

Notes from Shangri-La

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Arrived in Shangri-La yesterday. The town has changed since last fall. There has been more building, as well as the tearing down of old buildings. A huge construction pit is in the middle of town. The city is coming out of the ground—all dug up and covered in its own dust. People stand around and watch from the corners.

Had some trouble breathing. The altitude is high. Cars drive five miles per hour, people wander in the streets; time passes slowly into thin air. David and I meander through town with our equipment. I tell him I will run until I can't run any longer. I stop after three blocks.

We got up at 6:30AM and took a walk through the "Old Town." Elementary-school children walk to school with backpacks and musical instruments: drums, bugles, and horns. A hall monitor stands at the gate making sure all the children wear their class pins and bandanas.

On the way through town, the driver told me that sometimes he takes tourists to Shangri-La. They say that the name sounds nice, but that it's kind of boring. There was a plane crash here during the Second World War, and that is why Shangri-La is set here, in this place. They also found a stone tablet inscribed with "Shangri-La" somewhere in a field. No one knew much about it, except that it was taken away and put in a museum.

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A lamasery sits on the face of the mountains overlooking the town. Monks are everywhere: sitting on street corners, shopping for sunglasses, begging, riding motorcycles.

A singer we met said that Shangri-La doesn't have any authentic Tibetan culture of its own. In the past, the government suppressed the culture, but now they are reinventing it themselves.



We looked at hotels today, too many to remember. Some that I liked: the clouds on the ceiling of the Jindi Hotel, the glassed-in balcony of the Potala Hotel, the massage parlor of the Holy Palace. A sex shop sells revitalizing herbs called Fierce Old Man with a drawing of Uncle Sam.

Moved into a new guesthouse this afternoon. Out our window is a view of the largest prayer wheel in the world. It is gold with scenes of Lhasa and takes six people to spin it.

Lhamu, our guide, lives across the street in an empty Tibetan house. She comes every morning to look for us, and we go out on our bikes to explore the town.

Today we went to the Paradise Hotel. Hollow music plays in the cavernous space. The atrium opens up six stories and is filled with trees and flowers that surround an unused swimming pool. In high altitudes, swimming is exhausting and ill advised. In the morning, dew condenses on the windows of the atrium, creating an unintentional rain shower, which has an unsettling yet transporting effect. A towering re-creation of the sacred snow mountain has been built at one end of the atrium. At the other end is a rock cliff of ledges and chasms, as if in answer to the snow mountain. It stands empty except for a few Chinese tourists.

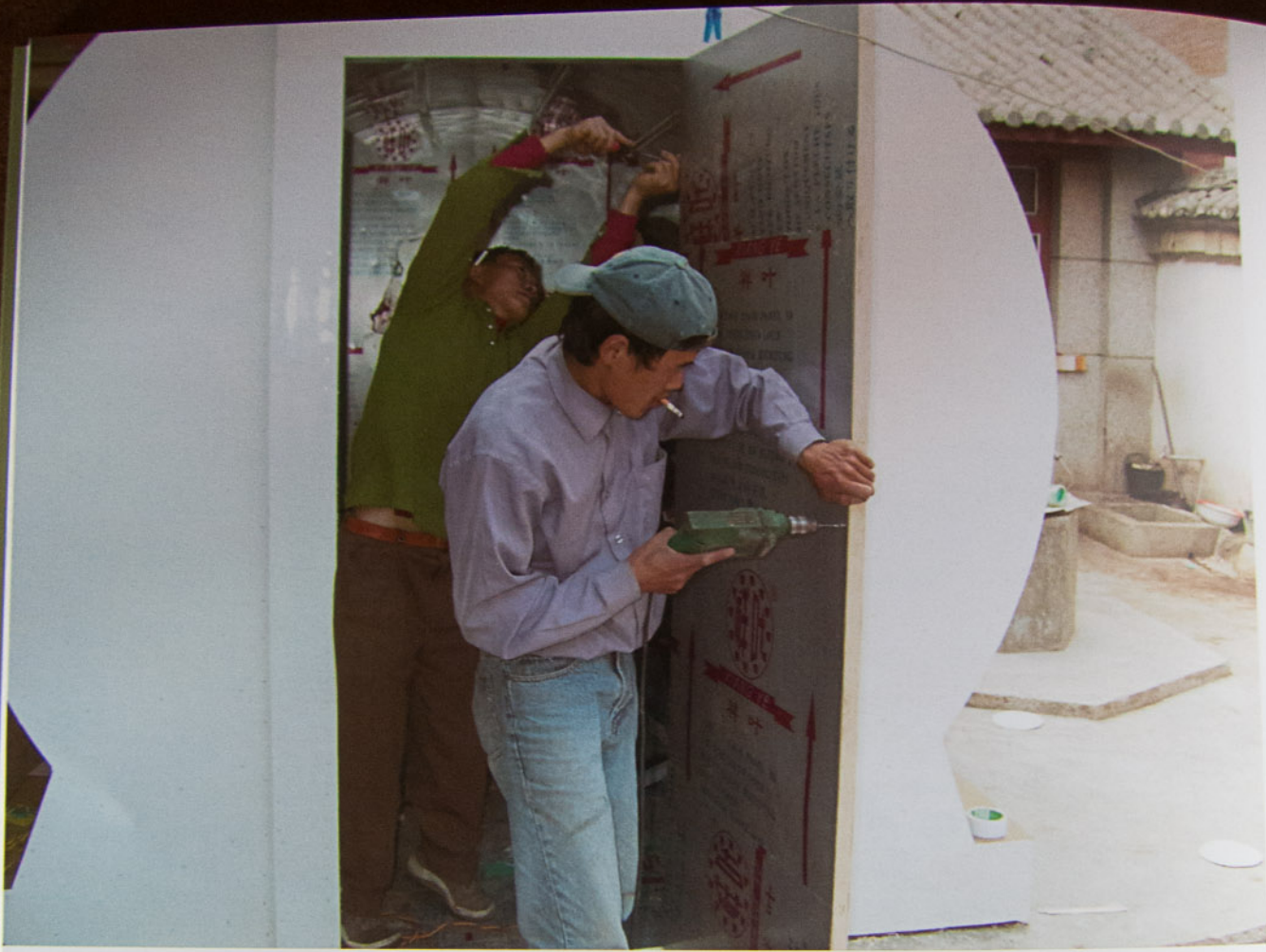
At lunch, I ordered a beer underneath the snow mountain. I got a headache and went to the high-altitude sickness clinic. Dr. Zhang is the resident doctor for all high-altitude sickness patients in Shangri-La. They have an oxygen pressure chamber used to treat people who suffer from too little oxygen or too much alcohol. The chamber resembles a submarine and a space ship. Oxygen masks hang over numbered velour seats.

For some reason there are seatbelts.

We find an architect to build a replica of the oxygen pod because Iris, the manager of the Paradise, won't let us shoot inside. The architect's assistant wears a uniform of a blue hat, camouflage shirt, and brown pants.

The architect built the pod in the courtyard of Lhamu's sister's house. Monks went in the pod today. Sometimes laughing, sometimes yawning, talking on their cellphones, singing songs, or telling jokes: moments of affection or nothing happening at all.









At the bakery, a cake decorator works in a cubicle of glass. He makes horses, dragons, and smiling pigs. The owner won't let us film the process, so we find someone else. The new baker instructs his son to make mountains out of frosting. They construct the cake on a pedestal, and everyone gives an opinion on how the oxygen pod crashes into the mountain.

Our water was turned off today. Old Town is being renovated and the Tibetan homes are being converted into bars and guesthouses. Outside our guesthouse, workers are digging a trench to lay a sewer pipe. Neighbors come to harvest the white clay for painting their houses. The rain turns the streets into rivers of mud. My father brings the mountain cake for the workers to eat on their lunch break.

Rode our bikes out along the edge of the hill where we could see the airport in the distance. On the outskirts of town, a monk runs a karaoke bar. There is a fantastic view of the mountains, and it seems so peaceful. We watch the clouds pass. He wanted the snow mountain built right in front where everyone could see it.

When we arrived in the morning there was no one around; open doors revealed beer bottles and teacups left in the karaoke rooms. Teenagers appeared. There seemed to be two groups of women: some hung out in the dining room, and some hung out in the karaoke room drinking beer and weaving flowers into their hair. They all slept in tiny rooms out back. The monk drove up in a four-by-four and changed into wing-tipped shoes and a Marlboro golf hat. Then lots of men came by and everyone gave an opinion about how to fix the mountain. There were Tibetan dogs everywhere being bred. The garbage outside the women's rooms was overflowing with ramen cups, dried-out flower wreaths, and condom boxes. The architect carved foam boards and glued them together in the wind. In the end, the foam, blown like snow all over the compound, couldn't hold the shape of the mountains. We dragged them to the back of the house so that they were out of the way of the evening's customers.





In the newspaper I read that they found a mountain in the ocean. It grounded a submarine full of soldiers on their way somewhere deep. The captain hadn't noticed the mountain in front of them until it was too late. The mountain's form is visible in satellite pictures from outer space. Though only a hundred yards shy of breaking the surface of the water, it doesn't, because that would be something else entirely.

Yesterday afternoon we started to put the mountain together in wood. When the architect was around, the building went smoothly because he flowed with the materials. When he was gone, the assistants spent more time agonizing over the angles of the facets.

The mirror is being laid on the mountain. I imagine that the mirrored facets will implode in on themselves from reflecting their surroundings. It's hard to know exactly the effect it will take. It is important that the mountain has motion. I want to put it on a vehicle to transport, to reflect its environment. In the landscape, it becomes very small; with people surrounding it, it becomes human size. Either way, it appears to be a gigantic trinket. The architect is careless with the mirror and cuts himself and his clothes.

Rode to the airport again. It is always deserted, and it feels strange to walk in and have no one around. A Chinese flag waves at the entrance. The sign says "Shangri-La," "Shangri-La," "Shangri-La" in Tibetan, Chinese, and English. Xiao Zhuoma guards the entrance to Shangri-La. She puts on her uniform when the plane arrives three times a week. Sometimes they add a plane if a tour is extra large.

Spent the last two days relaxing, cooking, in a daze. Almost had a heart attack when I left my purse at the hot-pot restaurant. Luckily, they put my purse in the cupboard for safekeeping. I watercolored some horses in a pasture for the hot-pot waitress.

The market is half vegetable and half meat vendors, mostly pork. I was walking over the cement floor and stepped into what I thought was a shallow puddle of water, but ended up falling into a sewer of rotting pig guts and vegetables. The whole market fell silent except for some nervous laughter. We spent the night at the Jindi Hotel, where I cleaned up and we ate ramen under the cloudy ceiling.









