Potala Palace, in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, has been the home of Tibet’s Dalai Lamas since 1642. The palace has two thousand rooms. UNESCO has declared the palace a World Heritage Site. Potala Palace, a huge structure that dominates the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, Potala Palace has been the home of Tibet’s Dalai Lamas (the spiritual heads of Tibetan Buddhism) since 1642, when the unfinished building was consecrated. It was built by the fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lozang Gyamtsho (1617–1682), to represent the cosmic mountain abode of the bodhisattva (deity) of compassion, Chenrezi, who is believed to dwell on Potala Mountain in south India and to be embodied in the Dalai Lamas. The Red Hill, 130 meters above Lhasa and already sacred to Chenrezi, was chosen as the site. The Potala was also built as a fortress, thus expressing its dual religious and political function.

So important was this palace that the death of the Dalai Lama was kept secret for twelve years so that the palace could be finished without political interference. The fifth Dalai Lama and his successors are interred in sepulchers in the palace.

The Potala consists of a huge central keep (secure inner fortress) painted maroon, the religious color, surrounded by the ancillary buildings of a white-painted palace.

Distant view of Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet. The palace, now open to tourists, has two thousand rooms, numerous temples and shrines, and the private rooms of the Dalai Lamas. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.
representing the secular. This creates an effect of wings, so that the whole edifice, with its golden roofs, seems to soar. The palace has two thousand rooms, numerous temples and shrines, and the private rooms of the Dalai Lamas, now open to tourists. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared Potala a World Heritage Site. China claims to have spent $6.7 million between 1989 and 1994 on renovations of the palace.

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Further Reading