

Tibet reopens to foreign tourists, but doors to the monasteries stay closed

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The troubled region of Tibet may have reopened to tourists but, according to some tour operators, those planning to visit in the next few months should be aware that not everything has returned to normal. The Chinese authorities, which have to grant permission for all foreign nationals to visit, began processing applications again on 25 June, and several tour operators have already restarted their programmes in the region.

'Although they may have opened the Tibetan frontiers to tourism again, any tours in the next few months are likely to be severely restricted,' says Margaret Percy, of Asia specialist Palanquin. 'Some of the great monasteries, such as Drepung and Sera, are not open to visitors, and they are an integral part of any tour of Tibet.'

Palanquin is now offering tailor-made tours to Tibet, but will not resume group tours until next April. However, several operators have group tours, with departures as early as August.

'Tibet's mystique seems marvellously undimmed by recent events,' says Ashley Toft of Explore, 'and our group tours are already proving really popular.'

Tibet's most famous sites, the Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple and Norbulinka - the former summer palace of the Dalai Lama - are fully open, and companies such as KE Adventure Travel are confident that visitors can move throughout the country freely. 'The only problem is that there are no guarantees,' says Tim Greenwood of KE Adventure Travel. 'The Chinese could change their minds at any moment and close the frontier, and monasteries can open and close on a day-to-day basis.'

For those who are keen to see Tibet this year, KE Adventures has several group departures in August, as does Exodus, while Explore already has only limited space on its September departures.

Companies such as Silk Road and Beyond and China Direct have shorter trips to Tibet, as add-ons to a longer trip to China.

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