

essential

Love in another country

The romance of travel can go right to the heart.
By **Claire Scobie** and **Gabrielle Carey**.

The Tibetan guides would all gather in Brokenhearted restaurant in downtown Lhasa. With its fat sofas and thimblefuls of sweet milky tea, it provided a safe haven from the uncertain world outside. It was there I would find Tashi, gossiping with his mates and smoking cheap Panda cigarettes. Dressed in loose beige trousers, the 25-year-old looked more like an American preppy student than a Tibetan tour guide. He had a mischievous face with a turned-up nose.

We had met some months before on my first trip to Tibet in 1997 when I joined a plant-hunting expedition in search of a rare red lily. As we tramped through the Himalayas among towering bushes of rhododendrons, Tashi told me that he had been educated in India. After recurring nightmares about his father and on the advice of a lama, he had returned to Lhasa

to find his father dying. Now back home, he was frustrated with his life in Tibet. The authorities viewed anyone from India with suspicion as a potential spy for the Tibetan government-in-exile.

I was 25 then, somewhat idealistic and with a spirit of adventure. I recall saying to Tashi, "Your land is so beautiful." His reply would remain seared on my mind for years to come. "What use is beauty," he said, "if our people are not free?" It was a defining moment, both in my relationship with Tashi and Tibet.

Bristling with rebellious bravado, Tashi and his friends were on society's margins. I was attracted to their resilient spirit and how they each tried to fight the iron-fisted system in their own small courageous way. I knew I was something of a trophy to be shown off to his friends. Nonetheless, I



enjoyed their contagious humour and passion for life, which fuelled my own urgency to live every second, to dream the impossible.

Tashi and I pursued each other with a passion that afterwards I found hard to rationalise. With hindsight, I wonder if my brief encounter with Tashi was like falling for the whole mess that was Tibet. I knew that our love was fated. It was an egg-timer relationship and, as the days slipped by, we both lived it with an intensity that reminded me of stories about affairs during a war. Outwardly Lhasa is not a war zone but inwardly the Tibetans have been fighting an enemy for more than 40 years.

When we walked the streets of Lhasa

together, Tashi insisted on taking my hand. In the face of police patrols he only pulled me closer. Like his friends, he took a lot of risks. His elderly, bent mother feared for her son and his late night ranting about the future of Tibet, afraid the neighbours would hear and report him. A ferocious German shepherd was chained up outside his home to serve as a warning if they received an unwanted knock in the night from the secret police.

It did not take long before the fissures between us began to show. Beneath Tashi's cheerful veneer was a sense of powerlessness, fuelled by an ingrained feeling of inferiority – a symptom of the Chinese invasion – compounded by mourning for

Modern love

There's a difference. You don't lob up with a handful of practical knickers from Kmart, do you?

Perfume? You'll only end up buying the stuff that

make a great present. I only had to enter a department store and consider exploring the entire building's contents for a friend's birthday present to

the bleak future ahead. He had a drinking problem. His eyes had a hunted look. There was an underlying anger that had hardened him. When he pinched me in jest, I would be left with a bruise.

"Man crack," Tashi would say, when someone was close to the edge.

After spending time together, the experiential and emotional chasms between us became too wide to bridge. Love and hate; apologies and tears; different lives, different worlds. When the sand had run its course and Tashi had to leave Lhasa, bringing our relationship to a natural end, it had the counter-intuitive affect of making me more passionate about his country. Through him, I had begun to understand the plight of the Tibetan people more deeply.

I haven't seen Tashi for a decade. Yet I have kept returning to Tibet to pursue an unlikely friendship with a wandering Tibetan nun. In 2000, I heard that Tashi was in jail. His drinking had worsened and, after a violent assault on a Chinese doctor, he had been imprisoned for three years. On hearing the news, I recalled his own words – "man crack" – and knew when I was with him, he had started to slip over the edge. I could never have imagined he would fall so far.

When I came to write my book (*Last Seen in Lhasa*, Random House, \$24.95), after seven trips to Tibet, I pondered long about how to write about our relationship. I waited until I felt enough time had passed and then heard the welcome news that since his release he had married and started a family. He had settled down and was leading a quieter, happier life. His redemption made writing about his descent more bearable. I could picture him as he was

when we first met in a rhododendron wonderland and not languishing in a hellish detention centre. I could chisel out our time together as a moment of shared imaginings and hope, in what could feel like an otherwise hopeless situation.

CS

Shire girl

I have always been attracted to difference – to different languages, different religions, different appearances, different dress, different music. I find difference exciting. I find difference sexy.

In some ways, given my insular birthplace of the Sutherland Shire, I was the most unlikely person to end up on the other side of the globe and in love with a Mexican campesino.

In another sense, given my passion for difference, it was almost inevitable. I seemed to travel the world simply to find the place most different, most removed, from Sylvania Heights.

But travelling to exotic realms is one thing – travelling, settling down, falling in love with a local, getting married and having a baby is another. Some people find the whole notion too weird. Others demand explanations. Why, they ask, did I fall in love with a poor Mexican mask-maker?

I'm not sure if anyone can ever explain, rationally speaking, why they fall in love with anyone. The poet Fay Zwicky wrote recently that she fell in love with her hus-

Marriage is tricky enough without the complications of cultural differences.

Gabrielle Carey

band because he could whistle Bach perfectly.

Certainly there was an element of this kind of idealisation when I fell in love with a native of Veracruz. He seemed, in a sense, pure – untainted by materialism, consumerism and all the ills of the wealthy West. But if anyone asked me what first attracted me to my Mexican husband (now former husband) and if I was going to answer honestly, I would have to say it was the back of his neck. The back of his neck was dark, even darker than the rest of his skin because of the sun beating down on him as he worked in his coffee plantation.

The darkness was attractive because I'd lived all my life with whiteness. Darkness hinted at his indigenous culture, his knowledge of another way of living and thinking that was profoundly different and fresh compared with that of Sylvania.

I longed to acquaint myself with something foreign and strange. I could perhaps be accused of exoticism but at the time I was overwhelmed by a compulsion to get outside my comfort zone and experience the other, rather than just observe it.

My love story in another country did not have a gloriously happy ending. My marriage to a Mexican, as with so many cross-cultural couplings, didn't survive. It wasn't just because I was the only white girl in the village. Nor was it mainly about Mexican



machismo or my suspicion that my husband was harbouring a second wife (not an uncommon practice in Mexico). It was far deeper than that; a disagreement about the concept of truth, of self, of the way to be.

I began to understand why people from the shire marry people from the shire, and why people from Turramurra marry people from Pymble. Marriage is tricky enough without all the added complications of profound cultural differences.

And the number of cases of intercultural marriages that result in difficult custody battles, not to mention abducted children, indicates that it is far safer marrying from within your own neighbourhood. It is far easier being separated from a husband in your own suburb than from one who originates from the other side of the world.

Cultural differences are real; I know that from experience. But whatever our colour, language or religion, we all suffer the same highs and lows: love, joy, failure, disappointment. It's called the human condition.

GC

Enjoy the differences... Gabrielle Carey (above); Claire Scobie (opposite page).