

## Sketches of a Traveler: Alexandra David-Néel

By Wailana Kalama



Alexandra David-Néel, née Louise Eugénie Alexandrine Marie David, arrived in this world on October 24, 1868. She is most known for her adventures into Tibet and conversion to Buddhism, uncommon feats in her day. A spiritualist and prolific writer, she wrote over 30 books on Eastern religion, philosophy, and exploration.

Born in Paris, Alexandra moved to Ixelles (Brussels) as a child. She was known to be an avid reader of Jules Verne and occult literature. From early on, her streak of independence led her to solitary roaming across Belgium, Switzerland, Holland, England, and Italy before her eighteenth birthday. In 1888, she journeyed to London to study at the Society of Supreme Gnosis, where she met Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society. An accomplished singer, she

entered the Royal Conservatory of Brussels, and later studied at the Sorbonne. In Paris, she acquired a few erratic hobbies, such as keeping a pistol and ammunition, and joining a cult led by Sri Ananda Saraswati.

An inheritance from her godmother enabled her to pursue travels in Ceylon and India, where her interest in Eastern philosophy encouraged study in Sanskrit, yoga, and Tibetan music, before her decreasing funds forced a return to Brussels. She spent a few years writing anarchist treatises, and soon took a job with the municipal opera in Tunis, where she met her husband, a railroad engineer named Philippe Néel.

In 1911 her journeys took her once more to India, to Pondicherry and Calcutta. She received an honorary doctorate of philosophy from the College of Sanskrit and met the exiled Dalai Lama, both unprecedented for a European woman. She studied Buddhism at the royal monastery of Sikkim and procured an audience with the crown prince Sidkeon Tulku. In 1914 she retreated to a cave in Sikkim and studied spirituality with a monk who was to become her lifelong traveling companion, Aphur Yongden. They spent the next decades journeying together through Japan, Tibet, and China.

Her epic three-year journey to Lhasa in 1921, disguised as beggars, was published in English as "My Journey to Lhasa" (1927). In 1923 she ventured as far north as the Gobi Desert, then south through China and Tibet, covering around 8,000 miles, fighting bandits, tigers and leopards. During her travels, she encountered many spiritual lamas, such as a telepathic priest and a "lung gom" runner, who could run for days without stopping for food or water. She also encountered the Gomchen (great hermit) of the Lachen monastery, from whom she learnt the art of generating body heat through meditated breathing.

In 1928 Alexandra legally separated from her husband, but they continued to keep in touch until his death in 1941. Aging in years, she eventually settled in Digne, Provence, where she wrote and published numerous books, dying at age 101 in 1969. Her last will and testament requested that her ashes and those of Yongden be combined and dispersed in the Ganges at Vârânasî. She

was awarded a gold medal by the Geographical society of Paris, made a Knight of the Legion of Honour, and, in Tibet, was granted the rank of lama before her death. Her legacy remains in Samten-Dzong, at The Alexandra David-Néel Cultural Centre, and in the echoes of other voices—she is said to have influenced many writers, including Alan Watts, Jack Keraouac, and Allen Ginsberg. Her remarkable life is the tale of adventure after daring adventure, as one of the first female pioneers into the uncharted realms of south Asia and Eastern philosophy.