

BEST TIBETAN GIFT SHOP

While waiting for the bus one day, we noticed a long row of colorful Buddhas in a storefront window. We followed the reds, blues, yellows and purple around the room stocked with clothing, scarves, Buddhist gods painted on scrolls, journals printed on recycled paper made by Tibetan refugees living in northern India. We've been back to buy jewelry, cards and fragrances for birthdays, housewarmings and the holidays.

Potala Gate is an amazing place to browse. Centered in downtown Eugene, the name may not sound familiar, but the store isn't new. Kyizom Wangmo and her husband Lama Jigme opened Potala Gate 15 years ago. The couple sold Tibetan Buddhist meditation items like prayer beads and bells to their friends at private events. Opening a store seemed like the next step and Wangmo says she and her husband did a lot of research by visiting similar shops in New York, Los Angeles and Seattle to get an idea of what to sell. At first, they began by carrying the basics — Tibetan prayer flags and books. After a few years in business, they began to grow.

"We try to buy things from local people, people who make things, people who sell things on the street, so that it goes to them rather than going to buy from a big warehouse," Wangmo says. Taiwan, Brazil, Nepal and India are some of the countries they've visited when searching for items to sell, although it's still possible to acquire a few items from Tibet. Overall, the process is arduous. "In Tibet they make a really beautiful silk prayer scarf," she says. "We get those and incense we get from monasteries, so it has to be a connection with people that we are friends of friends with because we don't have a direct connection." And money can't be sent to Tibet; it has to be routed through Nepal.

Wangmo and her husband have felt the pangs of being small business owners over the years and through the recession. She says she's watched their business go up and down and credits their online store with making it possible for them to afford their current store space. "Without that, I would think that one of us would have to go find a job." They run the store together, which is open seven days a week. Wangmo takes Sundays off. She laughs, "I only do six days; that's enough for me."

Wangmo and Lama Jigme, a former Buddhist teacher, have seen the Dalai Lama in India and in Florida, Arizona and Canada. "A few years ago when he was here we were able to get a blessing from him directly," she says. "[We're] very lucky."

The store name is taken from Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region. "Potala Palace is the palace of his Holiness the Dalai Lama. Potala means the pure land," Wangmo says. Jigme took a tour of the palace, which is more like a museum now, she says.

An original plan included opening the store in Los Angeles instead, but Wangmo says her husband suggested Eugene. If you've never experienced the soothing incense, the meditation music or effects of the "hippie shop," as Wangmo has heard others call it, if nothing else she says just walk in. "Anytime that people come, they always say the environment here, the vibes that they get, it's very peaceful, it's very meditative. And so that's what I want to be remembered in the store. They don't have to come buy stuff."

Potala Gate is located at 1030 Willamette Street; see potalagate.com.



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER



PHOTO BY ATHENA DELENE

BEST PARKS THAT USED TO BE DUMPS

You might think of riverfront land as valuable, but in Eugene's early days, the flood-prone banks of the Willamette were not where you wanted to build your house or business. In the post "dam all the rivers" era we have a much more stable riverfront (and fewer salmon), but our riversides bear the legacy of the bad decisions of the past. You know like, "Hey, let's turn the riverside into a dump! Because it's not like we are going to drink the water, right?" Once known as the "Day Island Landfill," part of what is now Alton Baker Park between the Willamette and the canoe canal was home to "putrescible wastes" and chemical and liquid wastes. Closed in 1974 it was covered in sandy loam and grass, according to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. Voila! A park is born! Away from the river in South Eugene, Tugman Park (named for a former *Register-Guard* editor) used to be a municipal burning site before it was closed in the 1950s after it was overrun by rates. The DEQ remediated it in the 1990s and now? Play ball!