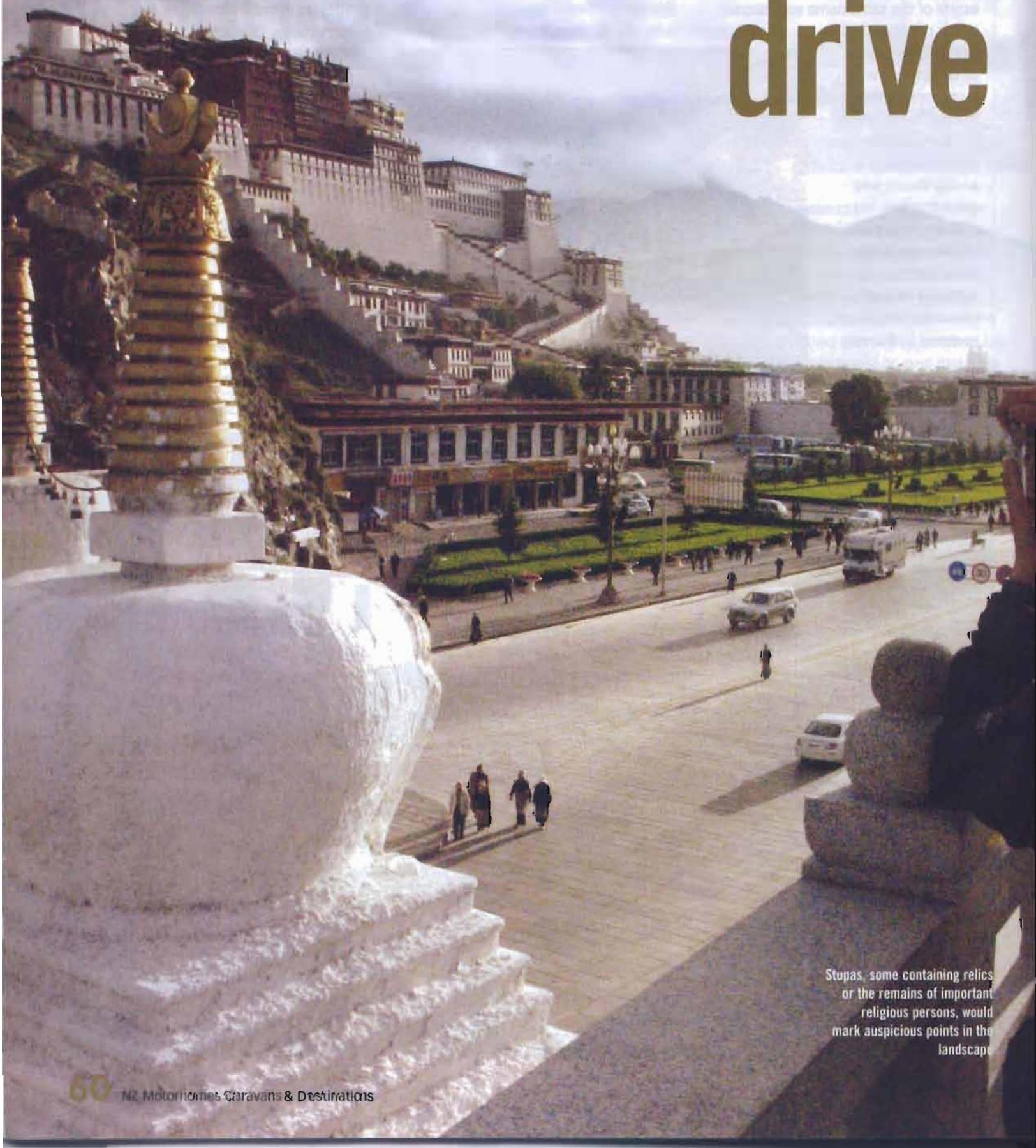


# A daring drive



Stupas, some containing relics or the remains of important religious persons, would mark auspicious points in the landscape

## Harriet Halkyard and her husband John explore China and Tibet by motorhome. Now *that's* different.

We had driven around the US in our seven-metre class C motorcoach, and even taken it on a 99-day trip from Texas to Panama and back. How hard could it be to drive around China? We found an agency that offered an RV similar to ours for US\$150 a day, including gas. It sounded like a deal.

We flew into Kunming, Yunnan, in southern China, to find one rather battered five-year-old motorcoach. The internet photos were obviously outdated. Also, there was a difference of opinion about "fully equipped" so we spent the first morning shopping for essentials like mugs and towels.

Yes, it was a dilapidated old RV, but Wen Wei, our driver, managed to keep it rolling. When the alternator died he made sure that we were plugged into a roadside stall and we only had to push start it a couple of times before he got it fixed. Everything that could break did, from the bed to the water pump. But our smiling hero soon fixed it or wired it up. He spoke no English but soon learned what thumbs down and "problem" meant. By the end of our five weeks together he would show thumbs up, grin so his eyes completely disappeared and say, "No pwoblem".

Our goal was to drive to Mt Everest. We started in the tropical Yunnan Province and travelled north on a southern branch of the Silk Road, known as the Tea-Horse

trading route. Tea is grown in the south, which was traded for Tibetan horses.

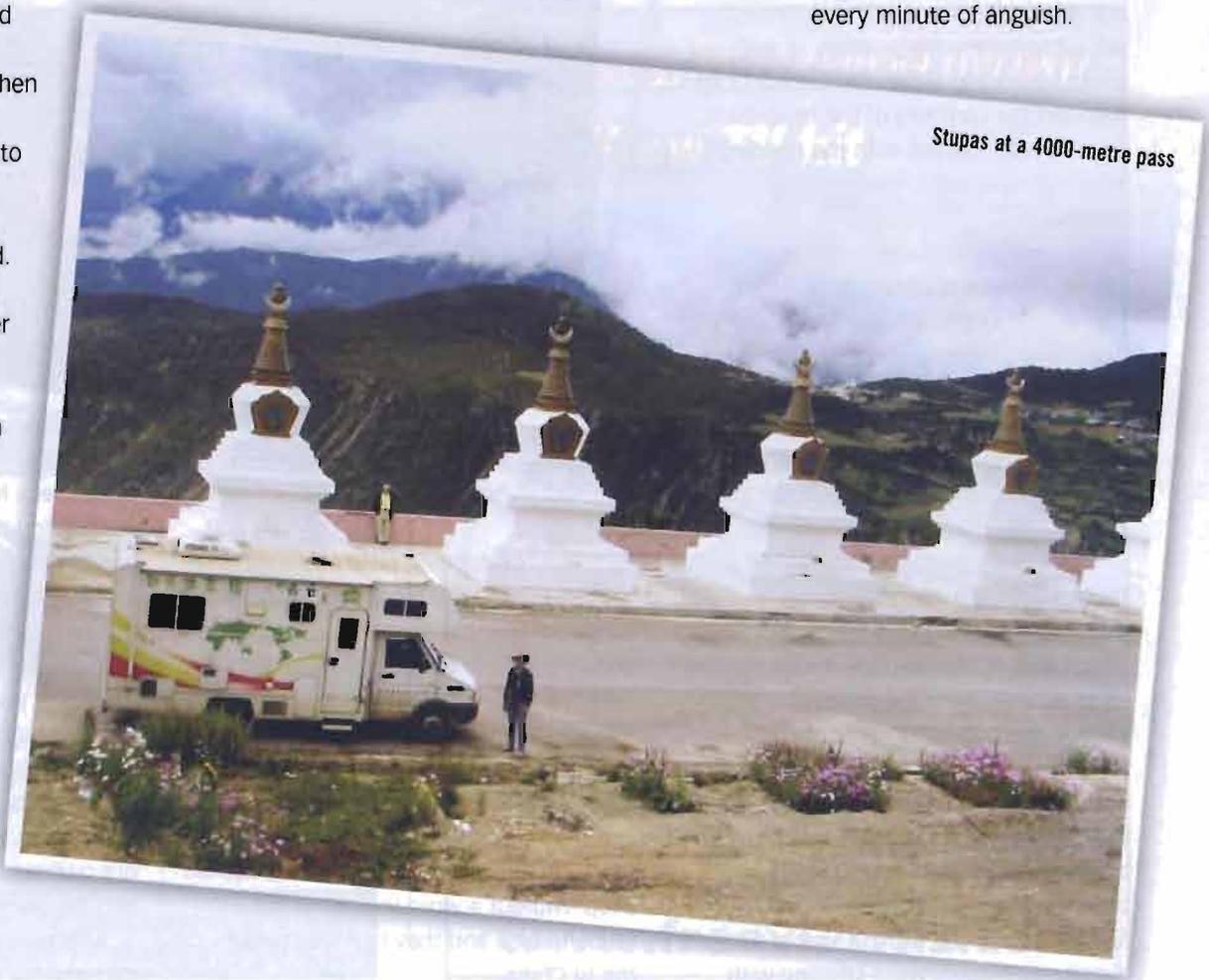
Road conditions varied. Some were excellent and as there are few private cars, traffic was light beyond the cities. After two days on bone-jarring cobbles we were passing under giant bamboo that kissed the sky, when the driver's cell phone went off to the tune of *It's a Small Small World*. Most of the roads we drove on consisted of a winding two lanes of blacktop with no shoulder. We also travelled carelessly carved dirt paths cut into mountains in Tibet, and we drove across a desert where we could hardly see the tracks we were to follow.

We think we were the first motorhome to make this

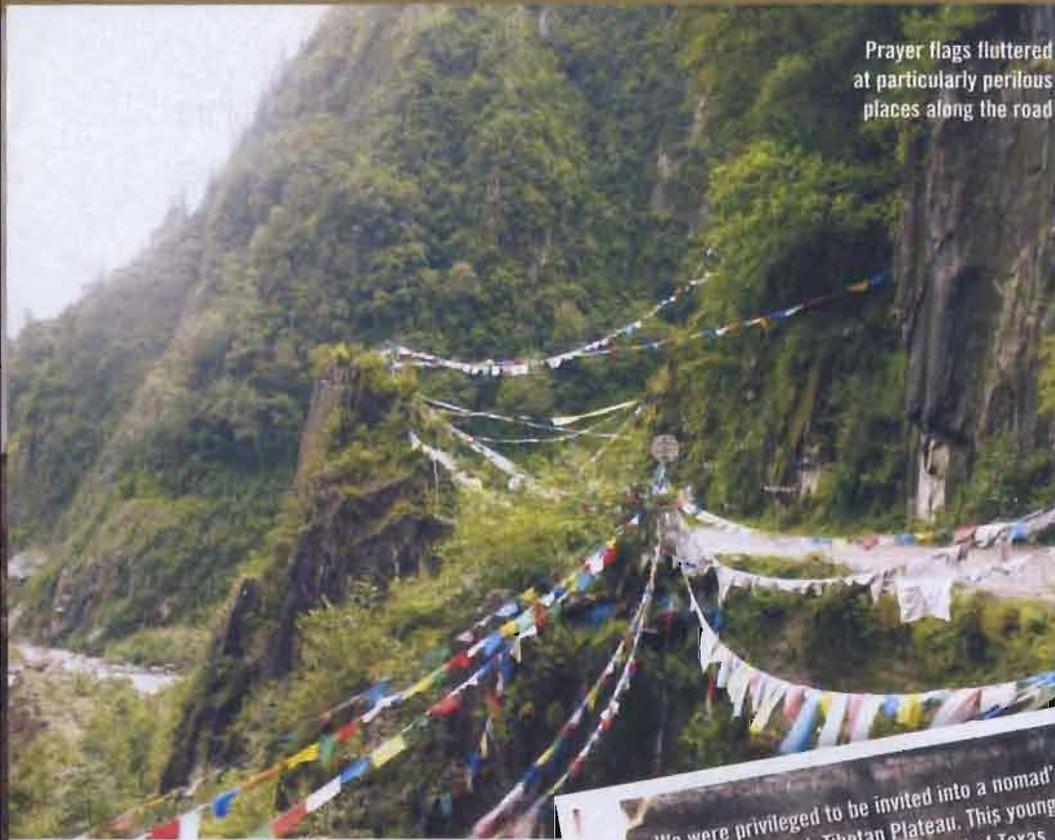
drive, and there was no way we could cover the distances the rental agency had planned. A couple of days we were scheduled to cover two or three hundred kilometres over dirt roads where we averaged 25kph. There were also frequent delays caused by landslides.

Unknown to us, *Lonely Planet* and the official Chinese travel authority described our route as one of the most beautiful and most dangerous in the world.

The Interstate Highway, N214 north of Shangri-La, was breathtaking. On this one-lane dirt road our wheels knocked rocks into cloud-filled canyons 1000 feet deep and then dropped into a pothole making me gasp. When I was not holding my breath, the dramatic scenery was worth every minute of anguish.



Stupas at a 4000-metre pass



Prayer flags fluttered at particularly perilous places along the road

That was only the first of many occasions when people spontaneously invited us into their lives.

On the chill grasslands of Tibet we were invited into a yurt by a family of nomads. They move this tent home every two months to take their livestock to better grass. There was a high ring of stones cemented together with yak dung to prevent the wind from entering underneath the fabric. The centre was open to the sky to draw up the smoke from the yak dung fire. There are no trees in this part of the world and their animals are their only resource.

Even in Beijing, if away from the major attractions, very few people speak

Near the village of Gingko, thousands of rice paddies, some only a metre wide with little dykes trampled by generations of feet, stepped up the hillside. Further north in Yunnan we came to sweeping valleys of soft green sugarcane planted in terraces that followed the contours of the mountains; each terrace marked with the nodding heads of sunflowers like sleeping sentries.

We crossed 5000-metre snow-covered passes and through forested valleys festooned with fluttering prayer flags. Rivers raged through canyons of purple rock dusted with pink and grey, and tinged with green from rare tufts of stunted vegetation. Craggy rocks were like teeth trying to bite the intense blue Tibetan sky.

There were no campsites on our route. Each night our interpreter and driver found an acceptable place to park, which was often the large, gated parking lot of a hotel. Both the driver and guide slept in the hotels and only ate with us when invited.

All along the road we were greeted with smiles and waves. The first night we pulled into the town square of Jianshui behind some charming tea houses and parked for the night. It was a clear evening and locals were strolling with



We were privileged to be invited into a nomad's "yurt" on the high Tibetan Plateau. This young homemaker is holding the postcard of Texas that I gave her as a small thank you.

their children and performing tai chi. I decided to walk around the block and paused outside a little tea shop. The group of people sitting in the back waved and beckoned me in to join them. The lady of the house was conducting a traditional tea ceremony for her family and I had been invited. I shared postcards of home and they reciprocated by presenting me with two little cups from a shelf in her shop. Without a word in common I had made friends and they had welcomed me to China.

English.

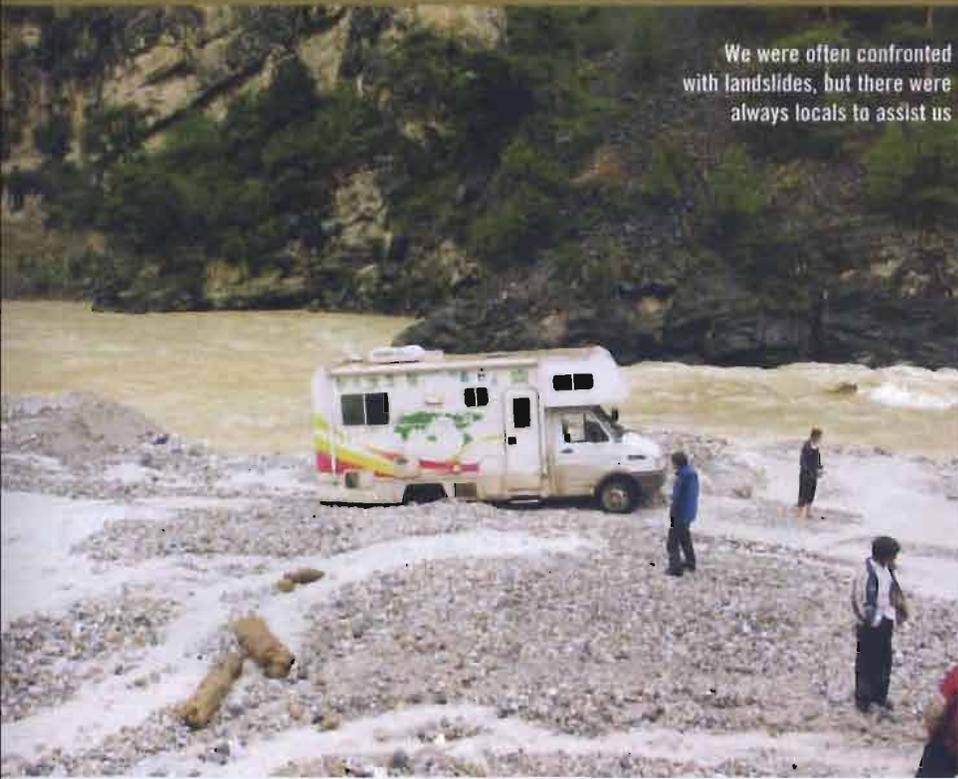
In Tibet they do not even speak Mandarin. This meant that we needed to change interpreters at the border, but it had the advantage of insuring that we had someone who knew the local customs.

A good reason for renting your own rig is that you have your own toilet. Chinese bathrooms do not always have a commode, just a hole to squat over, and there is a different standard of cleanliness. For me, another benefit of our own rig was that I didn't have to eat noodles for breakfast.

Although we had breakfast in the motorhome we usually ate out for lunch

We were often confronted with landslides, but there were always locals to assist us

Harriet Halkyard is the co-author of *99 Days to Panama; an Exploration of Central America by Motorhome*. Visit [www.99DaysToPanama.com](http://www.99DaysToPanama.com)



moistened with yak butter and molded into balls in your fingers. It tastes like salty cookie dough. Yak-butter tea is made with melted yak butter and yak milk and served hot. Coming inside from the freezing plateau this could be a comforting, rich drink, but to me it was like drinking melted butter. We were glad we had brought our own instant coffee.

The road to the Everest Base Camp was being rebuilt for the passage of the Olympic Torch and was impassable so we camped on a vast grassland some 50km away. We sat mesmerised, completely alone, watching the setting sun paint Mt Everest pink. Within 20 minutes the sun had tanned us through our clothes, but then it was gone and we were suddenly cold.

We went inside for dinner and watched Everest glow beneath the stars. ■

and dinner. Restaurants were plentiful and the food changed depending upon local custom and availability. Produce was often displayed so you could choose what you did, or did not want.

We declined larvae the size of thumbs, but my husband did enjoy yak burgers and steaks. In Tibet the traditional diet consists of "tsampa" and yak-butter tea. Tsampa is ground, roasted barley-flour

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