Tibetan Sichuan Photography Tour Report 2025

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The Tibetan regions of Sichuan and Qinghai in western China are, perhaps, one of the most beautiful and difficult places to travel for photography in the country. Wild Images has a long history of operating tours in Tibet and our tour this year was highlighted by beautiful traditional architecture, the lively horse festivals that brighten up the brief summers on the Tibetan Plateau, a stay with nomadic yak herders and a behind the scenes visit to the Sichuan Opera. We explored many beautiful and serene Buddhist monasteries, nunneries and ancient printing presses where we joined in spiritual walks, witnessed philosophical debates, prayers and a surprise celebration of women. Despite the challenges our journey was filled with memorable moments, both large and small.

Our route took us through the eastern Tibetan regions, an area often referred to as Kham **.** Most of our route lay within Sichuan province, where Tibetan culture and traditions remain strongly present, before continuing into Qinghai province for the final stage of the tour around Yushu.

Kham is known for its high plateaus, deep valleys, and snowcapped mountains. The region has a strong Tibetan identity, with monasteries, nomadic traditions, and festivals playing an important role in daily life.

Over the course of our tour, we visited towns such as Dzongsar, Baiyu, Sershul, and Yushu. We attended prayer rituals, observed the unique tradition of monastic debate, and visited sites of great cultural and historical importance, like the Parkhang Printing Monastery in Dege and the world's largest Mani Stone Wall in Yushu. Along the way, we often had spontaneous encounters—whether with villagers, monks, or artisans—that gave us a glimpse into local life.

The landscapes, with vast grasslands filled with yak herds, remote mountain passes, and colourful prayer flags fluttering in the wind, formed a constant backdrop to our journey. Sometimes the travel was tiring, but there was always something to discover: a festival, a market, or simply the quiet atmosphere of a monastery.

Meeting the Pandas in Chengdu

After our welcome dinner on the first evening, we started the tour with a visit to the Chengdu Panda Center. This world-renowned center focuses on Panda conservation, research, and education. It is home to dozens of Giant Pandas as well as Red Pandas and some other animals.

In Chengdu, everything seems to breathe pandas. From souvenir shops to street art, billboards, café decor and even traffic signs. You see pandas everywhere. The city fully embraces its most beloved residents. In the park a small train took us to the section where the baby pandas are on display. Since the temperature had risen above 26 degrees celsius, sadly all the pandas were moved indoors to enjoy the comfort of air conditioning.

It took quite a bit of effort to get a good picture of the baby pandas due to the crowds, but eventually some of us managed to catch a glimpse. We also visited the Red Panda area. These little creatures were absolutely adorable, however with the heat and the crowds growing we decided it was time to move on. Our visit to the Sichuan Opera in Chengdu was waiting for us after lunch.

Backstage at the Chengdu Opera

We arrived at the theater little before 3 p.m., which gave us some time for a bit of street photography and browsing in the nearby teashops.

Around 3 p.m., we entered the theater for a behind-the-scenes experience. The Chengdu opera is part of the famous Sichuan opera tradition, known for its colorful costumes, dramatic performances and the legendary 'face-changing' act.

Backstage we were able to photograph a female opera singer in full costume (lucky us!) and observe and photograph the performers as they were applying makeup and getting ready for the show. Once seated, we were served tea and sunflower seeds while the performance began. The show featured singing, traditional music, acrobatics and martial arts. The most spectacular part was definitely the face-changing act. Masks changing in the blink of an eye, a skill that takes years of training to master.

Adding to the local charm, guests could enjoy a shoulder/back massage or even get their ears cleaned during the show, right from their seat on the right or left side of the stage. As the performance ended, a thunderstorm rolled in with heavy rain and thunder, so we grabbed our rain ponchos and ran to the bus. After a delicious Sichuan dinner, we returned to our hotel.

Litang Horse Festival

After leaving our lovely hotel in the old center of Chengdu, we began our journey toward the highlands of western Sichuan. Our first stop was the mountain town of Kangding, where we took a short walk through the center. Kangding rises 2,600 meters above sea level and is the first Tibetan city you come to when traveling west from Chengdu. The city has been a trading post between Tibetan and Han Chinese cultures, and a small but rapidly moving river divides the narrow valley city into northwest and southeast halves. It's a place where old and new visibly coexist: where old traditional shops exist in trade, next door to modern fashion shops.

After lunch we continued our drive toward Yajiong where we stayed overnight to be closer to the Litang horse festival.

When we arrived the Litang horse festival the next day, it was already in full swing. Rows of colourful Tibetan tents filled the field and a traditional opera performance echoed across the grassland. Both men and women were beautifully dressed in traditional Kham attire. We walked around, watched a dance competition and in the late afternoon we attended an impressive horse skill match performed by Khampa horsemen.

The following morning, we returned early to the festival. Walking around, talking with the local people and taking portraits and other photos. We attended a horse race where the horses came down from the surrounding hills and crossed the finish line in front of the crowd. The people were warm, welcoming and proud to share their culture with us.

In the afternoon, we visited the Litang monastery. This monastery belongs to the Gelugpa sect, also known as the ' Yellow Hat' school of Tibetan Buddhism. Founded in the 15th century by Tsongkhapa, the Gelugpa school emphasised strict monastic discipline, celibacy, and rigorous philosophical study. It later became the most influential school in Tibet, as the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama (the second highest spiritual authority in Tibetan Buddishm, after the Dalai Lama) are part of this tradition. Visiting this monastery means stepping into one of the most important Gelugpa centers of the Kham region. Set on a hillside above the town, inside the halls were filled with the scent of incense, the sound of chanting and the warm glow of butter lamps.

We also visited the birthplace of the 7th Dalai Lama, a deeply significant building as Litang holds a special connection to Tibetan spiritual history.

The Tagong Grasslands

After leaving Litang, we began the long but scenic drive towards the Tagong Grasslands. Along the way, we stopped at colourful prayer flags fluttering in the wind. In Tibetan culture, prayer flags are not meant to carry prayers up to the gods, but to spread blessings across the land. The wind activates the mantras printed on the fabric, carrying messages of compassion, peace and wisdom to all beings. The colours – blue, white, red, green and yellow – represent the five elements: sky, air, fire, water and earth. Together, they create harmony and balance. Standing among these flags, with the mountain wind rushing through them, you cannot help but feel that the landscape itself is alive with prayers.

Further down the road, we met a local beekeeper selling jars of wild honey by the roadside. He proudly showed us his hives and left us taste the honey: sweet, rich and completely natural. We couldn't resist buying a few jars, each with a beautifully designed label.

As we finally approached Tagong, we got stuck in traffic but instead of waiting in the bus, we decided to walk the last part into town. Tagong is a small but lively place on the Tibetan plateau, known for its monastery and wide open grasslands. It has also become popular with Chinese tourists, who come here to experience a taste of Tibetan culture. Along the streets you find many little shops offering the

chance to dress up in traditional Tibetan clothing for photos.

After arriving in Tagong, we visited the Tagong monastery (in Tibetan called Lhagong monastery) in the centre of town. This monastery belongs to the Sakya tradition and houses a revered statue of the young Jowo Shakyamuni Buddha, similar to the one in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. Because of this sacred image, Tagong has long been a place of pilgrimage for Tibetans for centuries. The monastery is beautifully set against the backdrop of the mountains and we all enjoyed its peaceful, spiritual atmosphere.

We also took some time to browse a shop next door that was selling colourful prayer beads, yak wool scarves, and locally made crafts, all beautiful items that made it hard for some of us hard to leave empty handed.

The next morning, we rose early to attend the morning prayer ceremony at the monastery. Inside the main prayer hall, the deep chanting of the monks echoed through the spaces and witnessing this first hand was an impressive experience.

Later that morning we set off toward the Kampa Eco Lodge, a quiet and scenic spot nestled in the Tagong grasslands. We relaxed in the garden, spoke with the other guests and enjoyed a delicious lunch before preparing for a long hike into the mountains, where we would spend the night with a nomadic yak herding family.

Even for the fitter members of our group the hike was challenging: steep, long and at high attitude (4000 meters). Walking through such beautiful scenery, however, was incredibly rewarding! By early evening we arrived at the yak family's summer camp, where we were warmly welcomed. We slept in traditional tents: one woven from yak wool, thick and dark; the other a lighter white yurt. After a simple but tasty dinner, it was time to crawl under the heavy blankets and rest.

The next morning, we rose before sunrise to witness the rhythms of nomadic life. The work of a nomad family starts early. Milking the yaks is the first task of the day. We even tried it ourselves, while capturing the quiet beauty of the highland morning in photos. After sharing some final moments with the families and playing with the children, it was time to say goodbye. A sturdy mountain horse carried our gear, and thankfully, the return hike was easier as it was mostly downhill. We arrived back at the eco lodge around midday, tired but full of memories.

After a delicious lunch, it was time to say farewell and we drove back to Tagong, leaving the windswept grasslands behind us.

On our final day in Tagong, we rose before dawn and set out for the Ani Gompa, the local nunnery tucked into the hills just outside town. We arrived during the blue hour: the hour before sunrise. It was a magical time as we photographed the nuns dressed in their dark red robes, walking around the spinning prayer wheels and reciting sacred texts as they moved. The atmosphere was quiet, focused, and full of grace while they walked the kora. The kora is a traditional Tibetan form of pilgrimage in which people walk clockwise around a sacred site. The act of making a kora is considered a form of meditation and devotion: with every step, practitioners recite mantras, spin prayer wheels, or offer prayers. By circling the sacred places, they accumulate merit, purify negative karma, and connect spiritually with the site. For Tibetans, a kora is not only a religious practice but also a communal activity, as families and pilgrims often walk together, creating a powerful sense of shared faith.

Afterwards, we visited the traditional block houses where the nuns live and study. It was examination time and many nuns were practicing their chants or texts. Some sat in the open grass, studying alone under the morning sky immersed in their teachings.

Later in the morning, we returned to the main monastery, perched above the town. We took the stairs and had a beautiful view of the temple from the top floor.

Unfortunately, there was no ceremony at that moment, but we were invited to visit the block house of a monk. He allowed us to photograph him surrounded by shelves of sacred books and scriptures. We found out about another monk living in a simple tent nearby. He too welcomed us warmly to have a look inside.

In the afternoon we enjoyed a delicious plate of momos, or traditional Tibetan dumplings, before returning to the main monastery for a planned ceremony. Unfortunately, we were not permitted to attend this one, but it gave us more time to explore the nearby Mani stone walls close to the nunnery. These walls of carved stone are sacred. Each stone is inscribed with mantras. 'Om Mani Padme Hum' is the mantra of compassion. Some mani walls reach several meters in height and stretch for tens of meters: each a monument of devotion built stone by stone often over many years.

As we made our way back to the hotel, we noticed a group of women distributing vegetables. They smiled and kindly allowed us to take photos. Curious, we followed them inside a nearby building and to our surprise we found ourselves witnessing a local religious ceremony led almost entirely by women. The music was rhythmic, with a deep, meditative quality that seemed to echo through the room. After the ceremony ended, we were once again welcomed to take photographs.

Tired but deeply moved, we ended our last day in Tagong feeling grateful for the openness of the local people and the richness of their traditions.

Tagong to Luhuo

We left Tagong and began our journey toward Luhuo, passing through the scenic region of Daofu. While the town of Daofu itself may not be particularly charming, the surrounding villages are home to beautiful examples of traditional Daofu country houses, known as Berghe. These are timber-framed homes with mud or stone walls, often plain on the outside but richly decorated on the inside with colorful Tibetan murals, columns, and courtyards.

We made a stop along the way to photograph these distinctive homes, and we had an unexpected and memorable encounter. An elderly woman invited us into her house, offering us warm Tibetan tea and a glimpse into her daily life. At 74 years old, she was tying bundles of fresh garlic when we arrived. It was a lovely, authentic moment and we were fortunate to photograph her and her home.

Around midday, we arrived in Luhuo, a bustling town nested at the foot of a hill. The Shuoling monastery at the top of the hill we reached by walking through the old town's blockhouse neighborhoods. The monastery offered breathtaking views over Luhuo. Inside, the richly coloured doors and the intricate interior design was a feast for the eyes.

Luhuo to Baiyu

The following morning we left Luhuo and drove across the beautiful Ganzi mountains, along winding roads with ever-changing views. Our destination for the day was Yarchen Gar, the second largest institute for Tibetan Buddhist studies in the world.

Yarchen Gar is a remarkable place. Established in the 1980s, it grew into a vast monastic settlement with tens of thousands of monks and nuns, mostly nuns, living in simple wooden huts spread out across the valley. For decades, it was known as a center of meditation, study, and spiritual life, attracting practitioners from all over Tibet. Yet at the same time, it has also been a very sensitive place for the Chinese authorities. In recent years, access for foreign visitors has become increasingly restricted.

Up until a few days before our journey, it seemed that we might be able to visit Yarchen Gar and we were all excited about the possibility. Sadly, in the end, the Chinese authorities did not grant us permission to visit. We did our best to arrange access until the very last moment, but unfortunately it was not possible. Faced with this disappointing news, we had to switch to "Plan B" and continue our route toward Baiyu.

On the way, we stopped in a small village to stretch our legs. To our surprise, this short break turned into a pleasant encounter of the day. We met a kind woman who was pursuing her own Buddhist studies in the village. She generously offered to show us around. The community was working together on the construction of a new building, and through her we also met her teacher. Encounters like these are what make our journey so special: wherever we stopped, people were open, welcoming, and eager to share their world with us.

By late afternoon, we finally arrived in Baiyu. Baiyu is a small town in Sichuan's Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture close to the border with Tibet proper (TAR). It is known for its surrounding monasteries and for its calm, rural atmosphere. Far from the large cities, life here felt more relaxed, with a strong Tibetan character that showed in the language, the dress, and the rhythm of daily life.

Gartuo Temple and Baiyu

The next day we left at six o'clock to visit Gartuo Temple, a monastery high in the mountains above Baiyu. Gartuo is a traditional Tibetan Buddhist temple known for its beautiful location and its role as a spiritual center for the local community. Temples like this are often built on elevated sites, symbolizing closeness to the heavens, and the climb up is as much a spiritual journey as a physical one.

Because of recent heavy rainfall, our bus was unable to reach the high-altitude temple and just when we wondered how to continue, a local man appeared and, within ten minutes, had arranged two cars for us. It was a perfect example of the helpfulness and

resourcefulness we often encounter on this journey. With our new transport, we continued the steep and winding road upward, rewarded with breathtaking views over the valley.

We arrived at the same time as a group of Chinese tourists, and our presence immediately drew some curious looks. After all, foreigners are a rare sight in this region. We spent several hours walking around the temple grounds, soaking in the serene atmosphere, before the cars came to pick us up again and took us back downhill.

At the base, we were invited into a building that turned out to be an artist's workshop. Inside, we discovered the world of Thangka painting. Thangkas are traditional Tibetan Buddhist paintings on cotton or silk, often depicting deities, mandalas, or important teachings. They are not just artworks, but also spiritual tools, used in meditation and religious practice. Creating a Thangka requires extraordinary skill and patience: sometimes a single painting can take a year or more to complete.

We were guided through the workshop by the son of the family, who proudly showed us the studio. Later, his father appeared—the master painter himself—and gave us a glimpse into his world. His talent and dedication left us deeply impressed. In the small shop, we purchased a few souvenirs to bring home, before ending the visit with a group photo. It was an unexpected and very special encounter.

Back in Baiyu, we rewarded ourselves with a delicious lunch of momos, the famous Tibetan dumplings. Afterwards, we strolled through the local market, enjoying the lively atmosphere of daily life. In the late afternoon, we paid a visit to Baiyu Temple, another beautiful monastery that overlooks the town. The combination of spirituality, art, and hospitality had made this day truly memorable.

Dzongsar

We arrived in the lovely town of Dzongsar and immediately visited the monastery in town. Dzongsar is home to two monasteries: one located within the village and the other perched on the hill behind it. The town monastery was our first stop, where we had the chance to witness a prayer ceremony. The deep chanting and rhythmic sound of the instruments created a mesmerizing atmosphere, reminding us once again of the central role that monasteries play in Tibetan daily life.

Afterwards, we continued to the monastery on the hill. This site offered not only stunning views but also fascinating details. The monastery's kitchen was impressive in both size and activity, and next to its entrance hung life-sized dried yaks—a striking, almost surreal sight. In front of the prayer hall we met a kind and gentle nun, who seemed delighted when we asked if we could take her photograph.

Dzongsar itself has a long history. The Dzongsar Monastery complex was founded in the 13th century and became an important center of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism. It is particularly known for its emphasis on philosophical studies and for training many respected teachers. Even today, Dzongsar continues to be a vibrant place of learning and practice, drawing both monks and laypeople who wish to deepen their understanding of Buddhism.

At lunchtime we returned to our wonderful guesthouse, where the restaurant was filled with monks. It was clearly a special day for them. Some were enjoying their meals, others were playing games on their mobile phones, and groups were gathered around watching horse races streamed on the little screen of their phone. The mix of tradition and modern life was fascinating to observe.

The afternoon was free to spend at leisure, and we decided to explore the village. We wandered through the lanes and, of course, visited the temple again. The monks' houses were especially striking: small in size but each with a uniquely decorated door, painted in vivid colors. Inside, the rooms were very simple, usually consisting of a sleeping space and shelves with study books, but without kitchens or bathrooms. Despite the simplicity, each home had its own personality, and the vibrant doors gave the entire settlement a colourful and almost artistic feel.

The next day we returned to the monastery in town to attend a debating ceremony. Before it began, we had the chance to speak with a 29-year-old monk who had already been studying there for six years. During that time, he had also learned English, which made it possible for us to have a meaningful conversation.

He told us that he came from a family with one brother and one sister, and that he was the only monk among them. His decision to join monastic life was inspired by a meeting with a highly respected Buddhist teacher, who encouraged him to pursue this path. Because of the shortage of housing, his family had helped him build a small hut on the hillside which became his home during his studies.

With a shy smile, he admitted that he was not very good at debating. Out of five levels, he was currently on level three. Soon it was time for him to join the ceremony, and we made our way to the debating hall.

Normally the debates are held outside in the courtyard, but because of the rain, this session took place indoors. We were allowed to quietly observe, though not to take photographs. The atmosphere was still fascinating, yet less lively than the open-air debates we would later experience in Sershul. Even so, it was a rare privilege to witness this centuries-old tradition in action, and to see how monks sharpen their knowledge and reasoning through this unique practice.

Dzongsar left a lasting impression on us. It was not just the monasteries, but the warm atmosphere of the town, the openness of the monks, and the details of daily life that made this such a special place on our journey.

Parkhang Printing Monastery at Dege

After the debating ceremony, we left Dzongsar and continued our journey toward Dege. Around midday we arrived in town and checked in to our hotel. In the afternoon we paid a visit to a truly remarkable place: the Dege Parkhang Printing Monastery.

Dege Parkhang, founded in 1729, is often called the “treasury of Tibetan culture.” It houses one of the largest collections of Tibetan Buddhist texts in the world, preserved on carved wooden printing blocks. In total, there are more than 300,000 blocks stored here, covering Buddhist scriptures, medicine, history, literature, astronomy and more. For centuries, this monastery has been the heart of Tibetan publishing, ensuring that texts were copied and distributed across the Tibetan plateau. Without Dege, much of Tibet’s written heritage would have been lost.

Upon entering, we had to lock our cameras away in secure lockers. Surprisingly, mobile phones were allowed, so we could still capture a few impressions. Inside, we walked through the working areas where monks and workers continue the centuries-old printing tradition by hand.

We watched as printing plates were carefully cleaned, repaired when damaged, checked for accuracy, and of course we watched the printing process. This process requires enormous patience and skill: ink is applied to the wooden blocks, sheets of paper are pressed against them, and then page by page, texts are produced in exactly the same way as they have been for hundreds of years. The atmosphere was both industrious and sacred, as if every printed page carried the weight of preserving an entire culture.

Outside, we wandered further around the monastery and some of us did some shopping. Local people circled the complex in the traditional way, walking their kora clockwise while spinning prayer wheels and murmuring mantras. Visiting Dege Parkhang was a profound experience. It was not only about seeing the printing process, but also about realizing how vital this monastery remains for the survival of Tibetan culture, language, and spiritual life.

Dege to Sershul

The following morning we first visited Zhuqing Monastery, one of the oldest and most important monasteries in the region. Like many Tibetan monasteries, Zhuqing is not only a place of worship but also a center of study and community life. The monastery is renowned for its prayer halls and its strong ties to the local population. We arrived just in time to witness a prayer ceremony, the deep chanting of the monks filling the space with a solemn yet peaceful energy.

On the road afterwards we made a short stop when we came across a large herd of yaks grazing freely in the high pastures. Surrounded by the snowcapped peaks of the Shaluli Mountains, the landscape was simply breathtaking, a reminder of the wild beauty of eastern Tibet.

By midday we reached Sershul, where we found a small and charming restaurant for lunch. The town itself left a somewhat deserted impression, with wide streets but little activity. After our meal we visited the monastery. While walking around, we discovered that at 6:30 p.m. a debating session would take place on the central square of Sershul Monastery. Excited by the opportunity, we planned to return later that evening. On the way, however, we stumbled upon a horse festival being celebrated just outside town. Compared to the grand spectacle of the Litang Horse Festival, this gathering was much smaller in scale. But what it lacked in size, it more than made up for in friendliness.

As Western visitors we quickly became a curiosity ourselves. People smiled, greeted us warmly, and often approached us for conversation. The atmosphere was joyful and open, and we were free to take as many photos as we liked. In the evening we returned to the monastery square for the debating session. This time, unlike in Dzongsar, the debates were held outside in the open air. The energy was completely different—much livelier and more dynamic. Monks clapped their hands sharply to emphasize their arguments, leaned forward with dramatic gestures, and raised counterpoints with intensity.

Debating is one of the pillars of Tibetan Buddhist education. It is not just an intellectual exercise but a spiritual discipline, sharpening both logic and insight. Through argument and counterargument, monks learn to test their understanding of Buddhist philosophy, to think clearly, and to cut through illusion. The hand claps and bold gestures are not for show—they mark the strength of an argument and challenge the opponent to respond. Observing this centuries-old practice in Sershul gave us a vivid sense of how tradition is kept alive with passion and vigor.

Yushu

On our final full day of the tour, we left Sershul behind and drove toward Yushu. From here, we would take our flight to Chengdu the next day. We arrived early in the morning and went directly to one of Yushu's most famous landmarks: the Mani Stone Wall.

This site is home to the world's largest mani wall, a vast structure built from countless carved stones inscribed with the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Stretching for more than a kilometre, the wall is not only an extraordinary cultural monument but also a living place of devotion. Pilgrims from all over Tibet come here to walk the kora around the wall, spinning prayer wheels and murmuring mantras as they pass. The atmosphere in the morning was vibrant and full of energy, with crowds of devotees moving steadily around the site. We grabbed a quick bread roll for breakfast, happy to be part of this timeless rhythm of faith.

Later in the day we returned, but by then the atmosphere had quieted down, with fewer people making the circuit. It was a reminder of how the early hours are often the most spiritual and communal moments in Tibetan daily life.

In the afternoon, we made a short visit to what is known as the largest yak tent—a massive tent that had been converted into something like an event space. It turned out not to be particularly special, so we did not stay long.

Instead, we drove up into the mountains to visit the Vairocana Monastery, a place of deep historical and artistic importance. The monastery is particularly renowned for its ancient wall paintings, centuries-old murals that depict Buddhist deities and scenes from Tibetan history. Photography was not allowed inside, but after some time a friendly monk approached us and granted special permission to take pictures. It was a generous gesture, and being able to capture these precious artworks felt like an honour.

By evening, the day's exertions had left us tired. We decided to return to the same little restaurant near our hotel where we had eaten lunch. Sharing one last simple meal together, we reflected on the journey that was now drawing to a close.

The tour had come to an end. Tomorrow would be a long and tiring travel day for most of us, as we made our way back home. Yet the memories of mountains, monasteries, and the many warm encounters along the road and with each other would stay with us.