

Tibet at a price

Fran Metcalf

NOW that she's written a book about her experiences in Tibet, Claire Scobie doesn't know if she'll ever be allowed to return there.

It's a high price for the English-born, Sydney-based journalist who spent the best part of a decade travelling to and through the Central Asian country, returning home only long enough to save up the money to go back again.

Her first trip, back in 1997, was a quest for a rare red lily and the delivery of an article on her experiences for London's *Telegraph* magazine where Scobie freelanced at the time.

From then on, however, it became personal and Scobie travelled to Tibet seven times in nine years.

She was intrigued by the rapid societal changes with red light districts, supermarkets, bars and internet cafes juxtaposed with an ancient civilisation in which many people continue to adhere to traditional rituals and customs.

Most of all, however, Scobie was compelled to continue returning to Tibet because of a wandering nun named Ani who became a good friend and who guided her on a personal journey towards spiritual enlightenment.

"The first time I met her, I thought she was extraordinary looking," Scobie remembers.

"She had long, thick dreadlocks and she was wearing jewellery. She didn't look like a nun — or what I thought a nun should look like.

"She belonged to an unusual group of wandering nuns."

Though she didn't speak English, Ani and Scobie forged a friendship that spanned years and continents and which grew stronger and richer each time they met.

"Ani is a very funny, bawdy woman," Scobie says.

"She's very earthy and she marries both worlds very well."



FASCINATION with traditional culture ... Claire Scobie.

It's people like her, Scobie says, who make compelling reading. "I think you need either a strong personal experience or a very interesting person to write a book," says Scobie, who will speak at the Brisbane Writers Festival on Friday.

"For me, what really excites me still as a journalist is people's lives.

"So often, we see extraordinary stories in the ordinary person and that's what can make a really compelling piece of writing.

"I'm particularly interested in women's stories, not to the exclusion of men, but so often women get missed in the history of countries.

"They are the ones that are unsung."

Inspired by classics and "emotionally meaty stuff" such as Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Scobie always aspired to becoming an author herself.

In her first book, *Last Seen in Lhasa* (Random House, \$35), she wanted to chronicle the political and social transformation of Tibet as well as her friendship with Ani who she believes is the last of a generation.

"Because I went to Tibet so many times, it was really difficult working out the most compelling parts of those trips for the strongest narrative," she says.

More info on Scobie at the Brisbane Writers Festival at www.news.com.au/couriermail/ and follow the links. Tickets required. Bookings QTIX 136 246 or www.qtlx.com.au

Last seen in Lhasa

Claire Scobie
Random House, \$35

LAST Seen in Lhasa is the literary debut of British journalist Claire Scobie and details her seven trips to Tibet over nine years. On her first, to a little explored area of Tibet called Pemako, she meets a Buddhist nun. A deep friendship, (one expressly forbidden by the Chinese rulers) develops despite the lingual and cultural differences.

Scobie writes about a paradox of a country poised between ancient belief and the march towards modernism, relentlessly engineered by the Chinese. She draws a people fluctuating between passive resignation and anger and describes the decline of Lhasa, from spiritual centre to a town where Tibetans are outnumbered by Chinese two to one, prostitution and violence are rife and the existence of secret police creates a paranoid population increasingly adrift from their roots.

Scobie adroitly presents the weighty political and moral issues facing Tibet without hitting the reader over the head with political righteousness. Combining that with her personal travelogue and emotional journey over the nine years, her writing is often deeply moving. While the prose is elegant and Scobie bravely exposes her own frailties, the space between trips looms large, creating gaps the reader wants filled. There's a lack of detail about her other life that creates a sense of mystery and, ultimately, frustration, but Scobie's writing is so warm it overcomes that small flaw.

Natascha Miroshch
Claire Scobie will be talking about her book at the Brisbane Writers Festival showing at the Cremorne Theatre (Queensland Performing Arts Centre) on Friday, 12:45pm. Tickets: \$10.50