

Kailas holy mountain of Tibet



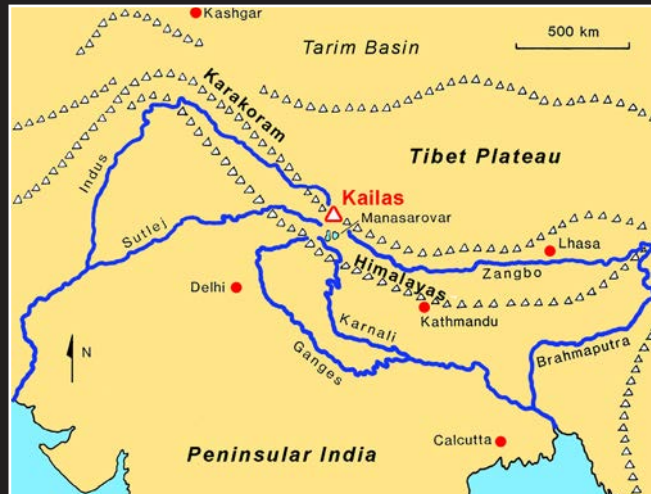
Images gathered by Tony Waltham while walking round the kora path in 1997

www.geophotos.co.uk/travels/Kailas_pictorial





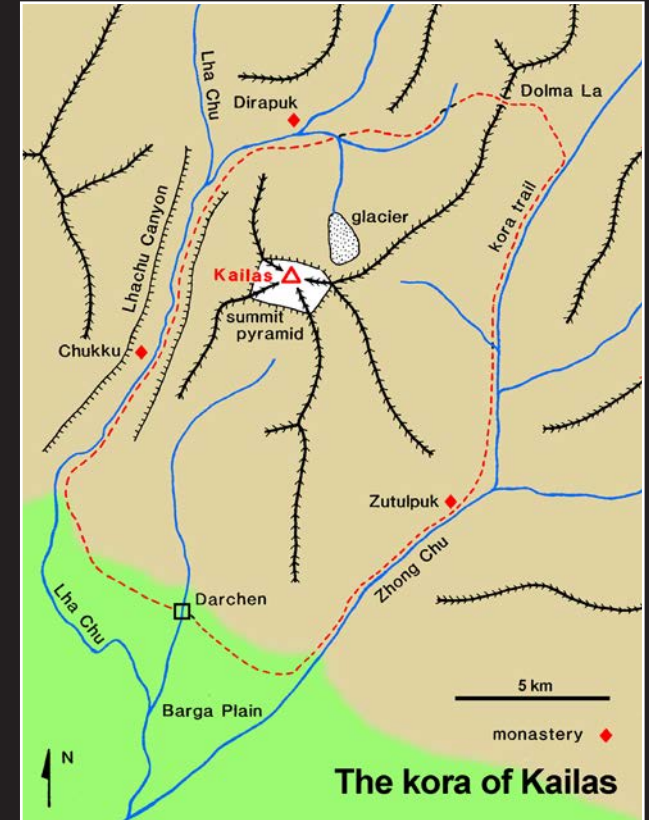
Views from the hill west of Lake Manasarovar:
 TOP: North to Mount Kailash beyond the Chu Gumpa;
 ABOVE: East across the lake beyond a sky-burial site;
 BELOW: South to Gurling Mandata in the Himalayas.



The most sacred mountain in the world, Kailas (or Kailash) stands within a mountain range in Tibet close behind the Himalayas. For much of the year it is an isolated beacon of clean white snow within the desert highlands of western Tibet, thereby creating its own symbolism with its visual impact. It also has a key location at the headwaters of so many of the greatest rivers of southern Asia. Hardly surprising that Kailas is regarded as holy by Buddhists, Hindus and Jains alike, and also by the followers of Bon (the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet).

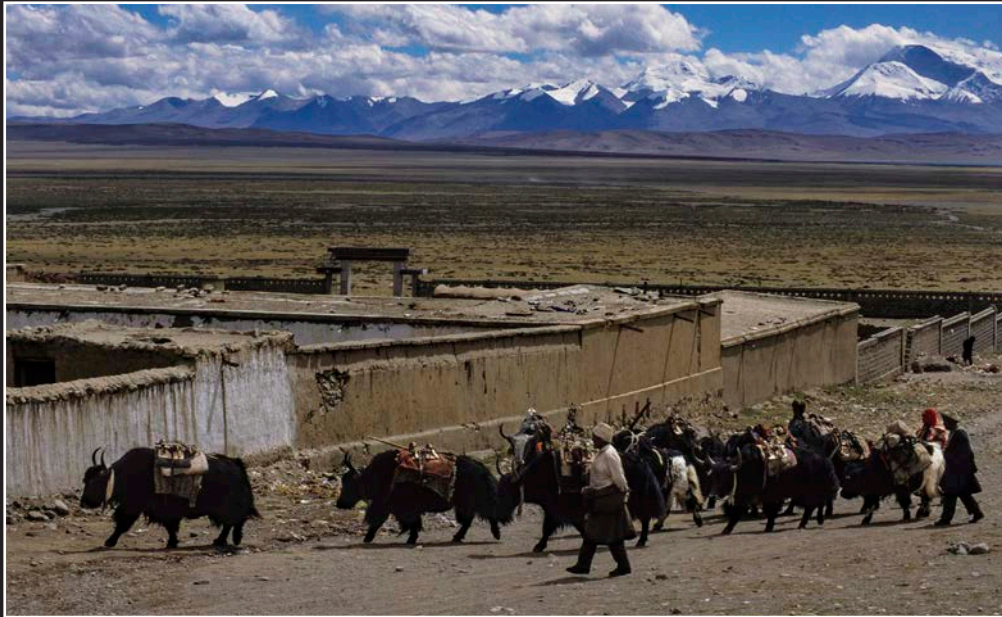
Thousands of pilgrims head for Kailas every year. It has not been climbed, and never will be. Instead pilgrims make the kora (or parikrama in Hindu terms), the trek of 56 km around the mountain, starting and ending at the tiny settlement of Darchen. For most Tibetans this is a two-day walk, with a night in the open near the Dirapuk Gumpa (monastery). It is more enjoyable for western visitors to spend four days on the kora; only the third day requires any major effort, with its crossing of the Dolma La, a pass at an altitude of 5636 metres. A few dedicated pilgrims prostrate themselves around Kailas, taking about four weeks to measure their length for the entire kora. Whatever the means, the infectious atmosphere at Kailas is pure joy, with most pilgrims making a once-in-a-lifetime visit to their holy mountain.





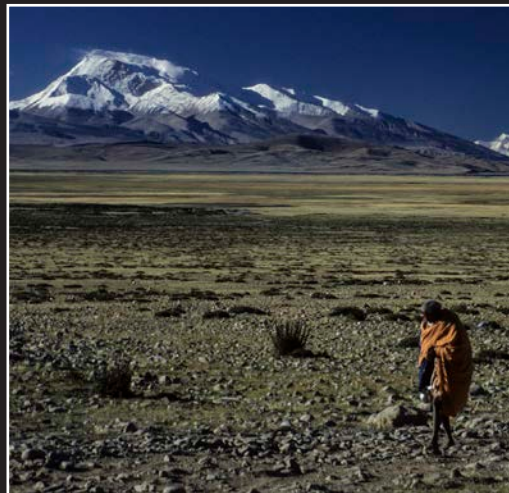
Chu Gumpa has an auspicious site on a crag beside the river draining Lake Manasarovar into the nearby saline Rakas Lake. It has a clear view to Kailas, and in a small room at the top of the monastery, a Buddhist monk taps on a drum as he chants his endless prayers.





Darchen is a small village at the road-head south of Kailas. As the base for the kora, it expands each summer into a tent town for pilgrims. Yak trains head north, trading goods over the mountains to the high plains, or in support of foreign trekking groups on the kora.





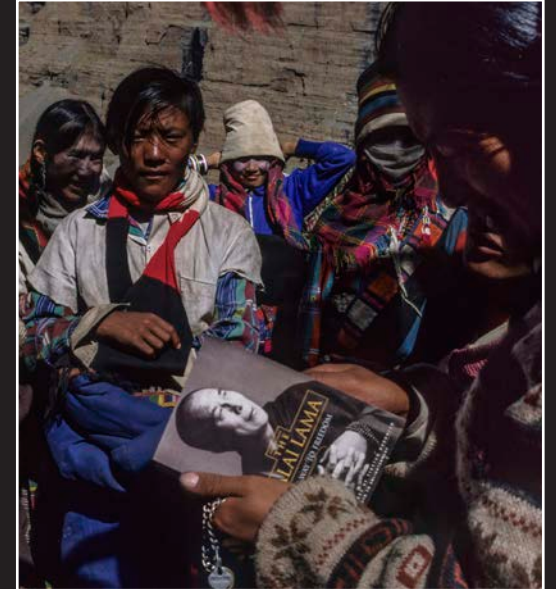
A Hindu sadhu had walked from India.

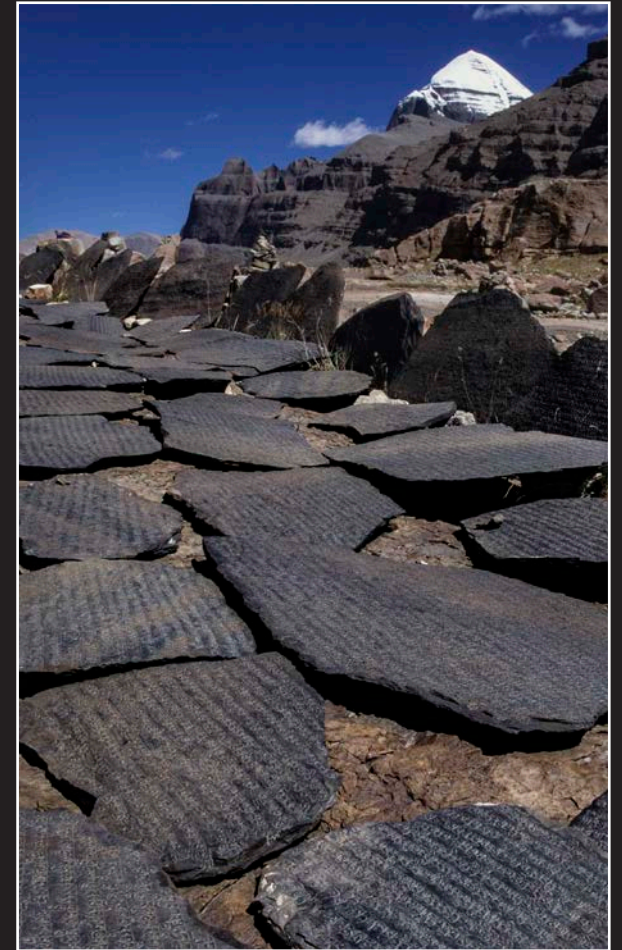
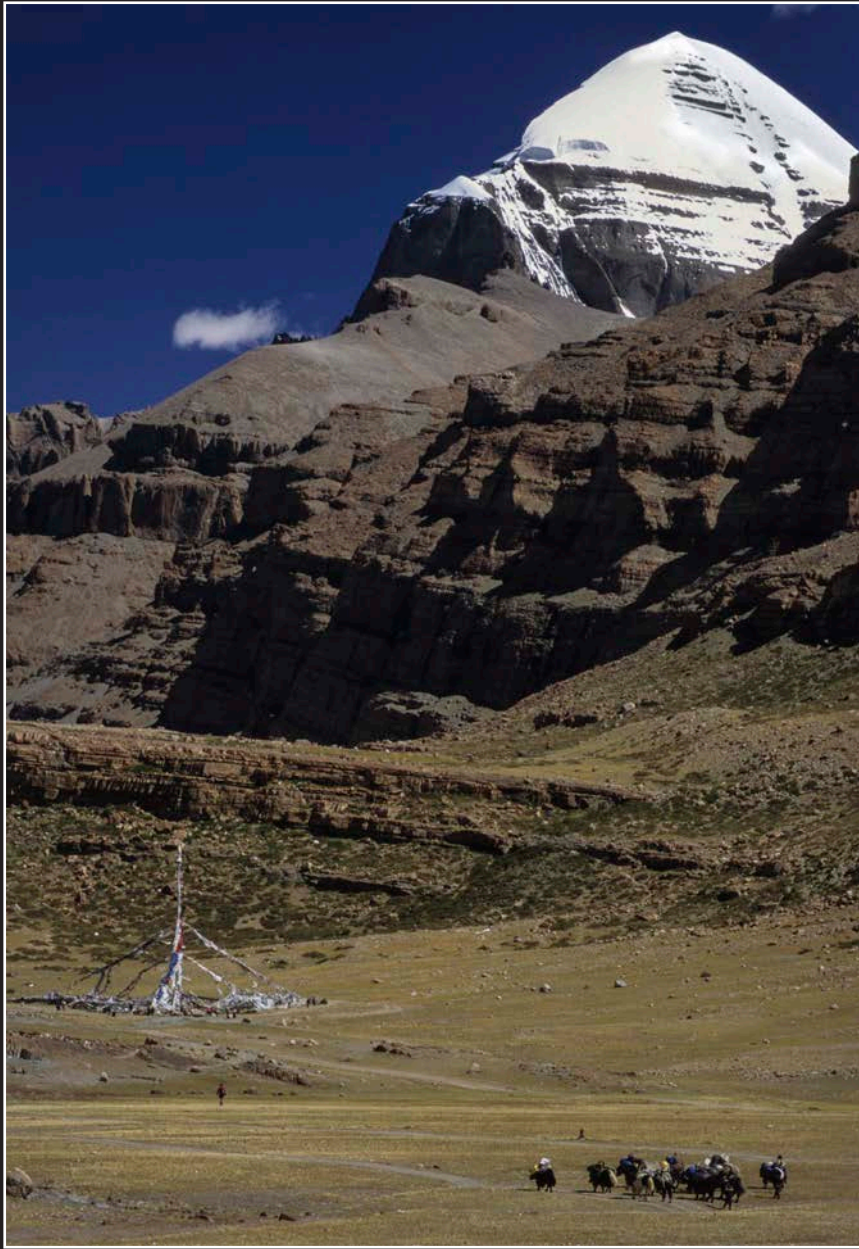


ABOVE: The Lhachu Canyon forms the western part of the kora.

LEFT: Prayer flags on the rise where Kailas is first sighted by pilgrims on the kora.

BELOW: High on the canyon wall opposite Kailas, Chukku Gompa is visited by many passing kora pilgrims, who are so excited by seeing any image (deemed illegal) of the Dalai Lama.

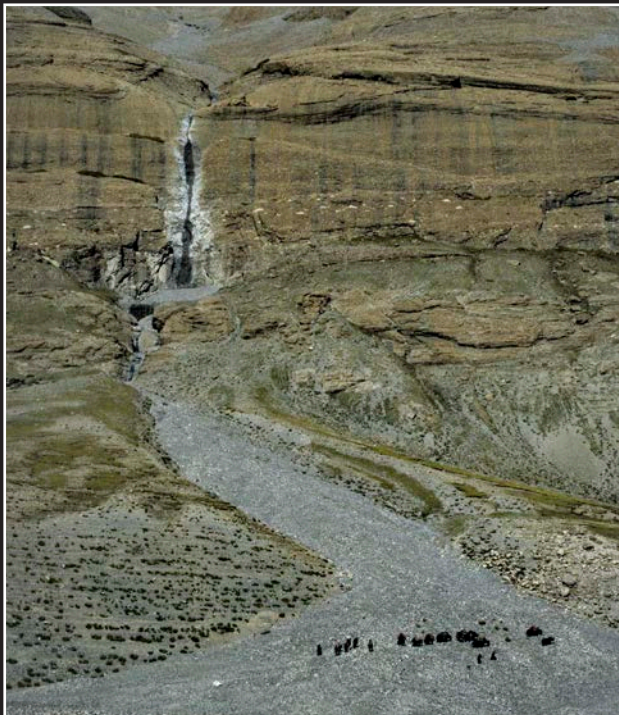




The huge Tarboche flagpole stands at a critical site within the Lhachu Canyon. Its prayer flags are replenished at a full-moon festival every June, and devout pilgrims circle it nine times on their way round the kora.

Above Tarboche, a rock spur is an auspicious site for a sky-burial ground, with tiny cairns each marking a departed soul, alongside numerous mani stones that are carved with prayers

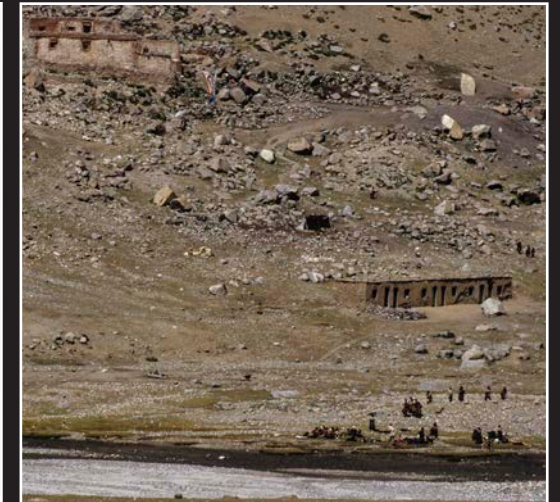




ABOVE: Prayer flags where the north face of Kailas is seen from the kora path.

RIGHT: Kora camp #2; yaks next morning.

BELOW: Yak train after a night in the open, and the pilgrim shelter below the Dirapuk Gompa half way round the kora.





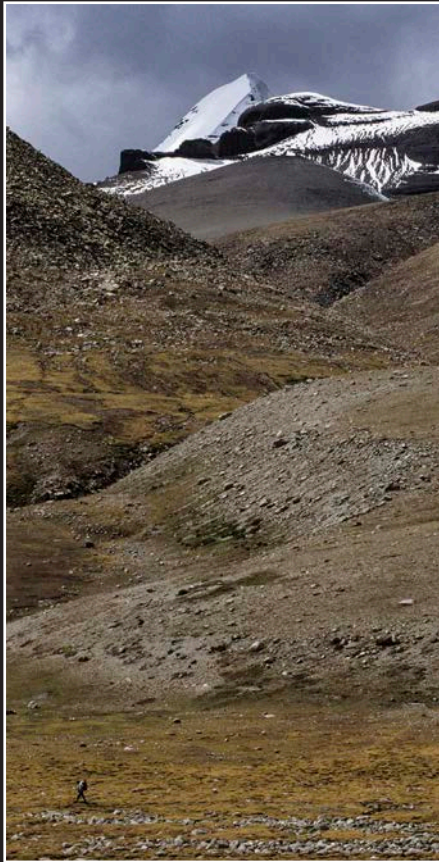
The Dolma (or Drolma) Stone lies on the Dolma La, the high pass along the kora. Hurlled from the summit of Kailas by a god (or perhaps a glacial erratic), it is draped in prayer flags and one face is adorned with small squares of gold leaf placed by pilgrims and held in place with yak butter.



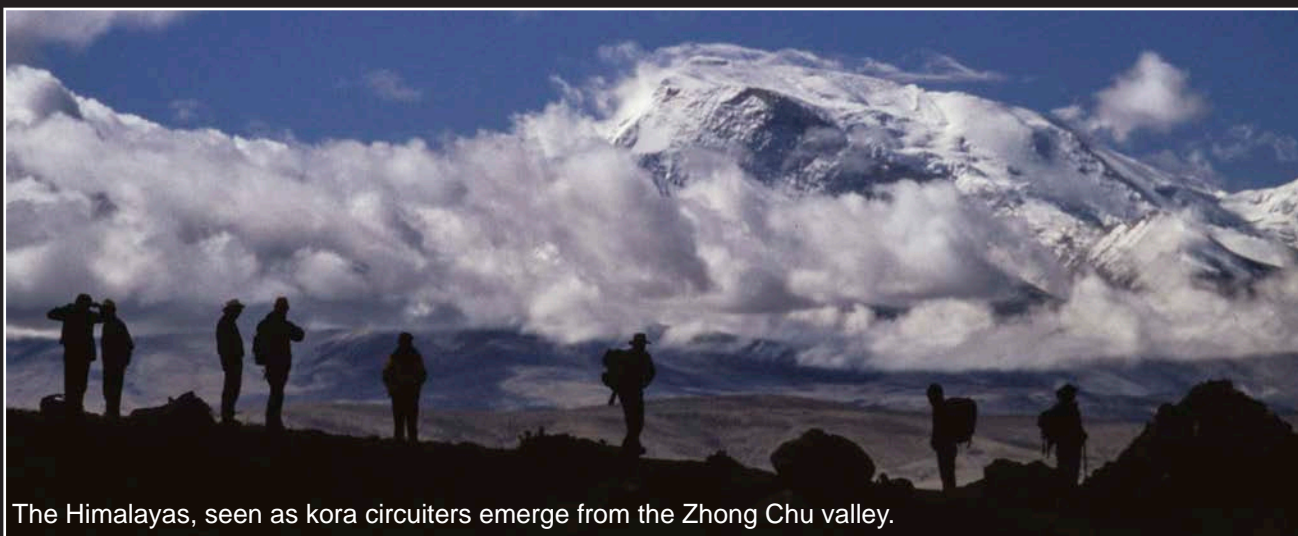


All downhill from the Dolma La, the second half of the kora allows pilgrims to relax and enjoy the experience of their devotions to the gods that dwell on Kailas.





LEFT: Kailas seen from the kora at Zutulpuk.
 RIGHT: 'Om mani padme hum' carved into stones, slates and yak-skulls of a mani wall.
 FAR RIGHT: A beam of sunlight, or a feature of the lens, or the gods checking on the mani wall?



The Himalayas, seen as kora circuiters emerge from the Zhong Chu valley.