



**Pablo Durana**  
Class  
Hometown, State

In mid-July of 2004, my older sister and I arrived at Chengdu, in the Sichuan province of China. Our luggage: two bicycles, eight panniers, a tent, a stove, and a video and photography camera. Our goal: to cycle through the back-roads of Western China and experience the life of its minority cultures. We did not have detailed plans; just look at our map, point to an interesting road, and hope for the best.

Continued ➔



**WESTERN CHINA**

# China by the Mile: A cycle-journey across the minority regions of Western China



August 21, 2004 - Day #26

We leave Langmusi heading towards Xiahe, excited to finally bike on a paved road. After a gradual high pass we roll down the hill hitting a flat plain and averaging

25km/hour. It's a blistering pace compared to our previous dirt-road-bump-splosh-pace. Today could be our longest ride. For the past two hours a dark cloud has closely followed us, so we break for lunch for only a quick moment 81km into our ride.

We are approached by a Tibetan woman who with a brilliant gold-toothed smile, invites us for tsampa – the staple Tibetan food of ground roasted barley, butter, and dried yak cheese mixed in with water. As we walk to her house the cloud catches up and the showers and thunder begin. Our cycling ends for the day, but

there is still work to be done.

It's cold, the rain is coming down hard and I'm running outside with her 8 year-old son and 13 year-old daughter who effortlessly climb two miles up the valley like mountain goats. I'm slipping at every step, tired from our long bike ride, and it's getting dark and cold. They are wearing a thin layer of cotton clothes and loose-fitting shoes, but do not seem to mind and it surely does not slow them down. The son and daughter giggle throughout the hike as we head up to round up the sheep. We work with hand signals and between the three of us, herd 150 sheep back to their home. In the mean time, down the valley, my sister is helping the mother milk the yak.

We all sleep in the same single room, side by side. I wake up to another a bowl of tsampa, and learn or rather try to make bread with a frying pan. We give them a bag of fruit along with a picture of us as a parting gift. The fruit, they eat right away. The picture, they carefully wrap in toilet paper to keep it safe.

Back on the road, the small drizzle soon matures to harsher rain; no

surprise. The paved road ends as we turn off onto a smaller road, back to the dirt-road-bump-splosh-pace we are used to...



I am amazed and humbled by the landscapes and the people we have seen and met. While the customs and beliefs greatly vary among the Tibetans, Uygurs, Tadjiks and Miao, they all share the common gift of generosity. Monks, nomads, and farmers, all opened their doors to us, offering genuine welcomes, smiles, and encouraging waves.

Cycling enabled us to steer away from the tourist roads, to take our time and to stop wherever and whenever we wanted. I loved waking up not knowing what the road will be like, who we will meet, or where we will sleep. And while we

explored several interesting tourist destinations, they all seemed secondary to our experiences in-between, to the places most others overlook. Throughout our four-month, 2700-mile journey, we helped build two mud homes, painted a colorful Tibetan house, chased after stray sheep, herded yaks, stayed several days with monks who invited us to attend an important monastery ceremony, worked in cornfields, and learned the "Usul" dance in a small Tadjik village. Cycling is such a great unrestrictive mode of travel and I cannot see myself

having done it any other way.

Pursuing my interest in documentary filmmaking, I used a mini DV camera to capture the sights and sounds that made this such an incredible experience for my sister and me. I sifted through thirty hours of footage to create my first travel documentary, a film I can now share with my friends at home.

I left wonderful friends – friends I hope to see again – and left with a thirst for exploration, learning, and understanding far greater than the one I had to begin with. I am so thankful to Mr. Burch and the Burch Fellows Program for giving me this dream opportunity.