

Always expecting the unexpected in Tibet

Plateau region is modernising and internationalising while sustaining local traditions. **Erik Nilsson** reports

Craft beer. Red wine. Pineapples. Yak burgers. Burger King. Harley-Davidson.

Most folks would find at least many of these prospects enjoyable. But few would immediately associate them with the Tibet autonomous region.

Many people instead envision herders guiding yaks to graze beneath snowcaps. And they wouldn't be wrong. Such traditions not only survive but also thrive in Tibet.

Yet they do so at intersections with such dimensions of development, advancing infrastructure, accelerating innovation and enhanced economic growth. That's not to mention internationalisation.

You can order a yak burger from at least one of Lhasa's five-star hotels, where a Harley-Davidson shop stocked with a fleet of top-end choppers greets visitors inside the main entrance.

Their engines are off. But their very presence rumbles.

Or you can eat at a Burger King next to — but, importantly, not on — Barkor Street.

The hogs and burgers beg questions about how Tibet's past and future define the region's place in the world today, especially within its key position within the Belt and Road Initiative's potential for tomorrow.

Speaking of time, I didn't have enough of it to eat any of the sandwiches there.

But I did buy bags of yak jerky and milk candy to give to friends and family when I make my summer visit to my US hometown.

I did so last time, too, using cash. This time I paid using WeChat.

Indeed, the autonomous region is modernising and internationalising while sustaining local traditions — in sometimes surprising ways.

It's not a land where the ancient and contemporary collide, like a time-machine fender bender.

Rather, it's a place where they coexist and work in synchrony, like the various parts of a vehicle steering forwards on the road towards tomorrow.

Tibet is a place to expect the unexpected — and when you least expect it. It's a destination that surprises, especially as its development accelerates.

This is what I've learned while exploring its vast territory during the Forum on the Development of Tibet, China, first in 2016 and again earlier June.

I was particularly impressed by an agricultural-innovation project in which tropical fruits — yes, like pineapples — were being grown on what's often described as the "planet's third pole", during my first visit.

This year, I was intrigued by the opportunity to sample locally produced microbrews and red wine.

It's not that Tibet isn't known for beer. Its mass-produced varieties, typically flaunting highland barley as its main ingredient, are popular around the country.

I like them. I sometimes buy them in Beijing.

The craft brewer, who sources most ingredients internationally, told me his young company is the first to enter the sector in Tibet. Two other entrepreneurs penetrated the regional market soon after.

Their unique concoctions are currently only available in Tibet.

But I'd buy them in Beijing. And I think many people in cities around the country and world would, too.

The region certainly isn't known for its wine. Few would think of vineyard-to-bottle production if they even ever thought of Tibet in vino terms.

It's perhaps time to start to. Grapes do grow on the plateau. And their potential is being bottled

locally only to be uncorked globally.

That said, traditional — consequently, more conventional — local products are also not only making inroads into the travel sector but also project their trade viability through trans-Himalayan exchanges in such areas as traditional medicine.

Three years ago, I learned a tremendous amount about how such poverty alleviation measures as urbanisation, vocational training and climate change mitigation are transforming the Tibet autonomous region.

This year, I also learned about Tibet's increasing prosperity and accelerated innovation and how it is becoming a major node of the Belt and Road Initiative.

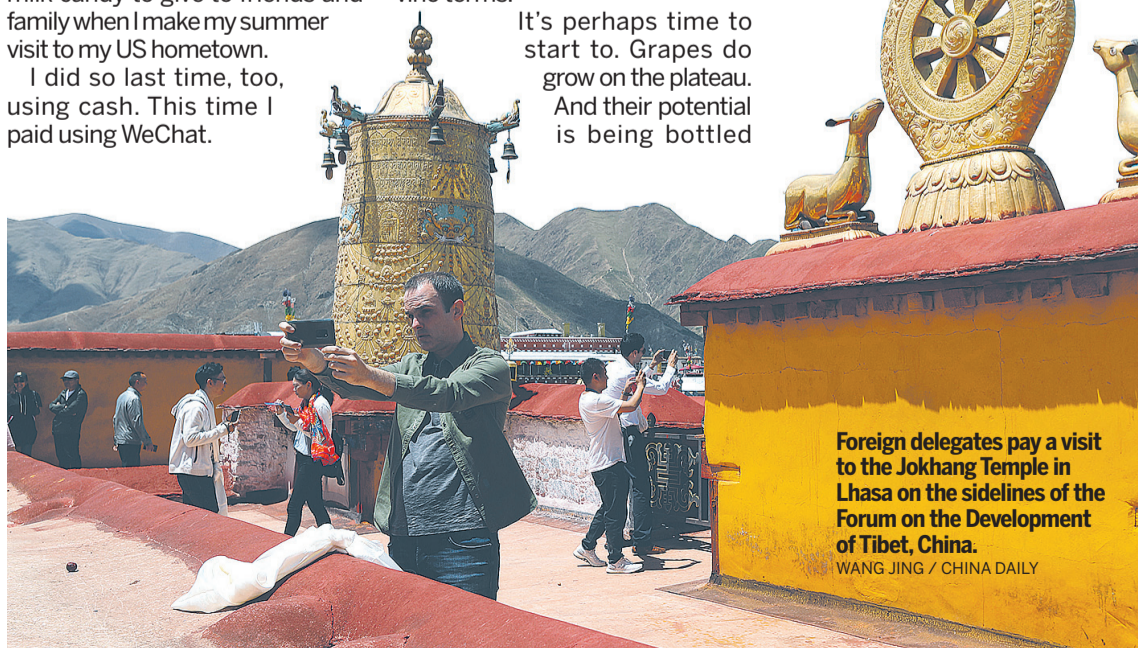
I listened as Nepalese participants, in particular, explained why they enthusiastically support plans for a cross-border railway from Tibet to Kathmandu agreed upon within the BRI framework. And I heard other participants voice hopes for their particular countries.

That was not only during onstage speeches and in discussion groups.

I perhaps learned the most about the reasons why they applaud their homelands' involvement in the initiative when we informally discussed it between swills of the local microbreweries' pale ales, stouts and lagers during an informal dinner.

The journey through Tibet also offered opportunities to visit villages and small towns in Nyingchi city to witness the region's rural development firsthand.

One family we visited in a village owned six cars and two cargo trucks. They earn about 400,000 yuan (\$82,640) a year from their transport business, tourism, farming and herding, construction materials and such products as wild herbs.



Foreign delegates pay a visit to the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa on the sidelines of the Forum on the Development of Tibet, China. WANG JING / CHINA DAILY



Homestays, as well as other tourism businesses, are proving to be an effective approach to poverty reduction. WANG JING / CHINA DAILY

Villagers embracing new occupations to escape life of poverty

By LIANG KAIYAN

19,000
yuan

the per capita net income of residents in 2018 in the Xiga Monba village in Manling county

18.14
million yuan

the total revenue of Bagchi village in 2018

Konggar, 35, still remembers the time when he lived with his family in a 50-square-metre shanty house on a mountain 16 years ago.

"I used to dig cordyceps on the plateau and live in a rat-infested house," he recalls.

Konggar is a villager of Xiga Monba village in Manling county in Nyingchi, the Tibet autonomous region. The village was founded in 2003 as a new settlement for people moving from poverty-stricken areas in Metog county.

Now, Konggar makes a living as a construction worker and the life of his family has changed, thanks to the support of local authorities in recent years.

In 2016, the country provided the village with financial support to build Tibetan-style villas, each with a floor space of more than 100 square metres. Each household could buy the house for 10,000 yuan (\$2,071) to 20,000 yuan.

"I moved to the new house in 2016 and I paid 15,000 yuan for it," Konggar says.

Also, the local government gives a subsidy of 1,800 yuan to each household every three months.

"Life is better and now my family can have a deposit of about 30,000 yuan annually," Konggar says.

The village currently has a total of 72 households with 318 people — the main income of the village is based on special crafts and transportation.

Drukdrak, a member of the village committee, says the income of local villagers comes mainly via the development of tourism, handicraft, transportation and transfer of land-use rights.

The village also has a co-operative engaged in producing Tibetan papers.

"Some local villagers will come here to work and the co-operative pays an average dividend of 50,000 yuan from its

total income to 72 households every year," he says.

By 2018, the per capita net income of villagers was 19,000 yuan and the goal of overall poverty alleviation was achieved.

Migmar, head of Bagchi village, has done the same thing concerning villagers' livelihood over the past 40 years.

About 3 kilometres from the outskirts of Nyingchi city, the village sits along the No 318 National Highway.

"In the late 1970s and 1980s, the village only grew grains and had a yearly revenue of about 200,000 yuan," Migmar says.

In 1985, the village signed an agreement with the local forestry bureau to allow villagers to transport timber, helping them earn 600 yuan per year on average.

Since 2000, due to the country's ban on logging, Migmar says the village began to transform and develop tourism and other industries.

With its location advantages, the village has been burgeoning in industries such as construction materials, machinery and tourism.

Official data showed that last year, the village's revenue reached 18.14 million yuan.

Sonam Tsering, 51, is a villager of Bagchi who has been engaged in excavation and timber businesses for 30 years.

"Farming is a way to live but not to be rich," he says. "It is easier for us to run businesses thanks to various preferential policies, such as taxes and loans."