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A&E

Pushy yaks and other travel tales

Slide shows at Royal Cinema focus on trips to Tibet, India/Nepal

Chinese occupation poses problems for an 'ethical' traveller

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"Beware the wild dogs," advises William Jans in his popular slide show on travel to Tibet.

Because of the rocky terrain and lack of wood for cremation in the Himalayas, he says, the Tibetans dispose of their dead in what they call a "sky burial."

A lama says prayers for 24 hours and three days later a friend carries the body to a holy site, where the remains are ritually chopped and thrown skywards to the birds.

What the vultures miss, however, wild dogs lie in wait for.

"I want to stress that if there is a sky burial happening, don't go," Jans says by phone prior to his two Toronto appearances, Thursday night and next week on Wednesday.

"For one thing, it's a funeral and you weren't invited. For another thing, I talked to tourists who went when the dogs were still around and they were scared to death. The tourists, not the dogs."

Jans, 38, is a Vancouver corporate photographer who started travelling the world in his spare time 15 years ago and began giving public slideshows shortly after that.

From a two-projector system and a cassette music tape, he has upgraded over the years to what is now a one-of-a-kind computer driven extravaganza.

"Power Point times 20," he calls it, a \$14,000 data projector from which he can access — live onstage with mouse clicks — an array of digital images, titles, music tracks and video clips.

Last year, he sold out four shows in a row in Vancouver at a theatre holding 835 people.

"People can put themselves in my shoes," he says when asked what draws the audiences.



Monks in Lhasa, Tibet show their amusement at William Jans taking their photograph — an image in his slide show.

"I've seen my share of slide-shows that would start, 'Here's the Taj Mahal, here's the Ganges,' and I would go, 'But how did you get there? What did you eat? Instead of all your pretty pictures, I would rather see the yak that somehow decided he didn't have enough room on the path and pushed you off the cliff.'"

In Jans's case, a yak did, in fact, push him off a cliff — into some brambles that stopped him from falling another 1,500 metres to the valley floor.

He will tell that story next week in *Top Of The World*, his show on India and Nepal, which includes details of his amateur climb to the 6,500-metre mark on Mt. Everest.

"A flight from London to Paris flies at 5,800 metres," he says by way of comparison.

Tomorrow night's show, *Trekking In Tibet*, includes a trip through Laos and

the story how, after he missed a plane, Lao Airlines sat him in the cockpit on the next flight because the passenger cabin was full.

"I have some video of that," he says.

Another highlight is a trip to the remote holy mountain of Mount Kailash, on the remote western Tibetan plateau in the northernmost region of the Himalayas. Jans joined Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims on their arduous 50-kilometre circumambulation of the mountain at high altitude, a test said to reap important spiritual benefits.

"It's astonishing to see," Jans says. "At 5,000 metres, walking is hard enough, but a lot of people make the entire circuit on their stomachs."

Perhaps no show on Tibet can be entirely free of politics, given China's occupation of the kingdom since 1949 and the brutal suppression, then tight regulation, of Tibetan Buddhism.

For economic reasons, China is now promoting tourism to Tibet's holy sites. China's tourist bureau counted 856,000 visitors to Tibet last year alone.

"It's difficult to go there and remain ethically clean," Jans says. "You are required to be with Chinese guides and to eat at Chinese restaurants. You are supporting the very people (the Chinese) who are oppressing the people you are there to see (the Tibetans)."

One solution, Jans advises, is to find out as much as possible about the country in advance. That means doing more than looking at pretty pictures.

Trekking In Tibet (Thursday, 7:30 p.m.) and Top Of The World (Wed., Oct. 8, 7:30 p.m.) are both at Royal Cinema, 608 College St. Tickets: \$18 advance, Royal box office and Mountain Equipment Co-op; \$20 at the door. wrj@wrjphoto.com