

Making tracks IN CHINA



MAIN PIC Being able to stop where you like is one of the advantages of travelling in a motorhome and views like this, that's Mt Everest in the background, are like double chocolate icing **1** Chinese architecture is as beautiful as the landscapes **2** Workers in traditional garb **3** Chilli anyone? **4** A temple in Tibet



{ WORDS & PHOTOS JOHN & HARRIET HALKYARD }

For these intrepid travellers, the notion ‘have motorhome will travel’ has never been more applicable. They have conquered the US and South America and now they’ve taken on China

We had driven all over America in our little C-Class motorhome, and even taken it on a punishing 99-day trip from Houston, Texas to Panama, South America and back. How hard could it be to drive around China?

Well, initially, at least, it seemed like it wouldn't be too tough at all. I did some research on the 'net, but the language barrier meant I eventually resorted to a Chinese friend to locate a local rental company. He did, and it was pretty reasonable: US\$150 a day for a 22-foot motorhome, including gas and everything else we might need along the way. It sounded like a deal.

Then our friend politely told us that he and his fiancé were going to join us. Okay, no worries, there's bound to be plenty of room and we all get along famously. Then the next week he told us he'd invited his thesis advisor. Hmm. It was all starting to sound very cosy. And then we learned the rental charge also included a driver. Squashy.

Anyone who has lived in a motorhome for longer than a weekend knows that however large the rig, it is actually only built for two. My loving husband, John, said not to worry; it was only for five weeks.

We received pictures of the shiny new rig and immediately noticed the lack of storage and the fact that there was no stove. John said not to worry, it was just the camera angle.

Two weeks before our departure date we got an extensive inventory. Our friend translated and read off everything from sheets to screwdrivers. Not quite everything. There was no mention of cups or towels. My husband said not to worry, they must be there.

When we arrived at the rental agency's lot there was one battered five-year-old motorhome waiting. Hmm, it didn't look like the one we had admired in the pictures.

Our Chinese friend then informed us that his fiancé was not well and they would not be coming. We expressed our regrets but could not help being relieved there would be fewer people squashed into the motorhome. However, our friend had arranged for an interpreter to accompany us. Nice. Neither the interpreter nor the driver would sleep in the vehicle. Even nicer.

I took a deep breath and climbed on board the motorhome. There was no stove.

TIP: Expect nothing to be provided that is not put down in writing.

With great smiles, a single hot plate was produced and I was guaranteed that I could cook anything on it. We gave the rig a once-over and found the fridge wasn't working. We were told that it had just been turned on and that by the time we had done our shopping it would have cooled down.

We went to the local Wal-Mart; yes they had one in Kunming, and bought the basics of food along with the other missing essentials.

The fridge had not cooled down. There was not another rig available. It boiled down to whether we wanted to tour China or go home. We wanted to go on.

We were promised that the driver would get us fresh ice every day. Okay, no worries. We headed out. Our first stop was the Ice House. It was closed for lunch. The driver packed some containers with snow from a pile that had been dumped in a corner. Could this get worse? John said not to worry.

In fact, the worst was over. Yes, it was a dilapidated old motorhome 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 that would provide power. He was usually able to park on a slope so we only had to push-start a couple of times until he got it fixed. Everything that could break did, from the bed to the water pump, but our smiling hero fixed it or tied it up with bailing wire. He spoke no English but soon learned what thumbs down and “problem” meant. Later he would show thumbs up, grin so that his eyes completely disappeared, and say, “No pwoblem”.

Our goal was to drive to Mt. Everest. We started in Kunming in the tropical province of Yunnan. We were to travel the southern section of the Silk Road, known locally as the Tea-Horse trading route. Tea is a prime product of Kunming and they traded it for Tibetan horses.

We did not know that the Lonely Planet and official Chinese travel authority described our intended route as one of the most beautiful and also most dangerous in the world.

There were no campsites on the route, and on the first night we found a paved corner of a town square behind some charming tea





houses and pulled in for the night. It was a clear evening and locals were strolling with children and performing tai chi. I decided to walk around the block.

I paused outside a little shop that sold tea, much of it compressed into inch-thick disks like giant coins for easier transportation. There was a group of people sitting in the back who beckoned me in to join them. They were drinking tea and immediately poured me a minute cup, smaller than an egg-cup. The lady of the house was conducting a traditional tea ceremony for her family and I had been welcomed.

I shared postcards of Texas and sculptured each person a balloon crown which caused laughter all round. They reciprocated by presenting me with two of the little cups from a shelf in her shop. Without a word in common, we had made friends and these people had welcomed me to China.

TIP: Be open to new ideas and be willing to enter the lives of the friendly people who surround you.

Those were only the first of many people who spontaneously invited us into their lives. All along the road we were greeted with smiles and waves. On the chilly 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 yaks to better grass. There was a high ring of stones cemented together with dung, to prevent the wind from entering underneath the yak hair fabric. The centre was open to the sky to draw the smoke up. There are no trees in this part of the country so the nomads mould dung into round

bricks to use as fuel. Various shaped fuel bricks can be seen stuck on walls to dry.

Each night our interpreter and driver found an acceptable place to park, often in the large, gated parking lots of a hotel.

TIP: Ask yourself if you really need a motorhome or would a four-wheel drive be better?

Staying in hotels would have been less expensive and the SUV would have been better on the bad roads. There were only a couple of times when we were not near a restaurant.

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

TIP: Always carry toilet paper and hand sanitiser.

Although we had breakfast in the motorhome we usually ate out for lunch and dinner. Restaurants were plentiful and the food changed depending on the area and what was available. We declined the larvae the size of thumbs but John did enjoy yak burgers and yak steak.

In Tibet the traditional diet consists of 'tampsä' and yak-butter tea. Tampsä is ground roasted barley you moisten with yak butter and make into balls with your fingers. It tastes like salty cookie dough. Yak-butter tea is made with melted yak butter and yak milk and is served hot. To me it was like drinking melted butter, but it was warming.

TIP: If you have to have corn flakes for breakfast, take your own supply.

Restaurants in China would often display fresh produce like vegetables or live fish and snails in tanks outside so you could point to what you do and do not want. The good news was that I seldom had to cook.

Only twice, when we were way out in the wilderness, was my offer to make everyone packet noodles accepted. However, when I told Wen Wei that I only had forks (shiny and new from Wal-Mart) he laughed and walked away, shaking his head, to make his own chopsticks from a nearby tree.

TIP: Make sure you have a good driver.

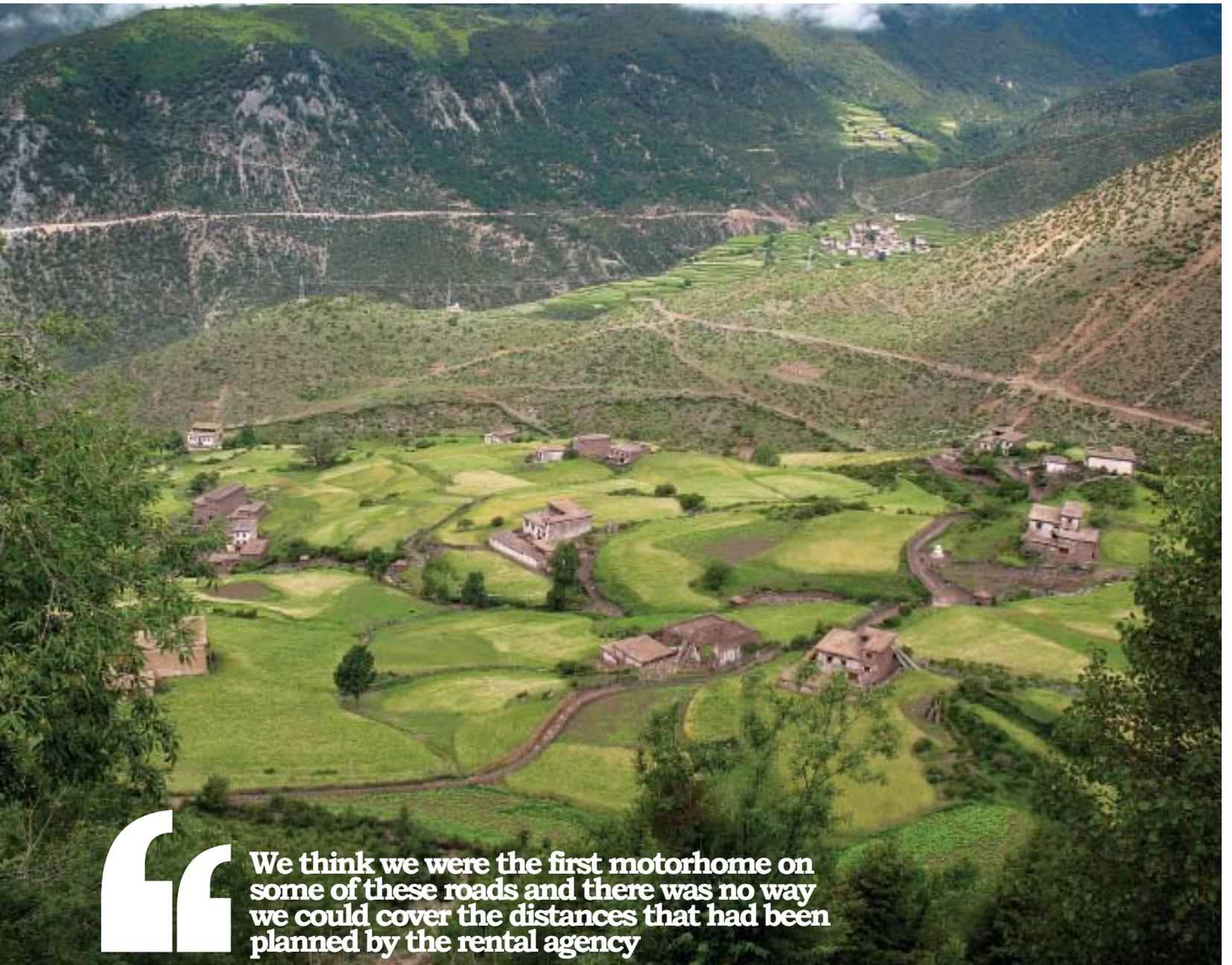
We were lucky to have Wen Wei who was a notably careful and polite driver. The Interstate Highway, National 214, north of Shangri La was breathtaking. The motorhome wheels knocked rocks into cloud-filled canyons 3000ft deep. When I was not holding my breath, the scenery was dramatic and worth every minute of anguish.

Near the village of Gingko, thousands of rice paddies, some only a yard wide with little dykes trampled by generations of feet, stepped up the hillside in terraces. Further north in Yunnan we came to sweeping valleys of green sugar cane planted in terraces along the mountain contours.

TIP: Be flexible regarding your route and schedule.

We think we were the first motorhome on some of these roads and there was no way we could cover the distances that had been planned by the rental agency. On more than





We think we were the first motorhome on some of these roads and there was no way we could cover the distances that had been planned by the rental agency

LEFT FROM TOP 1 Tibet is a wild and colourful place 2 The Tibetan people are absolutely wonderful 3 Roads in China are nothing like you've ever travelled on before 4 Cobble roads, without shoulders, set the motorhome vibrating 5 Landslides slowed progress 6 Leaving Kunming through one of its beautiful gates - the motorhome seems out of place



6

one day we were scheduled to cover 300 to 400km on dirt roads on which we could average no more than 30km/h.

Some of the roads were excellent and there are few private cars so traffic was light away from big cities. On major toll ways you have to keep 200m from the car in front so there was little chance of getting rear-ended.

Most of the roads we drove along consisted of a winding, two lane blacktop with no hard shoulder. We also travelled for a couple of days on carefully laid cobbles and it felt like a weight-loss vibrator (John and I each lost 10kg due to eating fresh local food which is a lot less fatty than our Western diet). There were carved dirt paths cut into mountain sides in Tibet and we drove across a desert with barely visible tracks.

TIP: Ask your driver to check with other drivers regarding the road conditions every time you stop.

Landslides slowed us down and three times one day we had to turn around and travel a different route because the road was

closed. We were delayed for an entire day at a landslide that had killed a dozen people. It's impossible to take road conditions too seriously when you're travelling in China.

TIP: Get an interpreter who is local to the area.

Even in Beijing, if you are away from the major attractions, very few people speak English and in Tibet they do not speak Mandarin. We changed interpreters at the border. Having a local on board enabled us to learn about the customs and points of interest in the area.

TIP: Take a good camera with plenty of storage.

The scenery we drove through was varied and magnificent and the locals loved seeing their own pictures on my camera's screen. The standout was when we camped alone on a wide grassy plain watching as the sun painted Mt. Everest pink beneath the arc of a rainbow. You can't beat that!

Harriet and John Halkyard are the authors of 99 Days to Panama: An Exploration of Central America by Motorhome. AG+RV