

The Tea Explorer

Director's "Sho La" Journey Notes

Jeff Fuchs is part mountain goat. It's not because he smells like a goat – that's not it. Neither is he an even-toed ungulate. I checked. But he can scamper up an impossibly vertical trail through scree at 16,000 feet like Himalayan *tahr*. I know this because I have watched him do it and tried it myself and failed– twice.

The first high mountain pass of the Tea Horse Road is called *Sho La*, and as Jeff told me, it can be a two faced beast. The first time he crossed Sho La the snows and blistering winds enveloped his entire mule team and toyed with killing two of his friends. By my first ascent (which was incidentally Jeff's 8th) I thought I was prepared for anything– maybe a blizzard, or maybe the kind of bright sheer unfiltered glaze of sunlight you only get at altitude. I wasn't ready though for the sheer and utter grind. I was raised pretty close to sea level. The highlands of the Niagara Escarpment don't prepare your lungs for anything like the Himalayas.

It started off easily enough at the trailhead, after we met our muleteers in a little Tibetan/Chinese village. We had lunch there in the home of an old *lado*, whose wife served us meat stew under twin giant portraits the Dali Lama and Chairman Mao. The delicacies of political allegiances in this part of China are not clearly defined. There's room for both men in the peace of this trader's home.

The lado was one of the men who used to haul tea on mule-back over the pass to Tibet. Once he was down the far side another lado would take over the load of tea for his leg of the relay to Lhasa. But that trade is long dead – cut off when China annexed and isolated Tibet in the 1950s. Now the only tea that comes through here arrives in hard packed yellow wrapped blocks – bricks of inferior leaves that bear no resemblance to the precious pu'erh that once came up this way from the tea forests of southern Yunnan.

We were here for a recce – scouting what I'd be in for when we came back to film the following year. So we didn't need much of a mule train. Jeff and his trekking partner Sonam Gelek – himself an even more advanced breed of human goat than Jeff – helped the lado's young grandson balance our camping gear and food on the backs of two ornery mules whose legs looked too spindly to handle a wickedly inclined rocky and jackknifed trail that would unfold in the hours and days before us.

I'll spare the details of the next several hours. Suffice to say it was hard. Once I got home a few weeks later I lived in fear of the training I'd need to do to go back there the next year and film. But as I started trailing the mules and Jeff and Sonam I felt I was a fit fifty-two-year-old who could at least keep up. I'd dealt with altitude before on a bunch of different trekking shoots. But this one took little time to knock me on my ass. By the time we dropped our gear for the night in a clearing halfway up to Sho La Jeff was speaking to me in the kinds of gentle calming tones I've used myself on friends at parties who are too deliriously drunk to realize what they are doing. I guess I was staggering around the meadow aimless and

spent with exhaustion. We sat by the river, took off our boots and soaked our feet. And drank tea.

We took a gamble it wouldn't rain that night and left the tents packed away. I fell asleep right away, but did wake up in the middle of the night at some point to see the dome of gorgeous stars above my head. And no rain.

The lazy tolling of the cowbells around the mule's necks woke me up around sun-up. The lado's grandson had strapped feedbags over their mouths and they were flipping their heads trying to get every last grain. In the centre of a small broken down rocky sheep paddock the cooking fire was already burning. Our own breakfast was going to be a mealy mix of tea and *tsampa* (flour made from roasted barley), formed into balls like bird suet. It was like a protein rocket, which was good, because in spite of the previous day I was eager to continue the upwards trek – at least until I actually started walking. It hurt – it hurt real bad.

In a few hours we moved up out of the conifers and into a forest of rhododendrons. I had no idea that forests of rhododendrons existed anywhere. The bushes as tall as trees were all dusted with snow and the trail cut through them like a boulevard. But I was like an old semi-tractor with transmission problems. I kept trying to gear down to accommodate the grade, but I just kept losing power. On top of that I was gulping back water. The whole climb we'd been next to a precipitous river and I kept asking if I could refill my bottle, but Sonam consistently said 'no.' I found out why eventually – there was a sodden, picked-over yak carcass near the top of a small waterfall and the river was running right through it. Who knows what bacteria I'd still be carrying around in my gut now if my thirst had won out over Sonam's cautioning.

I sat on a small bluff at the edge of a clearing. Jeff and Sonam had gone ahead through the rhododendron and up and beyond where the trail curved off between the peaks towards Sho La. There was no way, I told myself, that I was ever going to convince my legs to go up there.

Sonam came running back down – *running*. He was looking for me and worried that I had fallen, given up, or maybe drank the yak water. I told him I thought I was done – the air in my lungs felt like it was coursing over blisters. Then Sonam was gone again – running again – this time, upwards, into the rhododendrons, back to Jeff. Within in minutes it was Jeff sprinting back down the trail. With a look of real concern.

I was carrying all my camera stuff so he grabbed it and coaxed me forward, concentrating on the steps as opposed to the distance I still needed to cover. It was working, and gradually I shuffled up past the rhododendrons, up the slopes of eroded red and black rock and then suddenly I was at the foot of the throne of Sho La. It was just up there, seemingly close enough to reach out and touch it. I had a feeling vaguely like fighting the crowds to see the Mona Lisa at the Louvre, and then you get there and say "that's it?" Here was Sho La Pass, up a rocky stairway, to a saddle between peaks, festooned with prayer flags whipping in the wind. I could see them from where I stood. I shuffled ahead like an old man in his slippers and made my way to the summit.

The two faced pass was happy that day. The wind was indeed brisk but the snow was barely knee deep and Tibetans wearing windbreakers and jeans were scaling the far side like it was nothing more than a jungle gym. I took it in, filmed and took pictures, planning to come back in a year for the real performance. After all this was just a dress rehearsal.