

The hardest lesson

Attaining the high trails of Tibet can bring stunning vistas – and perhaps even enlightenment – along with the altitude headaches and muscle cramps.

Story by **Ryan Stuart** Photography by **Ryan Creary**



MAYBE I HAD UNWITTINGLY ABSORBED THE BUDDHIST IDEAL of non-attachment. Or else just the painfully thin air. Either way, all talk of a reward at the top of our climb had been quickly blown out of my mind to go tumbling across the windswept Tibetan grasslands.

At the last break, Jim Hamp, the leader of our band of mountain bikers, had sent us off with a promise of a surprise at the top of the endless climb ahead. I don't think any of us got too excited, if we gave it any thought at all. At more than 4,000m above sea level on the Tibetan Plateau, there wasn't enough oxygen to imagine. And five days into a week of high-elevation adventure, I was too tired to dream. Hamp knew this of course so it could have been that his 'reward' was just a ruse to coax us into a little more effort.

Up to that point I had ridden the longest climbs and descents of my life and enjoyed hours of the most amazing alpine singletrack imaginable, a smile plastered on my face for miles. But it had taken a toll: I was dog-tired. And so, a couple of minutes after spinning slowly away from the group, my oxygen-deprived brain was engrossed in just one task: keeping my bike moving. I forgot all about the surprise.

An hour later I was closing in on the 4,500m pass. My lungs burned with every huffing, sucking breath. The lactic acid ran thick and woody in my legs. A pain in my butt screamed for attention. My body was demanding a break, but my mind saw the top, just 100m ahead. I put my head down and focused on maintaining the balance between moving forward and passing out. Push just a little too hard and my hands went numb, my head light

from lack of oxygen. Don't pedal enough and I wobbled all over the road. It's delicate. I was almost there.

And then I was screaming and swearing euphoric monosyllables. I'd never felt so high. I'd never been so high.

* * *

Rewind seven days, to another high of complete exhaustion. More than 24 hours after leaving my home on the west coast of Canada, I landed in Chengdu, China, gateway to the Tibetan Plateau. Before I signed up for this mountain bike trip, I'd never even heard of this city of 14 million. And I didn't know much more about where I was going.

Credit Jim Hamp for getting me into this. He grew up where I live, on Vancouver Island, a 300-kilometre-long rock floating off the west coast of Canada. When Hamp first came to China in 1998, he backpacked into Kham Tibet, the easternmost historical region of Tibet, not well known to the outside world at that time.

"I had this overwhelming feeling that I needed to come back and help the people," he says today. With a strong desire to serve, he moved to Chengdu, learned Mandarin and started working with charities on the Tibetan Plateau, coordinating and running logistics for doctors, educators and development workers. After a decade with NGOs he realised he loved showing people around, knew all the gems of the area, and had built the skill





TRAIN TRACKS

Matt Yaki and Stefan Gnoyke on two of the many bridges enroute, the more rustic ones built by yak herders as part of their seasonal routes from pasture to pasture.



VIRGIN SINGLETRACK (RIGHT)

Stefan Gnoyke sets off down a switchback trail that likely had never been ridden – it proved some of the gnarliest and funnest riding on the trip.



set to run a travel company. Five years ago, he started Extravagant Yak, one of the first foreign-owned tour operator in China.

"I wanted to continue helping Tibetans," he says. "I figured the for-profit model could work just as well."

From his base in Chengdu he runs a variety of trips into the plateau, everything from sightseeing in Lhasa to trekking in the Gongga Range. He taps Tibetan horsemen to shuttle gear on his backpacking journeys, stays in Tibetan-owned guest houses and hires Tibetan guides and drivers.

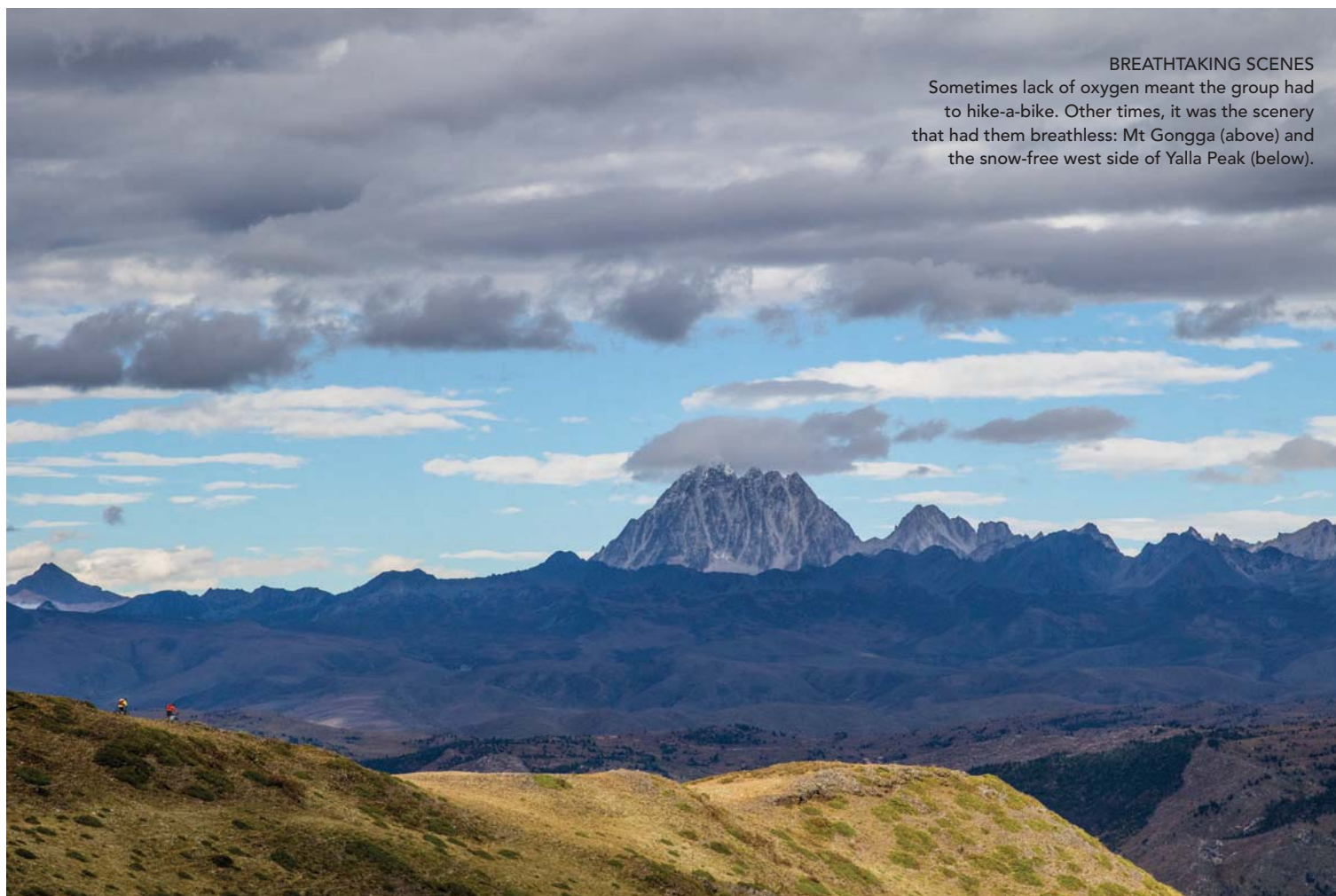
I learned all this as our bus of 15 Westerners honked and chugged its way west, slowly climbing out of the subtropical Sichuan Basin into the foothills of the Himalaya. Soon we were weaving up impossibly steep mountain sides on a narrow two-lane road jammed with cars and trucks driving like they're in a Hollywood movie. Cars passed on blind corners, just missing head-on collisions with carefully timed swerves. Even our bus driver was not immune, just barely threading the needle between a slightly slower lorry and an on-coming car. Mostly we studiously kept our eyes off the road and focused on guzzling water, Hamp's simple secret to acclimatisation.

Next morning, we made our first pedal strokes in Tibet. Abu Ren, a Tibetan guide and one of Jim's business partners, led us onto a singletrack trail carved into the hillside by generations of yaks. I was feeling good until we crossed a creek. Climbing the small hill on the opposite bank, the first 'up' of the ride, I suddenly felt like someone had put a plastic bag over my head. Spots invaded my vision. Before I fell over, I stopped, heaved a couple of breaths and made a mental note to slow down. I wasn't at sea level anymore.



Backing off the pace, I regained control of my breathing and vision. The smooth trail climbed an open valley between grassy hillsides. I could see a Tibetan nomad's tent and the black dots of their herd of yaks. On a slope above, strings of coloured flags had been arranged in the likeness of a huge Buddha. To the east, cloud poured through clefts in the ridge. We were literally on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, between the moist air of the lowlands and arid Tibet proper.

An hour in, we took a break. We'd gone 4km. At sea level it would



BREATHTAKING SCENES

Sometimes lack of oxygen meant the group had to hike-a-bike. Other times, it was the scenery that had them breathless: Mt Gongga (above) and the snow-free west side of Yalla Peak (below).

have taken 20 minutes. We pushed on, spinning up to a small pass, clouds whipping through and then disappearing in the dry air. Pushing into the clouds we crested the pass and headed down the 1,000-metre, 17-kilometre descent, literally falling back off the Tibetan Plateau. The trail plunged down tacky gravel through grassy alpine mountainside and then along a small creek into a scraggly forest. It went on and on and on, with only brief moments of pedalling.

Midway, the trail cut through the yard of a family living in a simple but solid stone home with a sod roof. They greeted 15 garish trespassers with smiles and curiosity, happily posing for photos.

With their darker skin, high cheek bones and more angular features, the nomads were obviously Tibetan not Chinese. The nearby city of Kangding was the traditional trading post, where Han Chinese from the lowlands met Tibetan herders. While the Tibet region of western China stretches across five of China's provinces (Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, Yunnan) the division in ethnicity remains stark: Tibetans on the plateau and Chinese lower down.

As for us, we were a mixed group, mostly from Canada, but also two Germans (one living in Beijing), an Australian and a couple of friends from Lebanon. Among us are a mountain bike guide and a pro rider, but also an engineer, an illustrator, a financier, a sales rep and a software developer. The thing we shared was a love of riding and adventure. Day one had whet our appetite but the real tests still lay ahead.

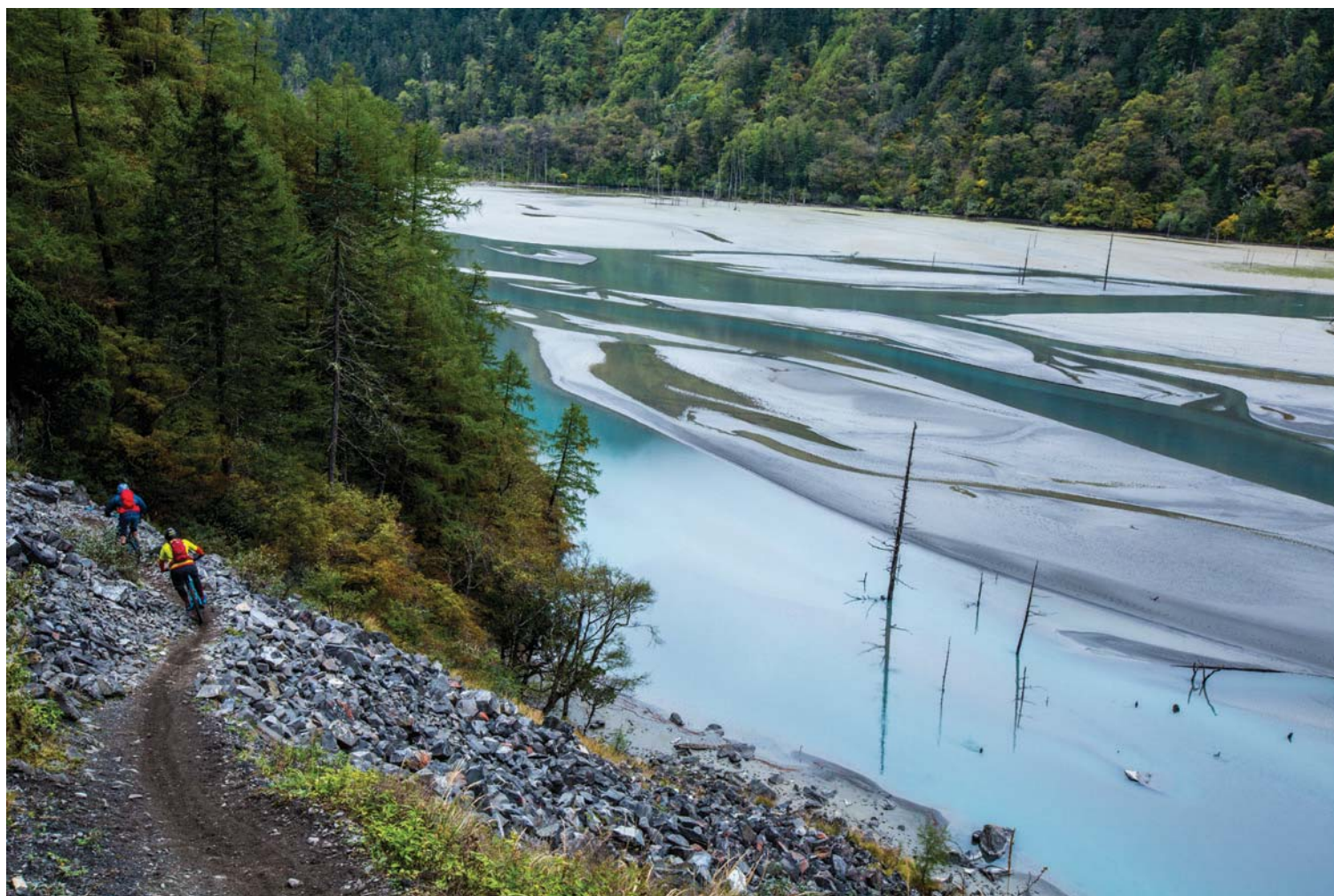
Next day began with a long delay on the highway so that we didn't get riding until after lunch. We spun uphill, weaving up a road on an endless series of switchbacks, climbing high onto a windy ridgeline. Eventually we left the dirt road and headed off on yak trails, contouring around grassy slopes on perfectly in-cut singletrack.

After whizzing along one of these sections of flowy goodness, I rolled up to the group and offered my highest praise to the furry cattle. "Yaks make amazing mountain biking trails," I gasped. Everyone agreed.

We were spurred on by views that kept getting better. Far to the west, two of the most holy peaks in Tibet bookended the horizon, a glimpse of what lay in our own futures. The more northerly was Mt Yala, a 5,820-metre craggy unclimbed summit and our goal over the next two days. From there, we were to head south towards, Mt Gongga (Minya Konka in Tibetan), the 7,556-metre high point of a spectacular string of snowcapped peaks. It is the most easterly 7,000-metre peak in the Himalaya and we would spend the last three days of the trip riding from guesthouse to guesthouse towards its base.

But, first we had to finish day two. As the day progressed, the altitude and long effort took its toll. Just about everyone was suffering: headaches and nausea mostly, but also cold. One of the challenges of riding in Tibet is the variable weather. When it was sunny we were sweating in shorts and T-shirts. In the morning or when it was cloudy and windy, we froze. At one break our group stacked together like sardines, trying to stay warm.

Hamp was always at the back, herding the stragglers. Up front, Abu led





STEEPS AND SHALLOWS

Far left: The forest on the last day comes after a week above treeline and brings some fast and muddy riverbank trail. Left: Matt Yaki negotiates some of the hardest singletrack on the trip, steep and exposed in this section before mellowing out at the bottom.



JUST THE RIDE WIDTH

Matt Yaki and Ryan Stuart working another yak trail. Generations of hooves have scuffed out flowing hillside singletrack perfect for riding.

us forward, encouraging us with, “There’s just one more hill.” After four “just one more” hills we realised it was a classic guide’s ploy to keep us moving. Eventually we really did top the last hill and then it was a freeride: trailless descent through grass and juniper bushes to the valley below.

Near the bottom, in the dim of twilight, we buzzed a nomad’s camp, spooking the yaks tied up outside. For most Tibetans, the yak is their whole life. They milk them, eat them, dry the dung to burn for cooking and warmth and gather the soft, super-warm fur to spin into clothing.

The nomads sprang from their tent, probably expecting a wolf, only to find a dozen white people on mountain bikes. They recovered quickly, their surprise shifting to shy smiles. They pointed us towards the trail that led to a small village and then a road right down to the highway and our bus, waiting to take us to our stop for the night, the town of Tagong.

It’s in Tagong that we got the full Tibetan immersion. But after what for most was to be the most challenging day of the trip, we were in no state to appreciate it that night. Next morning though, we woke to find ourselves in the centre of a bustling monastery town. In the early sun, pilgrims and locals walked in endless circles around the monastery walls, some prostrating themselves every 50m, others twirling prayer wheels or fingering beads.

Most Tibetans are highly spiritual. On every ride we passed piles of

mani stones, flat rocks carved with the mantra, *om mani padme hum*. Prayer flags flapped from every high point, hillside, roofline and pretty much everywhere else. Square papers with prayers written on them tumbled across the grasslands taking good luck with them. Their homes too are spiritual places. Most are intricately decorated and painted in the same vibrant colours found on their prayer flags.

That day we climbed rolling hillsides and then bumped down a long rocky descent to a campsite: the trip’s only night in a tent. Beneath Yala’s glaciated north face it was one of the most spectacular spots I’d ever slept. The stars were so thick they looked like clouds in the moonless darkness.

The next day we pushed our bikes even closer to the holy mountain before flowing downhill for more than 20km, losing almost 1,500m, to a hot spring. After a blissful soak and dinner, we drove south and west to set us up for the last half of the trip.

Our fifth day of riding found us spinning up one of the most unique valleys I’d ever seen. Rather than a defined creek, water popped up then disappeared again, flowing here and there in streams that spilled across the gravel and grass. We ate lunch next to a waterfall cascading off rock stained orange by minerals.

“That’s the coolest climb I have ever done,” said Matt Yaki, a mountain

bike guide from British Columbia's interior mountains. "It was such interesting terrain you almost didn't notice all the climbing."

As I rode away after the lunchbreak, Jim made his promise of a surprise at the top of the climb. A few spins of the pedals later though and my brain has reset itself to Neanderthal simpleton. Breathe in, breathe out. Steer around rock, breathe . . . god, the pass is still a long ways off, breathe...next corner I'll take a break, breathe . . . drink some water, breathe . . .

The approach to the pass cut under a high hill that runs steeply down to the road, so it was not until I was almost in the cleft in the ridgeline that the view beyond suddenly opened up. Then, boom! In one bike-length, my view went from brown, rocky hillside to a dog's jaw of canine peaks. The Mt Gongga Massif. Backed by a cloudless blue sky and underlined by brown hills, the mountains popped and so did my eyes.

"Holy sh#t. Look at that. Wow. F-ing amazing. Whooooooooo!" Verbal diarrhea poured forth as I pulled up to the front pack of riders. We were all smiling and high fiving, shouting over each other in our excitement. Then the next rider rounded the corner and repeated the performance.

After five hard days of riding, of being cold and wind battered, hammered by pounding altitude headaches, deprived of comforts such as Western toilets, fed strange food and still jet lagged, we had been taken so low. And now we were on top of the world. The release was total.

Later, a few of us hiked our bikes up to a small summit above the pass, topping out at 4,718m. It was as high as we'd go. From there we could see our descent down rough roads into a quiet mountain valley and the waiting guest house where we would sip beer and slurp bowl after bowl of soup.

The next day, we climbed another pass with a closer view of Gongga and then began a 3,400-metre descent, over two days, off the Tibet Plateau. Along the way we'd pioneer a wild descent, rollercoaster down a narrow gorge, ride through about 10 different climatic zones and finally arrive in a tiny Chinese town in the rainforest.

But before all that we had this moment on this no-name summit with a world-class view. "You know what's amazing about this trip?" said Elladee Brown, a bike industry sales rep from Vancouver who had ridden all over the world. "Every ride's been different. Each one had its own character. And every one was world-class."

I realised I felt the same without quite understanding why. There are plenty of places with more flowing trails, purpose-made for biking. The scenery had been epic at times, but there are many beautiful mountain ranges. The insight into Tibetan culture had been fascinating but fleeting. So why did we all agree this was one of the best mountain bike trips ever?

A little later, I was struggling with a flat a couple of kilometres shy of the guesthouse, knowing the rest of the group was already there, sat drinking beer. Suddenly, the answer came to me. The Buddha famously taught that life is suffering. He didn't mean we are in constant pain. He was talking about our habit of clinging to pleasure even though it is impermanent.

The mountain biking on this far edge of Tibet is so good, I realised, because it is so hard. Without the pain, the pleasure would not be so sweet. Enlightened, and back on two wheels, I rode off towards the beer that lay waiting at day's end. My head pounded, my legs were knotted with fatigue and I couldn't be happier. **AA**

PRACTICALITIES

When to go

Generally, the best riding weather is in October. Earlier in the summer and fall tends to be rainier and later the chances of snow increase. Extravagant Yak is running two mountain bike trips in 2018, June 21-July 1 and October 11-21.

How to get there

Most visitors to this part of Tibet arrive via Chengdu's busy international airport and then drive eight hours to the plateau. A new expressway to Kangding, scheduled to open in fall 2018, will cut the drive in half. An alternative is to fly into Kangding's own airport.

What to take

Bring plenty of clothing options to deal with Tibet's variable weather. You'll need your own bike: an all-mountain, dual suspension model is best for the long climbs and rough descents. And bring plenty of spare parts – even Chengdu has limited options.

Further info

The combination of long climbs, technical descents and high elevation demand fitness and intermediate to advanced riding skills. Expect to be in the saddle four to six hours every day.

Contacts

Extravagant Yak, (86-28) 8510 8093, www.extravagantyak.com
Travel resources for Kham Tibet, see www.tibetpedia.com

