



As elusive as the Yeti

Violence, a dreadlocked nun and monks with mobiles were some of the unexpected things a journalist found in Tibet.

THE INTERVIEW

CLAIRE SCOBIE
TALKS TO JOYCE MORGAN

THE TRIP BEGAN as a botanical adventure across Tibet in search of a rare red lily. Along the way, Claire Scobie discovered something even more rare: a deep, if perplexing, friendship with an itinerant red-robed Buddhist nun; one of the last of her kind.

A decade after the British-born journalist first met the dreadlocked nun, Scobie still struggles to explain why she felt compelled to return repeatedly to the Himalayan region to seek out Ani, a woman with whom she shared little common language or life experience.

"Sometimes it was frustrating not being able to speak fluent Tibetan but often it didn't seem to matter. That was what was the strange thing about our friendship," Scobie says. "There's something that I guess you'd say is beyond words."

She's hesitant to call it karmic – cosmic cause and effect – as perhaps a Tibetan might. "It can sound so very flaky," she says.

Certainly, there's no shortage of flaky, misty-eyed, New Agey books on Tibet. But the picture Scobie paints of Tibet in her first book, *Last Seen in Lhasa*, her account of her journeys and evolving friendship with Ani, is no rose-coloured Shangri La. The Tibetan capital might be home to the ethereal Potala Palace, the former seat of the Dalai Lamas, but these days monks carry mobile phones

and the city has more than its share of violence, prostitution and paranoia.

Indeed, each time she flew out of Lhasa, she would find herself breathing a deep sigh.

"It's almost like I'd been holding my breath the whole time I'd been in Tibet," she says. "You don't realise it when you're there, you just get on with it. But afterwards you realise everything has been on edge."

Not that she was alert to this during her first trip when, like many other tourists, she had been overawed by the beauty of the Himalayan mountains but oblivious to the tensions simmering between the Tibetans and the Chinese, who invaded and annexed the region in the 1950s.

"You would never be alert to it," Scobie says. "There's this whole surreal aspect of Tibet. You've got all these tourists going in there and they see newly renovated monasteries and pretty monks wearing red

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robes and to them, nothing is going on really. They are not aware of the undercurrents.”

Scobie, 34, was a successful young journalist working on London's upmarket *Telegraph Magazine* almost a decade ago when she began feeling restless with her comfortable life.

“I was 11 floors up thinking life just is not about this,” she says. “I had this fear of being there 15 years later not having seen the world and feeling like I don't have enough life experience to offer. [I thought] I've got to go and live a bit. I can't just write about girls in pearls.”

Around the same time, a friend and nursery owner invited her to join a trip to Tibet in search of the elusive *Lilium paradoxum*, a plant which then had not been propagated in the West. It meant travelling to Pemako, a little-known part of south-eastern Tibet. It was too good a chance to miss. She quit her job and in June 1997 joined the expedition.

With her modulated voice, English-rose complexion and understated manner, Scobie seems an unlikely adventurer, to whom bitter cold, altitude sickness and leeches are no longer strangers. She admits she was naive and ill-prepared for her first trip. She had no idea there were places in the world unexplored by Westerners, was unfit and afraid of heights.

The first trip was cut short by officialdom and the lily proved as elusive as a yeti. But with her appetite whetted for the mountainous region, Scobie joined a second – and successful – expedition to find the plant. En route the journey became more important than the botanic destination, as she encountered a nun who would reorient her life.

Scobie, now based in Sydney, assumed Ani was simply a kind-hearted, exuberant lay woman when she joined the expedition. Over time, she learned that Ani leads a life

unusual by any measure. She is a wandering mystic, a yogini, who spends long periods meditating and fasting alone in freezing caves and at Sky Burial sites, where vultures pick clean the bones of the dead.

“When I started to realise what sort of practices she'd done and the immensity of her wisdom, I couldn't believe it,” she says. “I'm glad I didn't know that at the beginning. I'd just seen her as my friend Ani.”

Over seven trips to Tibet, the two women spent time together in remote monasteries and hermitages, in Lhasa and undertook a pilgrimage to sacred Mount Kailash. Each time, Ani – 11 years older than Scobie – would reveal a little more of herself and her religious practices.

The harsh life of a wandering nun requires courage and discipline but over its 1000-year tradition has provided independence and spiritual advancement for women. It has released them from having to remain in monasteries under the control of monks and allowed them to take spiritual teachings where they wanted to. But the future of such women is uncertain as Tibet struggles with modernisation, materialism and Chinese domination.

“For women like her, the future isn't bright because she's not teaching her wisdom to any younger students. So there's no one else within her nunnery who's going to follow her particular path,” Scobie says. “In 50 years I can't see how many more there will be like her.”

Which is why she wanted to tell Ani's story. But in doing so, Scobie has not revealed her friend's real name – Ani means nun – and has disguised the identities of some figures. Surveillance of Tibetans is widespread and even nuns risk imprisonment, she says.

While Scobie learned about Tibet's spiritual side from Ani, she saw a much darker



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side through others, including Tashi, a young guide with whom she had a brief romance. He later descended into alcoholism and violence. Writing about her former lover was challenging but his story is emblematic of what is happening in Tibet, she says.

"The whole society is becoming dysfunctional," she says. "I would see the most terrible fights in Lhasa, not just between men and men, but between women and women, men and women. I'd see full-on domestic violence spewing out onto the street ... It's the trickle effect, because people are disenfranchised, they're dispossessed, they can't get jobs, their whole sense of self-esteem is going."

The emergence of widespread alcohol problems is relatively new, together with the spread across Lhasa of brothels full of young Tibetan and Chinese women. This month further dramatic change will come with the opening of the first railway across Tibet from Lhasa to neighbouring Qinghai province. Already there are concerns that the 1000-kilometre link will further consolidate the region's integration within China.

"It is the Tibetans' worst fear that more Chinese will come and more resources will go out," she says.

Scobie knows that the publication of her book might mean she will not be able to return to Tibet. And she has come to terms with the possibility that by recording their friendship she may never see her friend again. There is a finality in the book about their last meeting a year ago. But the pair made a pact that each time the moon is full they would think of each other. Does she still do that?

"Yes, absolutely," she says. "And I know Ani thinks of me."

Last Seen In Lhasa

By Claire Scobie

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Photo: Quentin Jones



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