

Tholing and Tsaparang, Tibet

Lonely Planet's Tony Wheeler wonders why we haven't heard of Tibet's Guge Kingdom

Tony Wheeler

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It continues to amaze me that despite all the documentaries, guidebooks and other enticements it's still possible to stumble across a place where the only honest reaction is, "Why haven't I heard of this before?" Like the Guge Kingdom in Western Tibet.

A thousand years ago a great Buddhist kingdom was centred in this barren, rocky, remote wonderland, not far from the border with the Indian region of Ladakh. Straddling an important trading route between India and Tibet, the Guge Kingdom built 108 (it's a significant number in Buddhism) monasteries in Western Tibet and in India's Ladakh and Spiti. How remote is it? Well, until the Chinese put it on a 1957 map, India hadn't even realised a road had been built through what, according to Delhi, was the Indian territory of Aksai Chin. This was one of the causes of the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

They hadn't noticed what was going on for the simple reason that getting here is very difficult. I flew to Simikot in Western Nepal from Kathmandu, walked for a week to the Tibetan border and continued to Thöling and Tsaparang, the two great Guge Kingdom centres, in a Land Cruiser. Thöling was big enough to be called a town, with a market, restaurants and a choice of hotels. Despite suffering a thorough trashing by Mao's Red Guards in 1966 - yes the Cultural Revolution got to the furthest back blocks of Tibet - the Thöling Monastery is still well worth seeing.

And then, 12 miles away, there's Tsaparang, a hilltop citadel topped by a summer palace reached via a maze of tunnels, chapels, caves and assorted palaces. Unhappily, Mao's vandals made their way here too, but there was so much on offer they apparently didn't have the energy to do a really thorough job of demolishing things. Or perhaps the altitude sapped their destructive urges. Whatever, there are enough statues, shrines, murals and paintings to almost, but not quite, distract your attention from the citadel's dramatic mountain-top setting.

Next year an airport is supposed to open at Ali (Shiquanhe in Chinese), the major centre in far Western Tibet. Until then there's the small matter of a 60-hour non-stop bus ride from the nearest airport at Lhasa. We spent a week driving back from Ali to Lhasa. Even when you get to Ali it's still another 125 miles to Thöling, two-thirds of that distance along a cart track where you'll be pushed to average 10 to 15mph. Oh, and finally there's a 17,400ft pass to cross.

. For more on how to get there, see the Lonely Planet Guide To Tibet, £11.89. Trans-Himalaya has a three-week expedition to Tibet in June which takes in Tholing and Tsaparang as well as Mount Kailash for \$4,866. See www.trans-himalaya.com for details

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