Dear Travelers:

The Tibetan Highlands in Sichuan are a remote corner of China, with a network of backroads that impart a constant sense of discovery. Rivers, plunging toward Sichuan, have created a labyrinth of gorges and snow-clad peaks with stunning landscapes, diverse alpine habitats, and superb opportunities for cultural insight.

This summer we will travel overland from the metropolis of Chengdu, cultural center of Sichuan, through giant panda country to the river gorge and plateau landscapes in Western Sichuan (eastern Tibet). Our journey will culminate in Yading National Park and the sacred peaks of Konkaling.

We will spend an introductory day in Chengdu, a city renowned for its tea houses, temple gardens, and literary traditions. Then our journey begins with a drive to Ya’an and the Bifengxia Panda Sanctuary. The riverside towns along our route, Ya’an and Baoxing, formed through centuries of trade and acted as gateways where Sichuan Chinese and Tibetans could learn each others’ contrasting ways.

Nearby Fengtongzhai Panda Reserve is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site for Giant Panda Conservation, and it was in this area that the French Catholic priest Père David obtained four panda skins. In the late 19th century, he first described this enigmatic species to the West.

Above Baoxing, we begin to encounter the distinctive architecture and religious iconography of Tibet, placing us at the edge of a cultural region that extends across 1,500 miles of high plateau to Ladakh, India. People in this part of eastern Tibet belong to groups like the Qiang and the Jiarong, and are culturally distinct from other Tibetans.

Farmers by tradition, the Jiarong have long interacted with lowlanders of the Sichuan Basin, bartering bricks of tea carried by pony along ancient trading routes through the mountains. Over the years, they have built many great stone watchtowers whose purpose even today remains uncertain.

Leaving the gorge country behind, we will see a shift to the lifestyles of the Tibetan Plateau: less farming, more livestock, and summers spent in portable black felt tents with yaks and goats close at hand. Horses (and increasingly motorbikes) are an important means of transport.

Buddhist symbols dominate the landscape in a very literal sense. Hill slopes are decorated with esoteric arrays of prayer flags and colorful banners. The same message is carved repeatedly, hypnotically, into riverside boulders.

Around the towns of Bamei and Tagong, long-haired Khampa men ride horseback in their traditional robes, adorned with coral and turquoise, images of their favorite lama worn discretely. Gold-roofed monasteries align with sacred, snow-clad peaks. After a night in the plateau town of Litang, a cultural hub of eastern Tibet, we will traverse
a region denuded by glaciers and now covered in diverse alpine wildflowers.

Our journey will culminate amidst the sacred peaks of Konkaling, first described to the Western world by botanist-explorer Joseph Rock, who visited and photographed this area in 1928.

After more than a century of chaos and deprivation, Konkaling, now a part of Yading National Park, has emerged with new infrastructure that enables visitors to reach the sacred circle of peaks much more easily than Joseph Rock did.

Please Note: This tour will be a deeply rewarding experience for passengers who enjoy travel on scenic, winding mountain roads. We will make frequent stops, and most days do not require excessively long drives, but we will travel most every day.

Most nights will be spent in valley locations at elevations below 11,000 feet, and we will have one night in the town of Litang, which is more than 13,000 feet elevation. Lodging will be “best available,” which means basic amenities everywhere, but some hotels may reflect local rather than Western standards of opulence.

Some days we will drive and take short walks at elevations that may exceed 14,000 feet, although we do not intend to spend long periods of time at these elevations, nor engage in sustained activity this high. The higher elevation areas will come later, after we have had some time to acclimatize.

The landscape at Yading is powerfully scenic and ecologically significant. Mountains of limestone approach 20,000 feet in elevation; their glaciated summits, each named for a Tibetan deity, are symmetrical and enveloped in snow of the purest white. Tibetan pilgrims come from far and wide to perform kora, walking around the peaks in a clockwise direction. Alpine plant diversity is tremendous. Colorful and species-rich taxa like gentians, primrose, rhododendron, and ground orchids will all be in full flower at the time of our visit.

This expedition—in both its natural and cultural aspects—is extremely conducive to photography, with fantastic skies, clear mountain air, and huge contrasts between the sacred and the profane, the traditional and contemporary aspects of Tibetan/Chinese culture.

We invite you to join us on this extraordinary adventure!

Best regards,

Ted Elliman
Expedition Leader
Days 1/2  Boston to Beijing & Chengdu
Depart Boston for Beijing, arriving in early evening on Day 2. Transfer to hotel for a restful overnight before our flight to Chengdu tomorrow.

Day 3  Beijing to Chengdu
Depart on a flight to Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province and one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Chengdu is the birthplace of much of Sichuan’s culture. See beautiful temple gardens and teahouses this afternoon, and restored neighborhoods near People’s Park. Welcome trip orientation and dinner.

Day 4  Chengdu to Ya’an
This morning, we will depart for Ya’an in panda country. Arrive in Ya’an in time for lunch and enjoy a local fish specialty. In the afternoon, we will visit one of the ancient towns situated along the trade routes out of Chengdu. At Wangyu, a farming village, houses are built of wood on either side of an ancient and mossy cobbled lane.

Day 5  Bifengxia Pandas
This morning, we will visit the giant panda breeding and conservation center of Bifengxia. This important facility is located on hill slopes where pandas occupy large, naturalistic enclosures. It is one of the most important research bases for panda conservation in Sichuan. In the afternoon, we will drive along the Qingyi River. Ancient logs are excavated from the river (buried by landslides millennia ago); many species are no longer found in this part of China. The city of Baoxing is a compact Sichuan hill town and is refreshingly cool and pleasant for an evening walk along the river.

Day 6  Dawei
This morning, we will visit a Catholic church that was founded in the 19th century and served as the parish of Père Armand David, a French priest who contributed much insight into Chinese natural history and was the first Westerner to describe the Giant Panda. The chapel is in good condition and is actively supported by the local community whose members come to worship and sing together.

This afternoon we will pass Futongzhai Panda Reserve and cross Jiijn Pass (12,000+ feet). Along the way, we transition from spruce forest to alpine grasslands, with several wonderful opportunities to photograph alpine wildflowers like *Mecanopsis* blue poppy, Edelweiss, and *Silene*. From the crest of the pass, we will descend into the semi-arid Xiaojin river valley, passing forests of larch, spruce, and oak.

Our destination, the Tibetan town of Dawei, supports a venerable Tibetan Buddhist monastery, much of which was well preserved through the tumultuous 20th century. Accommodations are in a pleasant family-run hotel that overlooks the town.

Days 7/8  Dangba
Today we follow the Xiaojin River past fields of Sichuan pepper that scent the air. Intriguing, centuries-old stone watchtowers rise from precarious locations. A particularly impressive watchtower guards the entrance to Wori village, where we can walk on a path among riverside dwellings. Further along, Mengu is the site of an old iron bridge wrought entirely from chain. The Tibetan farming village of Zhonglu has beautifully crafted homes amongst fruit orchards, and many ancient watchtowers.

Today’s destination, the town of Dangba, is situated where several valleys come together to join the powerful Dadu River, an important tributary of the Yangtze. Gorge-bound Dangba is amazingly compact, but nearby villages retain the characteristic architecture of the Jiarong Tibetans, who are indigenous to this region. We will have a second day in Dangba to visit the Jiaju Tibetan cultural landscape.

Day 9  Xindu
Today, we will leave the river gorge country, ascending a forested tributary valley that opens onto the grasslands of Kham (eastern Tibet). If the weather cooperates, we will have great views of Yala Snow Mountain, rising behind several monasteries that gain stature from their proximity to this majestic peak.
In this season, the hills are brilliant green, visited by grazing yak and cattle. At the highest elevations, people still use traditional black tents for temporary accommodation when they are with their animals in the summer.

Around Bamei and Tagong, local people have decorated the hilly landscape with huge, colorful mandalas of ceremonial flags, derived from Tibet’s ancient pre-Buddhist shamanistic religions, and gigantic mani prayers assembled from painted stones. Stones along the river are covered with painted mani prayers and beautifully executed images of Tibetan deities. At Muya Monastery, we will see monks and local craftsmen carving prayer stones, which they color brightly before placing them around the edge of the monastery. Descending from Tagong, we pass through the fertile scenic valley of Xindu, where we link to the main road between eastern China and Tibet.

Day 10 Litang

After a morning to explore and photograph the traditional architecture of Xindu, we will cut across the grain of the landscape, crossing one mountain pass on either side of the spectacular Yalong River gorge. The busy town of Yajiang lies along the Yalong river, while yak and horses range the adjacent highlands. The meadows are an important point on the road to Tibet. In order to make a smooth descent to the Yalong Valley, the audaciously-engineered new road includes several 360 degree loops. Our destination for tonight is Litang, one of the higher towns in eastern Tibet. It offers one of our best opportunities to become acquainted with the horse-based Tibetan culture of Kham.

Day 11 Riwa

Today, we will traverse high plateau landscapes and then descend to the valley town of Riwa, gateway to Konkaling sacred mountains. We will pass an area that was glaciated during the ice age (curiously, for all its height, most of the Tibetan Plateau was not glaciated).

Today, the habitat here is still recovering: frost-rounded boulders blanket the landscape like a crop of giant potatoes, and glacial lakes shimmer in the distance. Out on the horizon, the mountains still retain ice caps. Streams flow everywhere, and alpine plants will be in full flower at the time of our visit. Highlights will include *Rheum* (wild rhubarb), primrose, and lousewort (Sichuan is a center of diversity for all of these genera), cinquefoil, dwarf rhododendron, saxifrage, and many others. This will be a wonderful time to poke among the boulders in search of botanical curiosities! The highest elevation today is about 15,400 ft.

In the afternoon we will descend, passing Tibetan villages where people farm mountain crops like barley, buckwheat, and mustard. We will pass the market town of Daochang to reach Riwa for an overnight at moderate elevations near the gateway to Yading National Park and the Konkaling sacred peaks.

Day 12 Yading National Park & World Biosphere Reserve

Today, we will visit Yading National Park, a scenic valley between the high peaks of Konkaling. It was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2003. Joseph Rock, an Austrian-American explorer, came into this region in 1928 on a National Geographic expedition. Some of his most interesting comments and finest photographs came from here. The 20,000-foot, glacier-covered limestone summits of Konkaling are sublimely beautiful, although they are frequently
cloud-cloaked in summer. Whether or not we are so fortunate as to glimpse the high peaks, we will certainly find the region remarkable, with distinctively textured rocks and rich alpine vegetation. Here are some of the highest forests in the world, with dense stands of larch and spruce growing at elevations over 14,000 ft. The Chonggu monastery near the entrance to the valley is especially important for Tibetan pilgrims who come here to walk around the peaks.

**Day 13/14  Daocheng to Chengdu & home**

We will drive to Daocheng for a flight to Chengdu. Enjoy the Sichuan opera this evening and a festive farewell! On Day 14 take flights to Beijing and the USA.
Discover the Tibetan Highlands of Sichuan
A Backroads Journey to Fascinating Cultures and Spectacular Landscapes!
July 8-21, 2016

Costs & Conditions

Trip Fee:
$3,995 per person twin share plus air fare $1,595 from Boston to Chengdu, round trip, on Hainan Airlines and $295 in-tour air.

Expedition Fee Includes:
Land transport; group airport transfers; accommodations twin share; all meals; entrance fees; tips to local guides and drivers; baggage handling; leadership, administration.

Expedition Fee Does Not Include:
Air fare (quoted separately); independent transfers; ; gratuity to expedition leader; personal items such as laundry, phone calls, alcoholic beverages, snacks; personal insurance, or foreign airport departure taxes.

What to Expect:
This expedition is for travelers who would like to explore the Tibetan Highlands of remote western Sichuan with an excellent naturalist and local guide. This trip is a rich cultural and natural history experience with great opportunities for scenic photography in the pristine beauty of spectacular mountain landscapes. The group will travel from 4 to 6 hours most days on winding mountain roads, up over a 12,000+ feet pass, with village visits and photography stops en route. Walks will be at a leisurely pace suitable for discovery.

It will be late summer with midday temperatures in the 60s to 80s; temperatures will be cool at the high elevations and at night. Nights are spent at 11,000 feet or lower, except one night at 13,000 feet. The expedition will be a tremendous experience for travelers with an appetite for adventure who would enjoy this rare opportunity to explore the Tibetan Highlands of western Sichuan made famous by the photography of Joseph Rock! We will have a grand adventure of discovery. (No smoking in vehicles, during lectures, or meals please.)

Air Fare & Airline Ticketing: Please phone Taunya at Betchart Expeditions, (800) 252-4910, for information about the group flights from Boston. AIR FARES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE UNTIL TICKETED.

Accommodations: Are twin share in first-class hotels in Beijing and Chengdu, and in modest country style hotels in western Sichuan. Hotels will be clean and adequate and with private baths for each room. Single accommodations will be a supplement of $695.

Reservations, Deposits & Payments: Please mail a deposit of $500 per person with the completed reservation form to:
Tibetan Highlands of Sichuan 2016
Betchart Expeditions Inc.
17050 Montebello Road
Cupertino, CA 95014-5435

The balance is due 60 days before departure.

Questions:
Please call Taunya at Betchart Expeditions Inc.
Telephone: (800) 252 4910 (USA)
or (408) 252 4910 (International)
Fax: (408) 252 1444
Email: Taunya@betchartexpeditions.com

Cancellations & Refunds:
The initial deposit is refundable up to 60 days before departure, less a handling fee of $100 per person. There is no refund after the 60-day period unless your place is resold, then only the $100 per person handling fee is withheld. There are no refunds for unused meals or other expedition features.