From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet by Vikram Seth

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After two years as a postgraduate student at Nanjing University in China, Vikram Seth hitch-hiked back to his home in New Delhi, via Tibet. From Heaven Lake is the story of his remarkable journey and his encounters with nomadic Muslims, Chinese officials, Buddhists and others.

Reviews of the From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet by Vikram Seth

Rindyt

China has evolved as a society and political entity so fast that this diary of chronicle of events has become more of a history of things as they were 30 years ago in western China. Today one need not hitch hike to Lhasa but rather rides a 21st century train.
Reading this narrative we meet individuals, both Chinese and Tibetan, who are quite different from our stereotyped impressions.

The diary, to my mind ends too abruptly. I had the impression that the publisher limited the number of pages allowed.

**Manris**

After slogging through a couple of mediocre fiction books it was a pleasure to read Vikram Seth's account of his journey from China to India. The man can really write! His descriptions are clear, concise, and evocative. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in northern China, and Tibet.

**Uickabrod**

A great travel writer and storyteller (A Suitable Boy), although I am not as impressed with his later works. This book is excellent!

**Thetalas**

From one who has traveled a lot, and read a lot of history of this area, this book is very down-to-earth. One can smell and feel and taste the author's movements. And that's what I liked.

**Gold as Heart**

Ostensibly From Heaven Lake is a travel book. The description is both apt and limiting. It is worth musing on the idea that travel may be merely a way of collecting a pool of nostalgia for future regurgitation. But this particular description of the author's journey through China - initially west-east and then north-south in the early 1980s - does not seem to have added very much potential fuel to future's recollected fires.

At the time it was hardly common for an individual to travel independently in China, let alone enter Tibet via Qinghai or - even more unlikely - exit China via Tibet into Nepal. But this is precisely what Vikram Seth did, and to add icing to the achievement cake, his preferred mode of transport was hitch-hiking. It is largely the mechanics and logistics of this journey that provide most of the content of the book.

Vikram Seth had been a student in China, so his goal was to see some of the less visited parts of the country and to exit, eventually, to India to be reunited, after years in college, with his family. He did have some language without which, given the twists and turns bureaucracy forced, he would surely not have achieved his goal.

Near the start of the book the author is already in eastern China, visiting Turfan which, on the other end of an axis that starts in Tibet, must be one of the strangest places on the planet. It bakes in summer and freezes rigid in winter, is in the middle of a massive desert but makes its living from highly successful agriculture. On a visit to the karez, the ancient underground irrigation channels that bring water from the distant mountains, the author chances an unauthorised swim against his guide's advice. The author gets into difficulty. And this seems to be very much a thread that recurs throughout the narrative of From Heaven Lake. A determined first person seems intent on asserting a rather blind individuality in the context of a society that respects only conformity and seeks to exclude anything that suggests difference. In the conflict that ensues between these fundamentally different aims, we are presented with a catalogue of travel that seems to miss much of the potential experience of the country through which it moves. Thus much of the book deals with the process of travel, rather than its experience.

Despite this, From Heaven Lake is a worthwhile read. Besides Turfan we visit Urumqi and the high altitude lake that gives the book its title. The tour moves on to Xian, Lanzhou, Dunhuang and then
across Qinghai to Tibet and especially Lhasa. This city occupies much of the text, revealing that visiting it was very much at the heart of the author's consideration.

We do meet some interesting people along the way, but they are largely bureaucrats, drivers or officials associated with the author's travel arrangements. Given Vikram Seth's experience in the country, there seems to be a missed opportunity here, in that more people would have embroidered the text with more interesting and enduring detail than the repeated travel problems.

In its time, From Heaven Lake might perhaps have been a unique account of a trip that few contemporary travellers would have contemplated, let alone attempted. Today it still presents an interesting account of a personal challenge, but offers too little contemporary experience to motivate the general reader to stay on board.

Leniga

From the author of two best selling novels "A Suitable Boy" and "An Equal Music" this travel book is something very different. It is a delightfully written story created from the journals kept by Vikram Seth during his hitch-hiking traverse of China from Nanjing to Tibet. For most people, certainly for most westerners, this is about as far off the beaten track as it is possible to get. We sympathise with Seth as he endeavours to obtain the myriad of visas necessary to cross communist China. These include, entry visas, travel visas, permits to stay in a certain village/area/precinct/canton and of course, exit visas. The bureaucracy is simply immense and yet nobody has any real authority, always having to revert up the seemingly endless chain of superiors. Overcoming the man made hurdles is only part of the story as rain, floods, swamps, swollen rivers, altitude sickness, extreme cold, washed away bridges and difficult terrain pose further obstacles along the journey. During the narrative, Seth breaks off occasionally to discuss the Chinese political system and interestingly compares it with the Indian political system. The Chinese dictatorship virtually removes free will from the people whilst the wheels of Indian democracy slowly turn in a very different form of bureaucratic inefficiency. "One overwhelming fact" says Seth "is that the Chinese have a better system of social care and distribution than we in India do. Their aged do not starve. Their children are basically healthy. By and large the people are well clothed, very occasionally in rags." He goes on "The fact that we have elections every five years means that the government is afraid to undertake projects that are unpopular but beneficious in the long term. The Chinese government is not thus fettered". Throughout his travels, but particularly in Tibet, the smashed temples, buildings and works of art, to say nothing of the ruined families, present evidence of the destruction which was wrought during the cultural revolution. How ironic that I was reading this in April 2001 whilst the Taliban were destroying fifth century carvings of standing Buddhas in Afghanistan. This review would not be complete without a mention of the yaks which form part of the scenery along Seth's route. Whilst alive, the yak is an efficient machine converting grass into milk, butter, cheese and yoghurt. It provides a convenient means of transportation and delivers dung for fuel and fertiliser. Finally, the meat, bone, pelt, fur, hooves and tail provide sustenance, clothing, leather and material for tents and awnings. So, please read and enjoy this unique travelogue by an educated, eloquent and observant man, multilingual Vikram Seth, also known as Xie Binlang in China. You won't be disappointed.
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