

# THE KAILASH KORA

Peter Finch



*Gurla Mandhata (7730m) - Mike Shrimpton*

Kailash in Tibet is an attractive conical 6638m peak, and the watershed of rivers which become the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra and Sutlej. It is sacred to Hindus, Buddhists, Bonpo and Jains. It has never been climbed; Reinhold Messner was given permission but declined because of its cultural and religious significance. It is a place of pilgrimage and completing a circuit, or Kora, is said to redeem all one's past sins. Clearly a 'must do' expedition!

In 2013 a group of friends joined a larger KE Adventure Travel trip. The starting point was Kathmandu - for meeting up, the distribution of kit and the painstaking process of obtaining Chinese visas. We flew first to Nepalgunj and then to Simikot where we met the trekking crew and set off on the first leg following the Karnali river upstream (the Karnali eventually becomes part of the Ganges). The track was negotiable only by pack animals, in our case horses, donkeys and dzos (a hybrid of cows and yaks) but was the main lifeline for the villages we passed through. Villagers were busy herding animals, gathering hay, raiding wild bee colonies (interesting!) but always with time to welcome us. At Yalbang we had time to visit the Taplung training gumpa. As we progressed up the Karnali valley the scenery became ever more dramatic including our first view of Saipal, a serious 7000m climbers' peak.

Finally, we reached an unsurfaced road where goods, including ours, were transferred from pack animals to lorries for the last leg to the border. By now we were camping at 4020m and feeling the cold, so walked briskly down through a desolate landscape relieved only by lammergeiers and blue sheep to the border crossing point at Hilsa. Three customs checks followed on the Tibetan side with Chinese soldiers inspecting our kit including searching books and digital cameras for images of the Dalai Lama (forbidden) and then spraying everything with insecticide. Our first night, at Taklakot, was spent trying to avoid photographing anything remotely sensitive such as police stations or military parades, while our Chinese 'fixer' got the police chief drunk and negotiated permission for one of our campsites.

A long drive over the Gurla La pass (4675m) brought us to our campsite beside Lake Manasarovar where a swim in the glacial water was also supposed to convey purity: only one volunteer! A further drive to Darchen (4670m), the start of the Kora, revealed a mix of traditional Tibetan life and the modernising influence of the Chinese, not always harmonious. We set off along the pilgrimage route, a wide track with a reasonable surface, and reached our first campsite via a sky burial site, fortunately not actively in use. Here the transport of our kit changed from lorries to yaks, or would have done if the yaks had turned up.



*Kailash from Manasarovar - Mike Shrimpton*

The next day involved a long, steady trek through barren terrain with the mass of Kailash looming ever closer. We encountered several groups of pilgrims mostly ill-equipped for the journey in minimal clothing and wearing flip-flops. Some were prostrating themselves all the way round, a very humbling sight. There was time to visit the Zheripo temple at Dira Phug before reaching some buildings adjacent to our campsite.



*Prostrating round Kailash - Mike Shrimpton*



*Pilgrims on the Kora - Peter Finch*

Sadly, the yaks had gone AWOL but we were able to secure accommodation in the buildings and once the animals did arrive our valiant Nepalese cooks rustled up a much-needed dinner. It was a bitterly cold night, with light snow falling, but still pilgrims could be seen by their head torches continuing towards the high point of the route.



*Pilgrims on Kora - Nick Gray*

Next morning was the final climb to the Drolma La pass (5660m). Initially the track was covered with ice and snow but as the sun rose, we were able to shed some layers. Eventually the top of the pass was reached, a surprisingly low-key location, but there was the usual mass of prayer flags with more being added every day. After savouring our achievement, we started the descent, pausing at a teahouse at the valley floor alongside the Lham Chu. The temperature fell to -100C in the night and we had to knock snow off the tents in the morning. From here we had an uneventful trek to our campsite at Trungto beside the river Dzung Chu, pausing en route at another gompa. Here the yaks left us as the rest of the trip would be in vehicles, and the next day we completed the circuit to Darchen. Job done!

Our new transport, three rather cramped SUVs, took us back to Manasarovar to a different campsite. Seeing Kailash at sunrise from the 'comfort' of my sleeping bag was exceptional. We walked during the morning, then boarded the vehicles for the trip to Hor Manasarovar, supposedly a typical Tibetan town but apparently empty apart from some packs of roaming dogs which kept us awake at night.



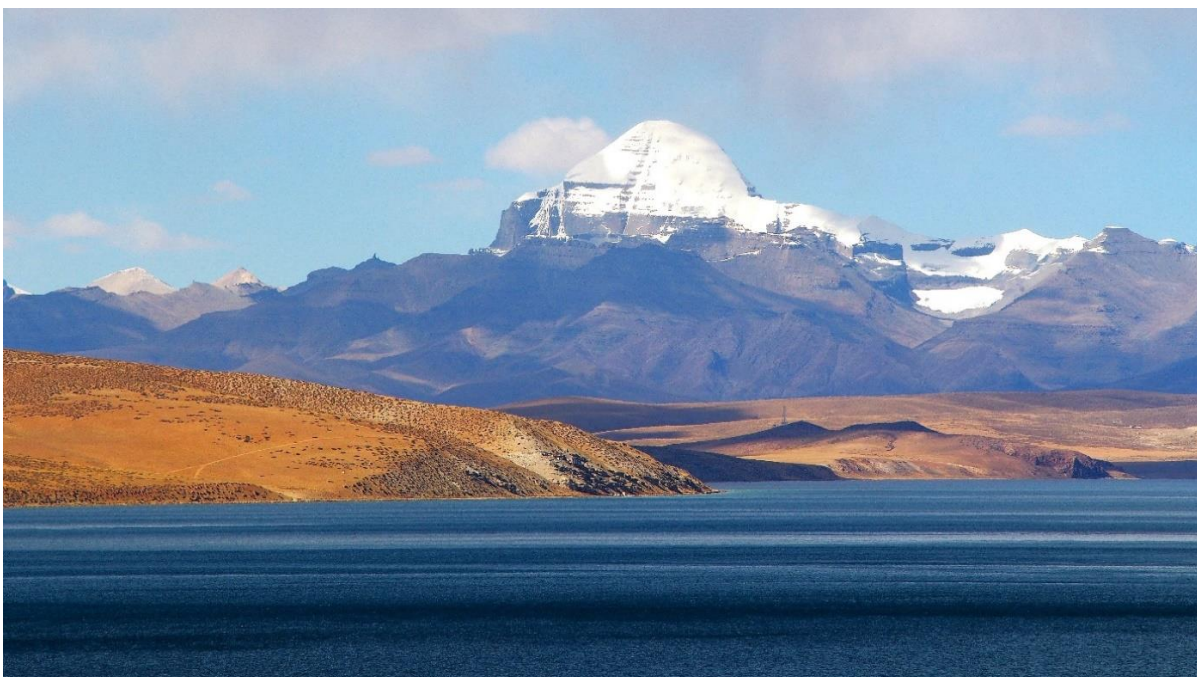
*Kailash at sunrise - Peter Finch*

The next day was a long drive along surfaced roads, courtesy of the Chinese, enlivened by occasional stops including the village of Hor ba Xang and a nomadic encampment where two of our party taught the children the Hokey Cokey.



*Learning the Hokey Cokey - Peter Finch*

The final day's drive in Tibet took us along the Friendship Highway to the Shung La pass (5150m) with its stunning panorama of snow-capped peaks including 8,000ers such as Cho Oyu and Shishapangma. Then came the longest continuous road descent in the world from 5150m to 500m in one hop. A hotel night in Zhangmu (welcome!) and then a crossing of the Friendship Bridge, where everything had to be carried across by porters, before a final drive by coach to Kathmandu.



*Kailash from Manasarovar - Mike Shrimpton*

I cannot speak too highly of the support given by the Nepalese ground agents, Thamserku, and the core team throughout the trip led by Rabi Gurung with sirdar Bhuwan Rai. In 2013 the Tibetans still had some way to go to catch up. One of the party Stephen Slater, made a video of the trip which can still be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF36RiJ0dVc>.



*Kailash south aspect - Mike Shrimpton*



*Kailash north face - Mike Shrimpton*



*Kora complete - Rabi Gurung*