

Name: _____ Class: _____

On the Roof of the World

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In this informational text, Benjamin Koch discusses his experiences in Tibet, a region in Central Asia. While in Tibet, Koch stayed with a group of people with no permanent home, known as nomads. As you read, take notes on how the author describes the Tibetan nomads' way of life.

[1] A few summers ago, I was lucky to travel to Tibet, the "roof of the world." Tibet is a small country surrounded on all sides by gigantic snowy mountain peaks. For thousands of years, these towering mountains acted like a fence, keeping people from entering the country. That's one reason why explorers and writers have called Tibet the roof of the world. It's hard to get to. The other reason is Tibet's high elevation. When I climbed mountain passes¹ over 17,000 feet above sea level, I gasped for air. I was more than three miles high!



"Nomads travel by foot or on horses alongside the yaks that carry all their supplies." by Scott Poupore-Haats is used with permission.

Years ago, the people of Tibet were nomads — people without permanent homes. The ground in Tibet is much too rocky and thin to grow crops, so Tibetans centered their daily life and survival on the yak.² The yaks provided the nomads with nearly everything they needed — milk, butter, meat, and wool for clothes and ropes. Even yak dung³ was used for fires.

Tibetan nomads would lead their herds of yak and sheep across pastures,⁴ valleys, and mountainsides in search of the best grazing⁵ lands. They did not live in permanent homes made of wood, brick, or stone.

Times are changing in Tibet, and more and more people live and work in villages and cities. But there are still nomads who survive on the high plateau⁶ just as their ancestors did.

1. a route through a mountain range or over a ridge
2. a type of large ox
3. animal poop
4. land covered with grass
5. **Graze (verb):** to eat grass in a field
6. an area of high, level ground

Becoming a Modern Nomad

- [5] Some friends and I were traveling with our teacher, Dudjom Dorjee, to Kham, in the eastern part of Tibet. Dudjom was born in Tibet and lived the first years of his life as a traditional nomad. Because of political problems, Dudjom's family had to flee⁷ to India when he was still young. We were following Dudjom back to his birthplace and getting a taste of that ancient, nomadic way of life — with a few modern updates.

We had the advantage of automobiles — a luxury that nomads have happily survived without. When it comes time for a nomad family to move, they pack all their things into large backpacks that they strap over their yaks. A typical family might need from 30 to 50 yaks to carry all their supplies. My friends and I had more than 50 bags to carry. We stuffed them into a bus, while we piled into four-wheel drives.

Problems Along the Way

When it comes to crossing rough country, yaks are the true all-terrain travelers. Many times, the nomads have to cross raging rivers. For the loyal and determined yaks, crossing is not a problem. But when we had to cross a river, our four-wheel drives turned out to be not so loyal or reliable. We got stuck in the muddy banks of the river, and it took at least a dozen people pushing to get us out.

When nomads arrive at their destination, they are so skilled at setting up their large yak-hair tents that they have them up in minutes. My friends and I, with our fancy super-modern tents, weren't quite as quick. At one campsite, I remember wrestling with one of my tent poles trying to pass it through the loops of my tent. Some smiling nomad kids approached and had me set up in no time, though they'd never seen a tent like that before.

Nomad families often compete to see who will be the first to have their tent up, a fire going, and hot tea poured.

It's Cold Up There!

- [10] The weather in Tibet is cold, and the brutal wind seems to show no mercy.⁸ Sitting inside a nomad tent, though, you'd never know it. With a warm fire burning in the mud stove and the snug black walls of the tent, you are as comfortable as can be. This was not the case in the fancy modern tents my friends and I slept in. I remember shivering through my four sweaters, three pairs of pants, and blanket, listening to the chill rain hit my tent.

Tibetan children were especially curious about us "modern nomads" and sometimes came peeking into our tents!

7. **Flee (verb):** to run away from a dangerous place or situation

8. to act forcefully towards someone; not go easy on someone

Having the Right Attitude

On this trip, I learned that it takes much more than snug tents and thick, hearty⁹ tea to survive. You need the right attitude. Everywhere we traveled, the Tibetans were generous, happy, and curious. It might be a monk¹⁰ warming my frozen hands in his fur robes. It might be a family of nomads taking a break to dance and sing in a circle, or a handful of kids watching me with beaming smiles.

Though their lives are full of challenges, the nomads never take their day-to-day problems too seriously. They know how impermanent¹¹ things are, including their homes. We modern nomads learned some of these lessons. Perhaps when we cross the raging rivers or face the cold bitter days of our lives, we'll do it with a lot more of the right attitude — the same attitude that shines from the bright smiles of the Tibetan nomads.

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9. **Hearty** (*adjective*): filling
10. a member of a religious community of men
11. **Impermanent** (*adjective*): not lasting; temporary

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement describes the central idea of the text?
 - A. Tibetan nomads know how to survive in difficult conditions and keep a positive outlook on life.
 - B. Tibetans nomads have learned to be thankful for what they have because they don't have much.
 - C. The number of nomads in Tibet is decreasing because it's not considered a fulfilling way of life.
 - D. Technology would help Tibetan nomads live fuller and more successful lives out in nature.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Times are changing in Tibet, and more and more people live and work in villages and cities." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "Some smiling nomad kids approached and had me set up in no time, though they'd never seen a tent like that before." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "Nomad families often compete to see who will be the first to have their tent up, a fire going, and hot tea poured." (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "Though their lives are full of challenges, the nomads never take their day-to-day problems too seriously." (Paragraph 13)

3. Which of the following describes how the information in the text is organized?
 - A. The author describes how Tibetan nomads survived in the past and how they are surviving today.
 - B. The author describes who the Tibetan nomads are and then his personal experiences spending time with them.
 - C. The author details his experiences as a Tibetan nomad and then compares his experiences to other nomads.
 - D. The author compares what he liked and disliked about his experiences as a modern nomad.

4. Which of the following describes the relationship between the Tibetan nomads and the author and his friends?
 - A. The Tibetan nomads were kind and helpful to the author and his friends during their time together.
 - B. The Tibetan nomads were suspicious of the author and his friends and their reasons for spending time with them.
 - C. The Tibetan nomads were excited by the author and his friends' visit and the helpful technology that they brought with them.
 - D. The Tibetan nomads looked down on the author and his friends as they didn't bring the right equipment.

5. How does the Tibetan nomads' way of living affect their view on life?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, the author describes how positive the Tibetan nomads are despite how hard their lifestyle is. How do you think they remain so positive? Describe a time when you encountered something challenging but kept a positive attitude.
2. How do you think the Tibetan nomads' way of living has shaped who they are? What traits do you think would be important for a Tibetan nomad to possess? How do you think your lifestyle has shaped the person you are?
3. How did the author of the text learn about the Tibetan nomads? What are other ways one can learn about another culture? Describe a time you learned about a culture you were unfamiliar with.