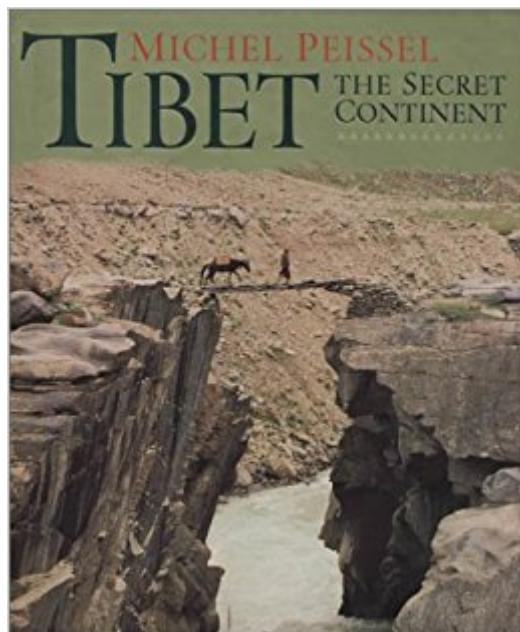


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Tibet: The Secret Continent



Synopsis

With 250 accompanying photographs, Michael Peissel tells the history of the early Tibetans and the subsequent golden age of Tibetan Buddhism under the monk Richen Zampo. He examines the spiritual aspects that are so important in Tibetan life and the modern international success of Lamanism. Chronicling the paths of early explorers, Peissel relates Tibet's plunder and destruction, from its dismembering in colonial times to the Chinese takeover. He looks at the uniqueness of the Himalayas, where flora and fauna have evolved to suit the high altitude and resulted in such extraordinary species of animals as the yak and the Takin, a huge goat. Through his writing and photography, Michael Peissel brings to life the geographical, spiritual, and intellectual heart of Tibet.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Who better to take readers on a journey through Tibet than someone who has led 26 expeditions into its vast expanses and even dreams in Tibetan? Peissel is an experienced explorer with a passion for Tibet and the Himalayas, and this book is the culmination of four decades of enthrallment. A land divvied up by India, China, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan, Tibet holds the interest of many but the understanding of few; it's truly a "world within a world," Peissel writes. In its text, the book shifts easily from mythology, to flora and fauna, to Peissel's own adventure tales, to regional geopolitics, without breaking stride. But it's the photos (also courtesy of the author) that truly bring the land alive, capturing its cliffside cave cities, its vibrant ceremonies and its countless unforgettable faces. The only portion of the book that isn't exhaustive is its cursory discussion of Tibet's brutal treatment under Chinese rule. For Peissel, whose love for Tibet is

palpable, it's probably too depressing a subject to broach. 250 color photos. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Explorer, anthropologist, and writer, Michel Peissel is a Frenchman who writes in English, speaks Tibetan, and has dedicated his life to investigating the remotest regions of Greater Tibet, with many of his discoveries making news headlines. He has led 26 expeditions of Tibet and made 20 documentary films over the last 40 years. In 1964, he "discovered" the minute kingdom of Mustang, and more recently, in 1994 he led an expedition to find the source of the Mekong River. His previous books include *Mustang: A Lost Tibetan Kingdom*, *Lords and Lamas*, *Zonskar*, *The Voyage of the Itza*, *The Amber Trail*, and *The Last Barbarians* (Holt).

This Himalayan explorer's renowned for his four decades in Greater Tibet. In 2002, this serves as a fitting survey of his twenty-six expeditions, and a teaser for his earlier narratives (reviewed by me) such as from "Mustang" in Cold War Nepal in 1964, a Bhutan facing India's intervention in 1970's "Lords and Lamas," and his stays with the Minaro ("The Ants' Gold") along Kashmir's forbidden zones in the early 1980s. "Tibetan Pilgrimage" conveys with his watercolors and his architectural emphasis some of the same terrain. What this large-format collection of his photographs and reports adds is an overview of how the vast open territories, as he has it, demonstrate the youthful vitality and energy that has characterized this realm since it was united under the sixth-century Songsten Gampo around 650. After introducing the land, flora and fauna (pandas gain credit for their Tibetan origins), the people and society (ditto, polo), and the rise of the nation, the early medieval period ushers in the empire that burst forth. Peissel reminds us, in a gentler fashion than some passages in "Pilgrimage," of how later Tibetan progress towards a land wealthy enough to allow first sons to inherit land, but restricted in size and resources so as to steer second and younger sons to study at monasteries. Not cloistered, monks (maybe a third of the male population) were supported by their farming family's plots and in return often returned to help their siblings learn and harvest. This broadens perceptions of Western readers, who may too quickly transfer feudal models of the Church and fealty from Europe to Central Asia. He later critiques the Dalai Lama, starting with the Fifth, who started an unstable domination by Lhasa over the rest of Tibet, beyond the third of the terrain it ruled directly. A particularly lively chapter shows how the Europeans began to enter the guarded kingdoms, or how they tried to. Peissel emphasizes: "Tibet remained one of the few lands in Asia where the Westerners were neither gods nor masters." (172) The outer areas began to be taken over by British and independence-era India, Bhutan, Nepal, China, and Pakistan. Later

sections unfold the collapse of the Tibetan kingdom. However, Peissel takes pains to present the Chinese side, and he rightly shifts no small blame to the imbalance of power that gave Lhasa and the Panchen and Dalai Lamas too much control, and too many pro-Chinese advisors who feared Britain as the alternative ally. Soon, Nehru's India was courted by the Communist Chinese to counter any politicking the Dalai Lama in exile might make. As one who witnessed the fate of the Khampa freedom fighters courted before abandoned by the CIA in Mustang during the Cold War, Peissel relates vividly the predicament of those caught on the ground and on borders who could not go along with the elite who appear to continue their "court intrigues" in Dharamsala. "Such people tended to have a greater concern for power and fortune than for prayer, and in the past they had taken their services to the highest bidders, be they Mongol, Manchu or Chinese." The present Dalai Lama by way of his allegiance to the same "monastic theocracy" does not escape diplomatic criticism for the "lack of foresight and for not having established sufficient links with the international community." (203) This tone infuses the near-present illustrations of Tibet poignantly and honestly. Peissel writes of his love for the people and their homeland, but he does not offer a soft-focus perspective in words or imagery. A couple small slips in proofreading (as in "Greek Marco Pallis" when that mountaineer turned mystic scholar was of Greek parentage but Liverpool-born; see my review of "Peaks and Lamas") do not detract from this volume's value. While parts may appear to gloss over his own encounters, they are often quick snippets gleaned from his past books reporting on regions. This book appeared before his death in 2011, more as a capstone for his career. He stays frank, and he lives up here to his life's ambition, to visit and share Tibet with us. While the language and largely Buddhist culture endures under pressures exerted all around its heartland by foreign powers, Peissel ends with guarded optimism for the survival of Tibetan mentalities and customs as its peoples realize the fate of the heartland and the frontiers is connected, by their vulnerability and their necessary flexibility--as its art and architecture symbolizes.

The author, who has explored the area for decades, writes about the geography, people, and especially the history of Tibet, considering not only the present-day boundary of Tibet but the surrounding Himalayan kingdoms that made up a broader, linked, unit. It's an excellent book. It has some flaws -- its treatment of recent history is very brief, and it occasionally has some typos and lapses of clarity -- but I'll give it five stars anyway because (i) its encompassing of greater Tibet is fascinating, (ii) its treatment of Tibetan history is clear, concise, and uncommon in books on this subject, and (iii) the photographs are wonderful. I've read lots of books on Tibet and nearby areas, and this is one of my favorites. 5 stars.

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This book differentiates itself from others that I've seen and read about Tibet. If you're looking for in-depth political commentary on the Chinese-Tibetan struggle you won't find too much here. The focus of this book is more about giving you the reader a sense of the people, the place, and the history behind it. The book, though never going into vast detail, does a good job of presenting many aspects of Tibetan life and culture. It ranges from marriage customs to plateau animal and plant life. It brings together the detail and reliability of the scholar with the varied interests of the traveler. The other reviewer has remarked on the lack of personal stories. While I could see how here and there it might add something to this book, if that's what you're looking for why not go purchase a traveler's account? I personally prefer something a little more systematic and less prone to misinformation. Where this book really sets itself apart is in the representation of more outlying parts of the Tibetan kingdom, such as Ladakh, Guge, and Mustang. It is interesting to see how their interaction with other peoples has created physical and cultural differences. (I showed some of the pictures of these people to a Tibetan friend and he just said, "that is not Tibetan", lol). Lastly, but not leastly, there are beautiful pictures in this book. BEAUTIFUL! They are diverse, covering people, landscape, buildings, and some animals too. They are clear and bright, and alone merit the purchase of this book.

Another book by Peissel. This one, much to my surprise, is actually quite good. Various aspects are presented in self-contained chapters. It is also telling for what it doesn't say. For instance, Peissel writes he's been trekking Tibet for the last 40 years. I believe him, but where are his personal experiences in this book? Also he (almost) glosses over the Chinese invasion and the horrors that followed. I guess he needs a visa to visit Tibet in the future... Nonetheless, this is a wonderful book. Great photos and a succinct description of the country. Well worth the time and money.

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