembly hall preserves over 1,300 iron statues of Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of Bön, alongside scriptures of considerable antiquity.

It is a quietly unexpected final site — one that adds a layer to Tibet that most visitors never encounter, and a reminder that even here, at the end of a journey that has crossed from Yunnan's subtropical valleys to the high plateau, there is still something new to discover.

Overnight in Lhasa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Lhasa: Departure

We depart from the Roof of the World having travelled to it — not flown in and out, but arrived overland through two weeks of ascending country, culture, and altitude. Safe travels onward.

Zhu nin yilu shunfeng!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast