

# Destination romance: Lhasa, Tibet

Pico Iyer is enchanted by a mountain-top city on the cusp of great change

**Pico Iyer**

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I walked out on to the balcony in Banak Shol guesthouse in Lhasa, Tibet, in 1985 and looked up to where the Potala Palace sat, on a ridge overlooking the small cluster of traditional whitewashed houses.

A few backpackers were gathered on the terrace, talking about the days of hard travel they'd survived to get there. Tibet had opened up to the world only a few years before, and all of us had the sense of stepping into a place almost never before seen by foreign eyes.

The Banak Shol could not have been a less propitious setting for romance. There were no windows in my little cell and I had to crawl into it before flopping on to the bed. Yet even then, on that first night, I knew, as one does in love, that I was in a place I'd never see again.

The kids on the streets were already asking for pens from the foreigners who arrived, and a Rambo Café in Lhasa was clearly on its way. I realised that the same impulse that had allowed me to come here would ensure that Lhasa would not remain a deeply Tibetan settlement for much longer. Besides, many of its temples were already in ruins, and by the time I came back, five years later, the place was under martial law, with soldiers on the rooftops.

Next morning, the mountains were so sharp and bright in the high, thin air, I felt light-headed. I stepped out of my real life in that crystal light, and seemed to be looking at everything from a great, clear height. One of the things I saw from there was the end of a romantic Tibet.

**Pico Iyer is author of *The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama* (Bloomsbury). Fly from Heathrow to Chengdu with Cathay Pacific ([www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com)) from £700, then fly Air China ([www.airchina.com](http://www.airchina.com)) to Lhasa for £130. Banak Shol (0086 891 632 3829) has doubles from 80CYN (£7.50) per night. For details go to [www.cnto.org/lhasa.asp](http://www.cnto.org/lhasa.asp)**

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