

# Nomadic LIFE

Hong Weixi explores the Tibetan Plateau on horseback

**I**T WAS cold and dreary, but the beauty of the Tibetan Plateau transcended it, with wild flowers dotting the vast grasslands and majestic peaks rising through the greenery.

During a two-day guided horse-trekking trip in the Langmusi area, I was treated to gorgeous views and got to stay with an Amdo Tibetan nomadic family. The small Tibetan town, which lies in a beautiful valley surrounded by alpine forests and mountains, straddles the borders of Sichuan and Gansu provinces in central China.

One of the best ways to take in the natural splendour is on horseback. After our Tibetan guide taught us how to handle horses, we started our trek. It went smoothly as the horses were tame and we rode for about four hours each day, with frequent breaks.

We rode along the White Dragon River, which divides the town, before stopping at a nomadic Tibetan family's tent for a lunch of vegetables, eggs and rice prepared by our guide.

Tibetan nomads have lived in the grassland in this region for centuries. They live in tents made of yak hair and drive their animals to new grasslands twice a year when the seasons change.

Due to harsh conditions on the plateau, the nomads do not often get their hands on vegetables. Their meals consist mainly of yak meat and dairy products; their staple is tsampa, roasted flour (barley or wheat) mixed with salty Tibetan butter tea.

Occasionally, travellers or tour guides bring the nomads vegetables. On the rare occasion when they can afford to, they make the long trip to the nearest village or town to get supplies.

After lunch, we galloped exhilaratingly through grasslands and up hills, with no other people or animals in sight. When we got tired, we rested on the grass, enjoying the fresh air and scent of the wild flowers.

## Live like the nomads

We arrived at a plateau where sheep and yaks were grazing in the late afternoon. That was where we would spend the night.

We met the only nomadic family there; we were told the nomads here do not live as a community, only as family units.

Our friendly hosts welcomed us into a yak-hair tent no bigger than 3m by 3m. The tent kept the strong winds and sounds out, but it was not waterproof. A plastic sheet on the roof was used to cover the tent if it rained.

Within the tent, there was a stove, a chest, some blankets and a pile of yak dung, which is used as fuel. He fired up the stove with the yak

Tibetan nomads have lived in the grassland in the plateau for centuries. They live in tents made of yak hair and drive their animals to new grasslands twice a year when the seasons change. Tourism is a new concept for the families, who live off their cattle and the land, but it helps to supplement their meagre income.



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## Insights into Tibetan culture

IN LANGMUSI, a town of 3,500 to 4,500 people, are two Tibetan temples — Kirti Gomba and Sertri Gomba — which provide a glimpse into Tibetan Buddhism.

Kirti Gomba is bigger and draws interest with its intricate woodwork and golden roofs. It is also where the body of Kirti Living Buddha V has been enshrined in the monastery for more than 300 years.

Behind the temple is the route to Lhamo Gorge. The beautiful trail leads to other villages, passing through mountains and breathtaking landscapes, and crossing streams surrounded by karst peaks. If you are lucky, you may encounter wildlife like deer.

### Time for kora

Sertri Gomba dates back to 1748 and it is where many Tibetan pilgrims start their kora, a type of pilgrimage in Tibetan Buddhism.

The pilgrims travel to holy places to perform a prayer ceremony for the gods of Tibetan Buddhism as they believe it will help them receive merits during their journey towards enlightenment and be shielded from misfortune.

During major festivals, many can be seen performing kora in the Amdo region. They often prostrate themselves on the ground every three steps, all the way to the monas-

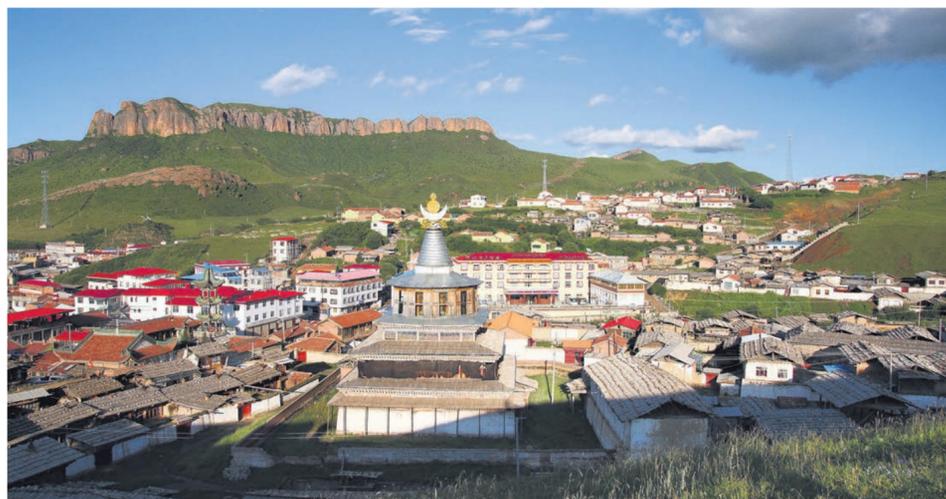
teries. Hence, such journeys can take several weeks or months.

### Sky burial

Sertri Gomba is also one of the few places where the ancient Tibetan ceremonial ritual of sky burials is carried out. During such private ceremonies, bodies of the dead are taken to a hilltop, chopped into chunks before being left in the open for vultures and other scavenging birds to devour them. The remaining body parts are burnt and the bones and skull smashed and mixed with barley-mash.

Tibetan Buddhists believe that one's spirit is released to go on a journey to be reincarnated after death, so the body becomes merely an empty vessel that needs to be disposed of. They also believe that those who consume meat will need to pay their karmic debts by becoming food for animals when they die. It is believed that as birds fly into the sky, they take the souls of the dead to the heavens.

It is considered disrespectful for tourists to view a sky burial. Also, the increasing presence of tourists at burial sites in recent years has resulted in a drop in vultures and sky burials. The locals can opt only for normal burials, which they believe will result in the dead going to hell.



Above: The Tibetan town of Langmusi is set in a pretty valley. Right: Devotees spinning the prayer wheels at Labrang Monastery in Xiahe Country. PHOTOS: HONG WEIXI

## GUIDELINES

I flew to Chengdu on Air China. From there, I took buses, stopping at the popular tourists destinations of Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong. From Jiuzhaigou, I took a five-hour bus ride and got off at the main road outside Langmusi, about a 1km walk to town. If you are coming from the north, you can catch buses to Langmusi from Xiahe city.

Foreigners are free to move around the 10 Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, which include Gansu and Sichuan provinces. No permits are necessary, other than visas for China. Singaporeans can visit China visa-free for up to 15 days.

Head to Xiahe County, or "Little Tibet", to visit the famous Labrang Monastery, one of the six great monasteries of the Gelukpa sect (Yellow Hat) of Tibetan Buddhism. Protests have erupted at the site before, so check with the locals for updates before heading there.

There are many shops in Langmusi and Xiahe selling textiles, jewellery, traditional Tibetan clothes and crafts. Beware of shops that sell fake silver or antique products at high prices.

Enjoy a mix of Tibetan, Muslim and Mongolian cuisines in Xiahe. There are yak burgers, yak milk and butter, barbecued beef, along with Muslim-style beef noodles, bread, butter and tea. There are also a few Sichuan restaurants.

Langmusi is located 3,325m above sea level and you may experience altitude sickness upon arrival. Wait a few days to acclimatise before doing any strenuous activities. Drink plenty of water and eat light, high-carbohydrate meals for more energy, and avoid alcohol to lower the risk of dehydration.

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