

The orange dot was almost lost on the vast plain of gravel and sparse yellow grass. It got larger as it came nearer. Then it materialised into a *sadhu* – a Hindu holy man, barefoot, dressed only in his dark orange robe, and carrying little more than a blanket and a cooking pot.

He must have been so cold – the plain was the icy, windswept Tibetan Plateau, and he had come up from the warmth of southern India. Behind him, the white peaks of the Himalaya formed the horizon. Behind us, and in front of him, was the target of his pilgrimage – Kailash, the most sacred mountain in the world.

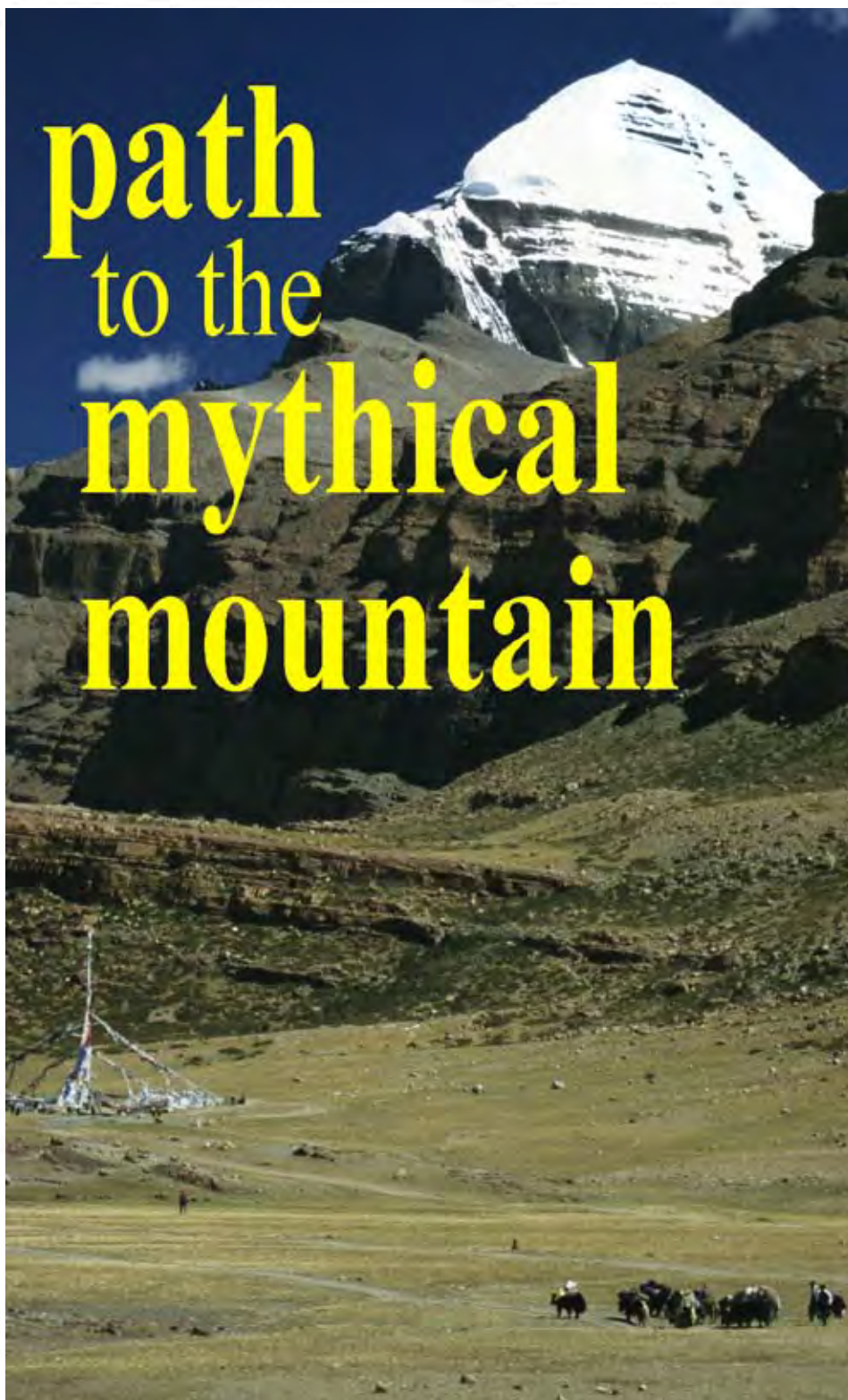
For Hindus, Kailash is the mythical mountain at the centre of the universe; it is the physical embodiment of Meru, from where all the great rivers of the Indian world radiate. The Indus, Sutlej, Ganges and Brahmaputra all rise in the shadow of Kailash. For Tibetan Buddhists, Kailash is nearer to the literal centre of their world. Its shining white pyramid of purest snow stands out as a beacon in the vast wasteland of Tibet's plateau. Because it stands on its own, with no snow-covered neighbours, it is far more impressive than Everest or the other Himalayan giants, which are a good deal higher but are well away to the south. Kailash is revered as the home of their gods.

It is a staggeringly beautiful mountain. Its steep slopes are swept clean by their own avalanches and, by a freak of geology, the fallen snow drops clear into the melt zone, so that no dirty glaciers besmirch the base of the holy mountain. And there is no vegetation at these barren altitudes, no tangled greenery on messy foothills. Clean rock and clean snow provide the purity for a sacred site.

Nobody (except the gods) has climbed Kailash, and nobody ever will. Buddhists and Hindus alike come to make the *kora* – the clockwise walk around the mountain (or anticlockwise by devotees of the minority Bönpo sect). The loop starts from the pilgrim village of Darchen, goes up the Lha Chu valley, over the high mountain pass of the Drölma La, and back down the Zhong Chu valley. Most pilgrims take two days on the *kora*. Acclimatised locals make it in a single long day but it takes three or four days for a traveller to appreciate the finer points and soak up the magical atmosphere.

Physical and political barriers make Kailash as remote as can be, tucked

path to the mythical mountain



Tony Waltham

seeks his karma on a pilgrimage around
the sacred Tibetan mountain of Kailash

photos by Tony

Wanderlust 61

Previous: Yak train approaches Tarboche
 Below: Pilgrims in Darchen
 Opposite: Yaks after snow shower,
 kora route below Drölma La
 Over: View past Chiu Gumpa beside
 Lake Manasarovar, on Barga Plain



away in western Tibet. But for the last few years, Westerners have been allowed into the region, and now they can share the experience with the pilgrims. It was a place that we had long yearned to see for ourselves. Now we were walking out of Darchen, on the first day of our own kora.

To our left, the plains stretched away to the distant Himalaya. To our right, Kailash was not yet in sight, hidden by its own foothills. But soon we came to a rocky ridge capped by a pole draped with a thousand prayer flags. Tibetans prostrated themselves beside it, for there above was the first glimpse of the sacred white mountain. Below the flagpole is a *mani* wall built of hundreds of inscribed stones. These stones, brought by monks from across all Tibet, bear the sacred Tibetan mantra, *Om mani padme hum* (Hail to the jewel of the lotus), celebrating the birth of Buddha.

Prostrations completed, the locals continued their kora at a cracking pace. Wearing tough hide boots, thick sheepskin coats and splendid fur hats, they were perfectly adapted to their harsh environment. They could sleep out in the clothes they wore, so they carried almost nothing. We had yaks to transport our kit and supplies, and still we walked at half their pace. But we enjoyed every minute as we descended into the Lha Chu valley.

At its own auspicious spot with the best view to the mountain, the Tarboche flagpole holds even more prayer flags. As we watched, a group of Tibetan women made their own mini-koras – circling the Tarboche nine times, twirling their silver prayer wheels and incessantly chanting their memorised scriptures. Above the Tarboche a natural rock bench is used as a sky burial site. The souls of the bodies offered to the eagles and vultures in the shadow of Kailash are ensured of reaching nirvana. All that remains is the ragged clothes, a small pile of stones for each deceased, and more carved mani stones. The atmosphere of the place was electric.

Across the valley, the tiny Chuku monastery is squeezed into the rocky slope. Three monks live there in almost unbelievable austerity. Groups of pilgrims were making more mini-koras around the monastery buildings, each time giving an extra push to the sacred prayer wheels built into the walls. Despite these interruptions, Chuku must be the ultimate place for prayer and study, for it has an awesome view of Kailash rising over the



far cliffs of the Lha Chu. Camping on the valley floor below, I was mesmerised by the changing colours of the mountain as the sun dipped below the horizon.

The next day we walked up the Lha Chu as it narrows into a canyon trapped between two looming walls of yellow conglomerate. A few thin waterfalls were frozen to the cliffs 300 metres above us, almost lost in a magnificent panorama of bare rock. Anywhere else in the world, the canyon would be a major tourist site. Here it is just another part of the kora.

The pilgrims added an element of humanity to the raw wilderness. Mostly Buddhists, they always had a warm greeting, even for us Westerners. Some strode past at twice our pace, while others sat in groups, deep in conversation, oblivious to the cold, and heartened by their precious days at Kailash. For most, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Multiple koras are largely the preserve of monks, whose ultimate aim is to circle the mountain 108 times; a prospect truly daunting to lesser mortals. The sadhu we met in Darchen had already completed 57 koras... in his bare feet.

After the second monastery, the trail climbs steadily into a terrain of granite crags and shattered rock. One small

terrace, softened by an apology for soil cover, was just wide enough for our second campsite.

By morning, a thin layer of snow had briefly whitened our mountain camp. Our implacable yaks resembled Ice Age mammoths, as they stood there waiting for their loads, totally immune to the cold. The thin air at this altitude – well over 5,000 metres – made travel hard. But it was no problem for the yaks; in fact they only have difficulties if they go *below* 3,000 metres. We set off, at a gentle pace, up a rocky valley which climbed to give better and better views back to Kailash. The beautiful pyramid of snow and rock kept drawing our gaze, while the morning sunlight danced off its east face.

High point on the kora, the Drölma La is a wild and windswept pass amid a mêlée of rocky crags. Right on the pass, the sacred Drölma Stone is a huge boulder named after the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy; legend has it she appeared here in the form of a pack of wolves. For pilgrims, this is the spiritual as well as physical highpoint of the kora. They anoint the sacred stone with yak butter, they drape it in flags, they paint mantras on it, they leave personal offerings by it and they touch their foreheads to it. The stone stands in a sea of prayer flags. Older ones

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have been bleached by sunlight, but newer flags add flashes of colour to the muted hues of the natural mountain setting.

We sat on rocks at a respectful distance from the sacred stone, and watched the stream of pilgrims come

to commune with their gods. We were not unwelcome; Buddhists seem to delight in sharing their religion. Our reasons for being there were much more shallow than theirs but it was still a magical experience.

The descent from the Drölma La

into the Zhong Chu valley is over the roughest of scree and boulders. It was not easy going but happiness radiated from all the pilgrims because they had been over the Drölma La. They had struggled to reach the pass – personal hardship does enhance religious reward – and now the rest of the kora was downhill. It was almost a party atmosphere as we wound our way past a few small lakes, across a snowfield, and then down to the open valley, where our yaks could graze again on the thin and meagre grass.

After a single glimpse of the east face of Kailash, we camped again below the third kora monastery. But Zutrul Phuk is a bleak place, lacking both the charm and the spectacle of that first monastery at Chuku. On the final morning of our kora – only a few hours short of Darchen – the trail rounded a bluff and the landscape opened up before us. The huge plain lay at our feet, with the Himalaya draped along its horizon; Gurla Mandhata and Api stood out within a fabulous panorama. Barren mountains of bare rock may be no match for the Himalaya – except that from their midst rises that great white pyramid. ♦

