

# Tourism in Tibet and the Impact of March 2008

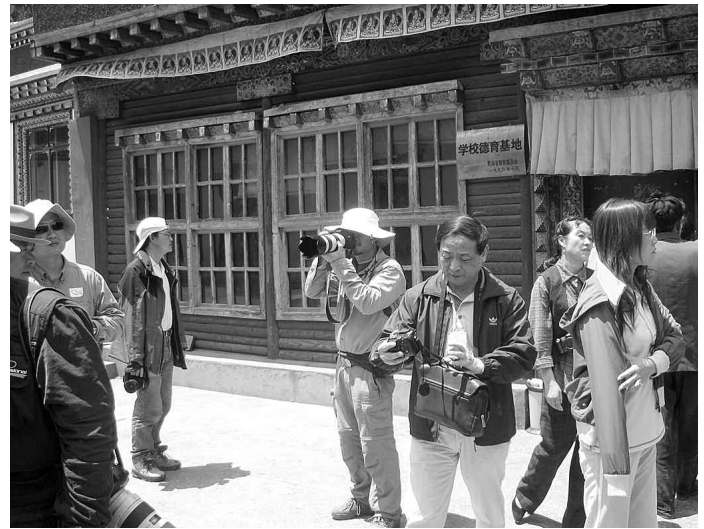
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**ACCELERATED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT UNDER CURRENT CHINESE GOVERNMENT POLICIES** and, in particular, the advent of the railroad and resulting increase in tourism, have heightened concerns for the survival of Tibet's unique identity. Ironically, as the Chinese authorities market Tibet within China as a tourist destination based on its "mysterious" culture and spectacular landscape, they are tightening control over Tibetan religious expression and practice by the Tibetan people.

Today in Tibet, courtyards where hundreds of monks were once taught and debated scriptures are now occupied by photo booths where tourists wear garish versions of traditional costumes to pose for the camera. In parts of eastern Tibet, entire monasteries are run as commercial concerns where the salespeople dress in maroon robes, attempting to sell incense, statues and paintings to tourists.

Tourism hit an all time high in Tibet in 2007, with just over 4 million visitors, an increase of 64 percent year-on-year. Chinese officials explained the increase as a result of better marketing and improved transport links, including the controversial train to Lhasa from Golmud that began service in July 2006. The Chinese government forecast that the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) would receive at least 5 million tourists in 2008—a figure that is nearly twice its population according to Chinese statistics. That figure was not met, as in the immediate wake of the protests in Lhasa (and elsewhere in Tibet) in mid-March 2008, the Chinese authorities severely restricted tourists entering the TAR, and stopped all foreign tourists. Xinhua reported that by October 2009, Tibet had already received 4.75 million tourists.

Domestic tourism to the TAR resumed in time for the national week-long May Day vacation in early May 2008, six weeks after the unrest in Lhasa. Only a trickle of Chinese tourists traveled to Lhasa, where many buildings were still shuttered and smoke-stained following the March 14 unrest, and police still lined the streets. Government spokespeople were initially vague about when foreign tourists would be allowed back to the TAR, with most observers guessing not until after the Olympics finished



**Chinese tourists in Tibet.**

and probably not until the Paralympics finished in September. While a spokesman announced in late June 2008 that tour groups—as opposed to individual, independent travelers—were to be accepted again as of June 25, 2008, the TAR was not formally reopened to all tourists in possession of travel permits until April 5, 2009.

For the foreseeable future, tourists are likely to face the most cumbersome and expensive application procedures ever seen for entering the TAR. Chinese authorities claim that these restrictions are intended to protect foreign tourists from possible instances of further unrest; but they are also well aware that foreign tourists in Tibet have witnessed and reported on instances of severe human rights abuses against the Tibetan people.

TAR officials set a target of 3.4 billion *yuan* (US \$460 million) in revenue from tourism in 2007 and expect at least 6 billion *yuan* (US \$770 million) from 6 million tourists in 2010. But analysts report that much of the revenue from tourism leaves the region. Development economist Andrew Fischer, a specialist on Tibet's economy, says: "Most of the tourists visiting the TAR are Chinese nationals and they mostly stay in Chinese-owned and -run hotels on the west side of Lhasa, close to an abundant supply of Chinese restaurants and entertainment centers, complete with Chinese

brothels and Chinese sex workers, who obviously service the military personnel and cadres stationed there as well. It is likely that much of the revenue that such tourism generates is channeled through such venues and eventually out of the province altogether. Under such conditions, the tourism industry will have a difficult time functioning as a self-sustaining pillar industry that accumulates capital and profits in the TAR, rather than servicing as another drain from which incoming resources flow back out of the province almost as fast as they enter.” (See: ICT report, *Tracking the Steel Dragon*, [www.savetibet.org](http://www.savetibet.org).)

The Chinese government prioritizes fast-track economic development above cultural protection, and changes in Chinese laws and regulations tend to decrease the protection of the Tibetan language and culture. The commoditization of Tibetan culture and promotion of “Tibet chic” by government and business coincides with a trend towards repression and, in fact, the weakening of Tibetan identity. The replacement of Tibetan tour guides with Chinese guides is just one example of how the authorities block Tibetans interpreting their culture to visitors and the outside world.

Tourism has the potential to bring enormous financial benefit to Tibet and the Tibetan people. And as an industry, tourism can be a way to support the traditional Tibetan lifestyle as well as providing training and employment for Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike. However, in the process of rapidly expanding the tourism industry in Tibet, Tibetans are being denied the ability and right to speak for their own lives and culture, even while increased and un-trammeled tourism is proving unsustainable in Lhasa in particular, and increasingly throughout all of Tibet. Fundamentally, if the tourism industry in Tibet does not include more Tibetans as the stewards of their own culture and environment—the very assets upon which tourism in Tibet relies—there is the very real risk that the segregation and alienation already faced by Tibetans in Tibet will become so entrenched as to be irreversible, wholly undermining Tibet’s appeal to tourists.