

The term Shangri-la has become a platitude used to sell everything from real estate to perfume. At some level, most of us know it is not a place or a product but a metaphor for a carefree, joyous and long life. Where is your Shangri-la?

My wife, Claire, and I like to have a theme for our travels, and "In Search of Shangri-la" ignited my imagination. I wanted to see the real Shangri-la and come to better understand the mythical place.

I began our journey by researching the origins of the word Shangri-la: James Hilton coined the phrase for the location of his novel, *Lost Horizons*, which became very popular escapist reading during the Great Depression. His Shangri-la was a high mountain kingdom in the eastern Tibetan provinces of China. Hilton's residents of Shangri-la lived to an advanced age with good health until the very end, an attractive idea to anyone.

James Hilton relied on a series of *National Geographic* articles about Jo-

seph Rock, a botanist who combed the unique landscape of southwest China for flowering plant specimens now popular in gardens everywhere.

With the real Shangri-la in Tibetan China, shipping our motorhome would be too expensive, so we chose our second RV, a tandem bicycle, who travels by airline and has served us well for over 40,000 miles.

Our journey proved taxing, pedaling up and over the Tibetan Plateau to elevations nearing 16,000 feet, the roads broken and often dirt, snow and sleet,

not to mention dodgy food and extremely basic accommodations. But, like all of our RVing friends, we know that it is often the more difficult road that leads to the more rewarding destination.

We found our Shangri-la in the smiles and help of the Tibetan people and in overcoming the challenges of a spectacular remote corner of the world. At times, facing yet another day of pedaling more than a vertical mile was daunting. But along the way, the yak-herding Tibetans waved and yelled encouragement. Always, at the summit, Buddhist prayer flags fluttered in the wind and rewarded our efforts with brilliant images, memories of a lifetime.

Fantasy and reality are never the same. In the case of Shangri-la, reality was, for us, far more rich and rewarding than James Hilton's imagination. As

— Is this Your — Shangri-La?

By Bob Rogers #61636

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Our other RV topping out yet another pass in Tibetan China on our quest for Shangri-la.
Photo by Bob Rogers #61636.

is so often true in our RV travels, the unknown road is the true road, the road to Shangri-la.

We find similar thrills and make indelible memories right here in North America in our motorhome: a boondock near a Southwest canyon, where we found, and left in place, a 700-year-old corncob; a campground in the blazing maples of a Vermont autumn and another in the white sand dunes of the Florida Panhandle. Memories are made of serendipity and a continuing sense of adventure.

When we embarked on the RV lifestyle, we soon learned our RV was really a magic carpet capable of taking us to

exciting new places and experiences, to a thousand Shangri-las. For all RV-ers, Shangri-la is the here-and-now and around the next bend in the road.

Our memories of special campgrounds, **boondock places** and destinations comprise our Shangri-la and the anticipation of our next perfect place, special **experience**.

In comparison to friends who never leave home, RVers purposefully undertake challenging travel, knowing the reward of new life experiences, maybe even a longer life, will more than make up for the effort.

RV travel is our Shangri-la. May it ever be so. 🏠

Only the Experienced Need Apply

If you are interested in searching for your Shangri-la by bicycle in Tibetan China, here's your reality check:

To cross the Tibetan Plateau as we did, be prepared to ride your bike two weeks or more, climbing up to 7,000 feet per day to headache-inducing elevations. Often you will lose nearly as much elevation as you gained during a typical 30- to 40-mile day, and you'll do it all over again. Expect oppressive heat and humidity in the Chengdu valley; on the Plateau, you could have rain, sleet and snow, but also beautiful sparkling blue-sky days.

Be very fit; your bike will carry 40–80 pounds. Get every inoculation suggested for Asia; carry antibiotics for your gut and your lungs, and bring your own hypodermic needles. You will sleep on anything from a nice bed to a board floor with a pillow of corn husks.

You will sometimes have a private bath with hot water, but you might also have to find your own personal bush and use snow for toilet paper.

Your food could **very well** be fermented yak cheese curds shared from a communal bowl.

Some of you are saying, "No way!" After years of bicycle travel all over the globe, this is almost normal for us. I should have added a disclaimer: *DO NOT ATTEMPT THIS WITHOUT 40,000 MILES BICYCLE TOURING EXPERIENCE!*

Here's an alternative, almost as much fun but much less strenuous. The northern part of Yunnan Province is Tibetan territory, mountainous but not so high. Try a guided tour; they provide everything, including your bicycle, so you don't have to fight with the airlines, and you don't have to worry about substandard accommodations or food. You will also have an English-speaking guide.

We know of one very reliable bicycle tour company run by Peter Snow Cao, an American who is married to a Chinese. His company, Bike China Adventures, can arrange tours of any level. His **Website** is: <http://bikechina.com>

We have no commercial ties with Peter. We shared tea and bike touring stories at the beginning of our trip. His advice was accurate and invaluable. We owe him tea next time we're in Chengdu.

If you think you have the experience and fitness to do this on your own, go first to our site: <http://newbohemians.net> and read the *In Search of Shangri-la* posts.

If you're still determined, my e-mail is bobrogers@newbohemians.net

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