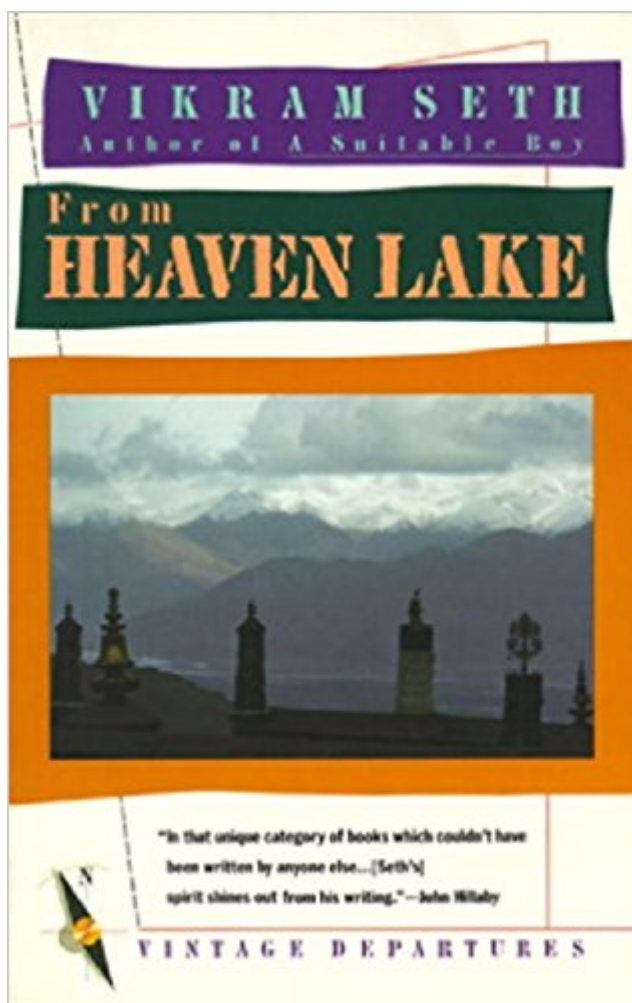


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From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang And Tibet



Synopsis

After two years as a postgraduate student at Nanjing University in China, Vikram Seth hitch-hiked back to his home in New Delhi, via Tibet. From Heaven Lake is the story of his remarkable journey and his encounters with nomadic Muslims, Chinese officials, Buddhists and others.

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After two years as a postgraduate student at Nanjing University in China, Vikram Seth hitch-hiked back to his home in New Delhi, via Tibet. From Heaven Lake is the story of his remarkable journey and his encounters with nomadic Muslims, Chinese officials, Buddhists and others.

China has evolved as a society and political entity so fast that this diary of chronicle of events has become more of a history of things as they were 30 years ago in western China. Today one need not hitch hike to Lhasa but rather rides a 21st century train. Reading this narrative we meet individuals, both Chinese and Tibetan, who are quite different from our stereotyped impressions. The diary, to my mind ends too abruptly. I had the impression that the publisher limited the number of pages allowed.

After slogging through a couple of mediocre fiction books it was a pleasure to read Vikram Seth's account of his journey from China to India. The man can really write! His descriptions are clear,

concise, and evocative. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in northern China, and Tibet.

A great travel writer and storyteller (*A Suitable Boy*), although I am not as impressed with his later works. This book is excellent!

From one who has traveled a lot, and read a lot of history of this area, this book is very down-to-earth. One can smell and feel and taste the author's movements. And that's what I liked.

Very well done travelogue around China. A perfect counterpoint to Salzman's *Iron & Silk*. Salzman stayed in one spot for his sojourn in China; Seth, although he spent two years at Nanjing University, here is concerned with an impromptu hitchhiking trip through western China and Tibet. Seth isn't afraid to put some dangerous questions to his hosts and fellow travelers--questions about the cultural revolution and Red Guard, how life is now under the communists compared with before, could Tibet be a separate country once more? But the best thing about this book is Seth's viewpoint: an Indian writing about China and Tibet for an English/American audience. He takes the time to ruminate on the relations between the countries and the conditions in each country. In particular, his comparison of the living conditions of the poor and aged in China (cared for, if not greatly) and India (left destitute) was eye-opening.

Ostensibly *From Heaven Lake* is a travel book. The description is both apt and limiting. It is worth musing on the idea that travel may be merely a way of collecting a pool of nostalgia for future regurgitation. But this particular description of the author's journey through China - initially west-east and then north-south in the early 1980s - does not seem to have added very much potential fuel to future's recollected fires. At the time it was hardly common for an individual to travel independently in China, let alone enter Tibet via Qinghai or - even more unlikely - exit China via Tibet into Nepal. But this is precisely what Vikram Seth did, and to add icing to the achievement cake, his preferred mode of transport was hitch-hiking. It is largely the mechanics and logistics of this journey that provide most of the content of the book. Vikram Seth had been a student in China, so his goal was to see some of the less visited parts of the country and to exit, eventually, to India to be reunited, after years in college, with his family. He did have some language without which, given the twists and turns bureaucracy forced, he would surely not have achieved his goal. Near the start of the book the author is already in eastern China, visiting Turfan which, on the other end of an axis that starts in

Tibet, must be one of the strangest places on the planet. It bakes in summer and freezes rigid in winter, is in the middle of a massive desert but makes its living from highly successful agriculture. On a visit to the karez, the ancient underground irrigation channels that bring water from the distant mountains, the author chances an unauthorised swim against his guide's advice. The author gets into difficulty. And this seems to be very much a thread that recurs throughout the narrative of *From Heaven Lake*. A determined first person seems intent on asserting a rather blind individuality in the context of a society that respects only conformity and seeks to exclude anything that suggests difference. In the conflict that ensues between these fundamentally different aims, we are presented with a catalogue of travel that seems to miss much of the potential experience of the country through which it moves. Thus much of the book deals with the process of travel, rather than its experience. Despite this, *From Heaven Lake* is a worthwhile read. Besides Turfan we visit Urumqi and the high altitude lake that gives the book its title. The tour moves on to Xian, Lanzhou, Dunhuang and then across Qinghai to Tibet and especially Lhasa. This city occupies much of the text, revealing that visiting it was very much at the heart of the author's consideration. We do meet some interesting people along the way, but they are largely bureaucrats, drivers or officials associated with the author's travel arrangements. Given Vikram Seth's experience in the country, there seems to be a missed opportunity here, in that more people would have embroidered the text with more interesting and enduring detail than the repeated travel problems. In its time, *From Heaven Lake* might perhaps have been a unique account of a trip that few contemporary travellers would have contemplated, let alone attempted. Today it still presents an interesting account of a personal challenge, but offers too little contemporary experience to motivate the general reader to stay on board.

The amazing journey Vikram Seth undertook in hitchhiking from China through Tibet to India - over 3 major mountain ranges including the Himalayas, is no small feat. He writes about it without exaggerating, and makes you feel as though you were in all those places yourself: enjoying the magical moments as well as suffering through the hardships (from trivial flies and fleas, to altitude- and bureaucracy- induced sickness and headache). The people he meets along the way, the friends he makes, the occasional bad interactions - one can totally relate with; it enriches your human experience and understanding of cultures. It is non-judgmental without being neutral or boring. I found myself enjoying his personal but lucid analysis of touchy subjects like a comparison of the Indian versus Chinese political system. Vivid descriptions of places and scenery - from the desert sand dunes, to the bitterly cold high mountain passes, to the melting glaciers, raging rivers, mud

and slush, lush green meadows and deciduous forests... I feel as though I have seen all of these in the last few days. His language is simple, yet powerful - his prose always has that undefinable quality of poetry about it. Cannot be classified as just a travelogue, it is much more... takes your imagination on travels to far away lands, and lets you take solace in humanity and the connectedness of everything. A book that will resonate with nomads the world over.. irrespective of the journeys you may personally take on.

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