



My Journey to Lhasa

By Alexandra David-Néel
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Introduction

I craved to go beyond the garden gate,
to follow the road that passed it by,
and to set out for the Unknown.

Vowing to "reach Lhasa and show what the will of a woman could achieve," Frenchwoman Alexandra David-Néel set off towards the capital of Tibet in 1923. Fluent in Tibetan and well versed in both Sanskrit and Buddhism, the 55-year old Parisian disguised herself as a pilgrim and made her way to the Forbidden City with Lama Yongden, who she had adopted. Traveling on foot and mostly at night to avoid suspicious townspeople, David-Néel and Yongden carried small amounts of food, money, weapons, and the bare necessities underneath their Tibetan garb. For months, they braved the conditions of steep mountains, extreme climates at high altitudes, the threat of thieves and robbers, and the constant danger of being discovered as outlaw travelers. No foreigners, and certainly no women, were allowed to venture into the country.

Born a woman of good social and financial standing, David-Néel adopted the role of a peasant so as not to alarm local people unused to travelers. She begged for food and shelter while she slyly sought information that would lead her and Yongden safely through the "Land of Snows." But she also felt strongly about following her own instincts: "In a country so little known as Thibet it seems better to avoid following tracks that have already been trod, every time one has the chance to do so." It was a historically important moment when she arrived at Lhasa in time for the Great Prayer Festival. David-Néel rejoiced at being the first Western woman to enter the city. It was a personal and cultural triumph that she was able to live in Tibet for a short while and to be received by the Dalai Lama.

Unfortunately, much of the Tibet of David-Néel's era no longer exists. A great deal of the landscape, wildlife, buildings, and government have changed since the Chinese invasion of 1949 and the subsequent Buddhist Holocaust. Fortunately, with *My Journey to Lhasa*, Alexandra David-Néel has created an essential piece of work, capturing the essence of Tibetan culture and the author's deep affection for it:

I cannot say often enough that Thibet is a land of wonder
which changes everything for the best.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the new introduction to the book, Diana Rowan cites other contemporary women who were influenced by Alexandra David-Néel. Which historical figures have inspired you to be more adventurous in either your actions or thinking?
2. "What decided me to go to Lhasa was, above all, the absurd prohibition which closes Thibet" (page xxxiv). Discuss the history of Tibet and how this book changed your view, if at all, on the nation steeped in mystery and controversy.
3. "As for the name Thibet, it may be interesting to know that it is a word unknown in the Thibetan language. Its origin is not quite clearly traced, but Thibetans ignore it completely" (page xl). What do you think that says about Tibet's history and culture?
4. "We have told the good villagers whom we have just left...that we are going for a botanical excursion in the neighbouring mountains" (page 2). The author begins her journey disguising the truth from everyone except her companion Yongden, the lama. Did you have mixed feelings about all the deception they practiced—especially that of the lama—in order to discover the truth about Lhasa?
5. Discuss the importance of the "iron bridge" experience to the author's quest as well as to the element of storytelling in the book.
6. Why did the author and Yongden travel as Tibetan pilgrims? What were the advantages and disadvantages of David-Néel's disguise?
7. "A strange intuition warned me that the ugly-looking, dirty article was to be of great use to me—that, indeed, it had been sent to me" (page 62). What was the article and how did it help David-Néel? Did you get the sense that the author was, by nature, someone who believed in such things as signs or omens or do you think that she became influenced by the mystical nature of Tibetans?
8. Discuss the irony of "the most respectful of Thibetan salutes?"
9. "When the people of the borderland hear about foreigners climbing the hills, traveling through distant lands or merely taking photographs, they cannot believe that this is done for personal satisfaction only... What sensible man, think the Thibetans, would take the trouble to move when he can remain seated at home?" (page 237). What do you think that statement reflects about Tibetans—that they are uninterested in lands not their own, or that they are already in possession of the knowledge others are constantly searching for?

10. Their disguise as beggars allowed the author and her companion no luxuries. Which of their experiences did you find the most shocking? At what point during their travels did you think they were in the most danger?

11. "Indeed, this world of the Thibetan mystics is a mystery in the mystery of Thibet, a strange wonder in a wonderland country" (page 198). Discuss the mystical or mysterious events that happened on their journey.

12. "For two months I was to wander freely in the lamaist Rome, with none to suspect that, for the first time in history, a foreign woman was beholding the Forbidden City" (page 257). Describe the atmosphere and events that awaited the author when she finally reached Lhasa. What surprised or disappointed her?

13. "Perhaps some of those who read of it, will remember that if 'heaven is the Lord's,' the earth is the inheritance of man, and that consequently any honest traveler has the right to walk as he chooses, all over that globe which is his" (page xxxix). Do you agree with the author, even in light of today's world situation?

About the Author

Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969) was an indomitable traveler, opera singer, journalist, and the first Western woman to enter the Forbidden City of Lhasa. In 1904, she married Philippe François Néel, but her wanderlust inhibited her from living the role of a traditional wife. Choosing, instead, to follow her passion, she studied eastern religions and traveled to India, the Far East, and Africa with her husband's blessing. In 1911, she graduated as a Lama in Northern India where she then spent a winter studying Buddhism while living in a cave with her adopted son Yongden. After three years in a Peking monastery, she traveled with Yongden from Calcutta to Burma, Japan, Korea, and across 5,000 miles of China into northeastern Tibet. It is the untamed lands of Tibet where David-Néel's memoir begins.

The author of several books and a legend in her own time, Alexandra David-Néel renewed her passport at the age of 100. She died just before her 101st birthday.

For more information about Alexandra David-Néel visit the official website at www.alexandra-David-Néel.org