



Mount Kailas & the NE Ridge of Everest

This is a fantastic journey through Nepal and Tibet which in effect combines two classic treks into one. In a challenging one month programme, we visit the mystical Mount Kailas, drive across the high Tibetan plateau to the Rongbuk Monastery and then trek to the foot of the North East Ridge of Everest. Even for the seasoned mountain walker, there can be no doubt that this trek promises to be the trip-of-a-lifetime.

Mount Kailas

Our journey begins in the foothills of western Nepal. We fly from Kathmandu to Simikot and then commence a delightful one week trek which follows the Humla Karnali River north-west towards the Tibetan border. We follow an old trading route used by Tibetans who, many years ago, sold valuable salt to Nepal and returned with grain. Even today remnants of this early commerce still continue and we may see the occasional caravan of yaks plying this trade. After an enjoyable week of walking we reach the border at Taklakot where we are met by our Tibetan colleagues and transferred by jeep to the foot of Mount Kailas. Located north of the main Himalayan chain, Mount Kailas remains one of the World's most sacred summits. No-one has ever been permitted to climb its virgin slopes and the summit remains untrodden by man. To Buddhists and Hindus alike, it is the most revered peak in the Himalaya. Hindu pilgrims consider the mountain to be the home of their God - Lord Shiva. For Buddhists Mount Kailas is said to be the Centre of the Universe – the Axis Mundi in Asian cosmology. Every year hundreds of pilgrims travel from all over the Indian sub-Continent and Tibet to make the ritual circumambulation around the mountain in their quest for enlightenment and our trek will join them on this journey.

The North East Ridge of Everest

Following our journey across Tibet, we will spend a couple of days resting and acclimatising at the main Rongbuk Base Camp area on the north side of Everest. This will allow us to visit the famous Rongbuk Monastery, now largely restored to its former splendour. The Base Camp area can be reached by four-wheel drive vehicles and so tourist parties sometimes visit in season. We will, however, be travelling into much remoter terrain; after our yaks arrive at Base Camp we commence three days of tough trekking up the East Rongbuk glacier to the foot of Everest's North East Ridge. The first day is relatively easy, and gives us our first taste of walking on glacial moraine. On the second day we follow the centre of the glacier up Mallory's 'Magic Highway', so named because it provided an easy route through the chaotic and impenetrable ice pinnacles which line both sides of the glacier. This is quite a tough day and we camp on the glacier at an altitude of nearly 6000 metres, with a palpable sense that Everest is very close. On the third day we climb up to an altitude of 6400 metres at Everest's North Ridge Base Camp. We are rewarded with scenery few trekkers will ever experience. The North Col and North Ridge of Everest rise in a huge sweep above us and we can just make out the Second Step where Noel Odell last saw Mallory and Irvine before the clouds moved in and they became mountaineering folklore. To the south we can gaze up at the tremendous North East Ridge of Everest and the famous pinnacles.

One excursion from Advance Base which should not be missed is a superb glacier hike to the Raphu La, a pass at the foot of the North East Ridge. From this pass we can look towards Makalu and the Tibetan side of Lhotse whilst above us rises the North East Ridge, so close to us that we can actually claim to have stood on Everest! Our time in the mountains finally over, we retrace our steps down the East Rongbuk Glacier covering the distance in one long day, rather than the three it took to ascend. We then return to Kathmandu by road.

The upper reaches of the East Rongbuk glacier have for many decades been the sole preserve of Everest expeditions, inaccessible to all but the most determined. Our trek will be able to venture into this high altitude world of mountains and glaciers for a trekking experience like no other.

Itinerary

Day 1

We depart from the UK for the overnight flight to Kathmandu. We fly from London and change planes in the Gulf.

Day 2

We arrive in Kathmandu in the evening and are met by some of our team of Sherpas. We transfer by private coach to the comfortable Hotel Marsyangdi situated in the very centre of the Thamel tourist district of the city. We are within close walking distance of the many restaurants, bars and shops which this part of the city is famous for. After checking into our rooms we can relax in the hotel's pleasant garden before an early evening meal. Flying to Kathmandu produces considerable jet lag on this first night and most of us will be asleep by 10pm.

Day 3

A free day in Kathmandu. There will be an optional sightseeing tour in the morning, after which we will be able to visit the shops to purchase or rent any necessary trekking equipment. In the evening we will visit a traditional Nepali restaurant.

Day 4

An early start for the domestic flight to the city of Nepalgunj in the far west of Nepal. The flight is extremely scenic as we travel the length of the western Himalaya and we have superb views north to the peaks of Langtang, Manaslu, Annapurna and Dhaulagiri. Situated in the Terai region on the Indian plains, Nepalgunj can be very hot and we will probably spend most of the day relaxing in the hotel garden.

Day 5

We return to the small airport at Nepalgunj and fly by Twin Otter plane up to the village of Simikot (3170m) in Nepal's far north-western corner. This remote spot is about as far away from Kathmandu as it is possible to get, without actually leaving Nepal. Simikot is the administrative centre of the beautiful Humla district and it is here that we will meet our team of Sherpas and trek crew. After our trek bags have been weighed and divided up between the porters we begin the trek, hiking along the scenic Humla Karnali river to Masigaon (2600m)

Day 6

Beyond Simikot the villages are inhabited by an increasing proportion of Bhotias, people of Tibetan extraction. The Humla valley becomes increasingly narrow and the occasional villages which we pass have to make the best use of the limited land available here. Eventually we reach the village of Kermi where Tibetan prayer flags flutter over the houses, whilst the trails are dotted with chortens and mani stones, testament to the rich Buddhist influence.

Day 7

From Kermi we climb over a high ridge, reaching an altitude of nearly 3000 metres before descending back down to the Humla river. We cross the Chumsa Khola, a small tributary stream and pass through the pleasant village of Yalbang (2890m). From here we follow an irrigation canal northwards to the neighbouring village of Yangar (2850m) where we camp. There is a small hydroelectric project on the Humla river and these two villages of Yalbang and Yangar both benefit from this. Yangar is an extremely compact village on a steep hillside and in places narrow tunnels have been built beneath the houses.

Day 8

We return back to the edge of the river and follow an increasingly precipitous trail, and in places there is nothing more than a narrow wooden walkway propped up with posts. Some sections of the trail have been blasted out of the sheer cliffs. The path wends its way along this rickety trail for a couple of hours until finally we reach a new suspension bridge across the river. We cross this and trek more easily through delightful apricot orchards to the stone houses of Muchu village. Just beyond this lies the police check post which functions as the Nepalese border control. We have our trekking permits and passports checked here, a process which may consume some considerable time. We then continue along the river to Thumkot Khola and with its small village lying just above. Tumkot is also known as Mota Gompa, and the large white gompa is situated on a ridge just beyond the village. We camp here in a pleasant clearing by the fast flowing waters of a mountain stream.

Day 9

First thing in the morning we cross the Bumachiya Khola on a small wooden bridge. The Humla Karnali now disappears into a steep cleft to the north, and we leave it behind, heading steeply uphill to the isolated tea house at Palbang (3380m). The local Nepali name for this place is Torea which means mustard, and this yellow-flowering plant grows in abundance in the adjacent fields. The trail then climbs steeply to a ridge where we have great views north to the fields of Yari. This small village is effectively the Nepalese frontier town and there are a variety of offices for

police, army and customs as well as a large Gompa. We may stop here for the night but if possible we will continue a little further to the meadows at Sip Sip, a pleasant camp site situated at 4300m at the foot of the Nara Lagna Pass.

Day 10

Above Sip Sip we climb steeply up to the Nara Lagna La (4600m). The crest of the pass is marked by a large pile of stones and a colourful collection of prayer flags. The views are superb and we can see some of the remotest of Nepal's 7000 metre peaks including Api (7132m) and Saipal (7031m) as well as a range of mountains heading west to the border with India. Looking north the landscape is arid and almost totally lacking in vegetation. The irrigated green fields of Sher appear in the distance like an oasis in the otherwise brown desert landscape. We descend down a loose stony path for over 1000 metres and re-join the Humla Karnali which has snaked its way around the mountains. We cross a small bridge over the river and enter Tibet and shortly afterwards arrive at Khojarnath, the first large village in Tibet. The road comes up to here and our Tibetan colleagues meet us with their 4-wheel drive Toyota Land Cruisers. We travel a few miles down the road to Taklakot, known to the Chinese and Tibetans as Purang. Taklakot is a typical Tibetan village - dusty roads and flat-roofed houses. If we arrive in Taklakot early in the day we may continue by road to a campsite by the magical Lake Manasarovar. Otherwise we will stay in Taklakot that night. Despite its drab appearance Taklakot is quite a lively town with a bizarre mixture of Tibetans, Nepalese traders and Chinese army. There are a few restaurants and, curiously, several snooker halls.

Day 11

Mount Kailas is much too distant to reach on foot so today we drive to Darchen at the base of the mountain. The drive is about 70 miles and the dirt road passes between the waters of Lake Manasarovar and Rakas Tal, two lakes which we will be visiting again later in the trek. Darchen was formerly a centre of the wool trade prior to the collapse of cross border commerce between Tibet and India in the 1940's. Now the village is only inhabited in the summer months when it becomes a key staging post for pilgrims making the ritual circumambulation of Mount Kailas. A sprawling tent city can then develop here with Hindus from India and Buddhists from Nepal and Tibet all living cheek by jowl. Only the very top of Kailas is visible from Darchen, a low range of foothills north of the village partially obscures the view. In the afternoon we can take a walk up the ridge just to the north of Darchen gompa for spectacular views of Kailas.

Day 12

The traditional circuit of Mount Kailas proceeds in the clockwise direction which is mandatory for Hindus and for most Buddhist pilgrims who walk this sacred route. Conversely the Tibetan Bon Po sect requires its followers to walk in the opposite direction and to circle the mountain counter-clockwise. The route around the mountain is over 50 kilometres and most pilgrims make the circumambulation, or 'kora' in one exceptionally long day. (Many pilgrims go on to do several further circuits of the mountain before returning home). We will take a more leisurely four days to do the trip. This will allow us to see the various different facets of the mountain at sunset and sunrise, and in this way we will also be able to visit at our leisure several important gompas which lie on the route. Darchen is located due south of Mount Kailas and we begin by walking in a north-westerly direction across the Barkha Plain to reach a cairn and prayer flags at 4,730m. This is the first of four chaktsal-gang ('prostration stations') on the kora. We then cross the broad valley of the Lha Chu and descend to Darbochhe where there is a single tall pole adorned with prayer flags. These flags are renewed every year on the day of Buddha's birth - when the full moon occurs in the month of May. Situated nearby is the chorten-kangri. To pass through the small archway formed by the two legs of this chorten is regarded as an auspicious act. From this important site the trail continues to Shershong. Shortly after this we cross to the west bank of the Lha Chu and continue across scree slopes to our campsite near Damding Donkhang at 4995m where we are rewarded with fine views of the west face of Kailas.

Day 13

We follow the Lha Chu river, crossing two small tributary streams via log bridges and trek to Diraphuk. If we continued north we would eventually come to the source of the Indus. From Diraphuk we head east, crossing the river and beginning the long climb up to the high point of the circuit at the Drolma La (5636m). On the way we pass the stone-built pilgrims house which offers rest to those on the kora. We camp at Jarok Donkhang with superb views of the north face of Kailas.

Day 14

To begin with the climb towards the pass is fairly gradual and there are occasional level sections but soon we are climbing steeply, passing the sacred site of Shiva Tsal where both Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims leave offerings to the Gods of clothing or locks of hair which supposedly smooth the passage of their spirit to the afterlife and represent leaving their past life behind them. The final section leading up to the pass is lined with cairns and prayer flags and at the crest of the pass lies a huge rock, the Drolma Stone, liberally festooned with prayer flags and religious icons. Banknotes from India, China and Nepal are pasted to the rock using 'ghee' or yak butter, and coins are placed in every available crevice. Pilgrims from all religions and sects prostrate themselves in front of this stone and walk around it three times before continuing the kora. For us we have a last look at the north face of Mount Kailas before beginning a

steep and rocky descent on the east side of the pass past the lake at Gauri Kund. This is normally frozen over, but devout Pilgrims are supposed to break the ice and bathe in its waters. This is purely optional for trek members! Eventually we reach the Lham Chu Valley and follow this down stream for about 5 miles to our campsite situated in the tranquil green meadows below Zutrulphuk Gompa. During this descent we will cross the Khado Sanglam river from where there are the only views we get of the mystical east face of Kailas. The Gompa is said to have been used for meditation by the Tibetan saint Milarepa.

Day 15

Today is an easy walk of only a few hours back to Darchen. We pass many walls of Mani Stones and carved Yak skulls which line the trail, before the path enters a narrow section of gorge. We follow this to a small rise from where we can see Rakas Tal shimmering in the distance. This beautiful lake lies just to the west of Lake Manasarovar. We reach Darchen around lunchtime and in the afternoon will be able to make an optional walk to Gyandrang Gompa for interesting views of the south side of Kailas.

Day 16

We have scheduled a spare day to allow for any possible disruptions to our planned circuit of Kailas, which could be as diverse as vehicle breakdown or acclimatisation issues. If we do not need to use this day for the Kailas circuit we will drive to Lake Manasarovar and camp at Chiu Gompa by the shores of the lake. Situated at an altitude of over 4500m, Manasarovar is one of the most sacred lakes in the Himalaya and said to be the source of the great rivers of the Indian sub-continent. West of Manasarovar lies another lake, Rakas Tal. Hindu mythology associates this lake with dark and malevolent forces so whilst there are eight gompas surrounding Manasarovar, Rakas Tal has only one. Legend has it that the water from Rakas Tal was poisonous, but that a small gold fish from Manasarovar created a channel across the narrow isthmus dividing the lakes, allowing sacred water to flow in to Rakas Tal and thus defeating the poison. This channel is called the Ganga Chu and the level of water which flows through this is said to determine the fortunes of Tibet. High water augurs well for the country and its people, but for much of the last century the channel has been parched dry.

Day 17-19

We have three days of driving across the high Tibetan Plateau. Although a demanding journey, we travel in comfortable Toyota Land cruiser vehicles well-suited to the rough terrain.

Day 20

Today we have a long drive to Shegar. In Shegar there is only one crudely built hotel, and we have little choice but to use it. However the poor amenities here are more than compensated for by the wonder of Shegar Fort - the Crystal Fort - which sits atop a steep hill. This was the fort which captivated the early British Everest expeditions of the 1920's and '1930's and on a clear day we can see Everest from its highest ramparts.

Day 21

Shortly after leaving Shegar we turn off the main highway and head south towards the Pang La, a high pass which gives access to the northern flanks of the Everest region. The road climbs steeply up a long series of perfectly inclined zig zags to the crest of the Pang La (5000m). When we reach the top of the pass we get a fantastic panorama of the Himalaya stretching literally for hundreds of miles from Makalu and Kangchenjunga in the east all the way across to Shishapangma in the west. And directly ahead of us rising above everything lies the black outline of Everest. The Pang La is definitely a place to linger to fully take in the view, but eventually after taking our photographs we continue by jeep down an equally long set of switch backs to the village of Phadruchi where the road divides. One way heads towards the village of Kharta from where the earliest British Everest expeditions set out from. We follow the road south towards the great monastery at Rongbuk. Continuing a little further brings us to Everest Base Camp itself and we camp on the glacier moraines by the snout of the vast Rongbuk Glacier.

Day 22

Rest day at Everest Base Camp. While our staff organise the yaks for our trek up the East Rongbuk Glacier to Everest's Advance Base Camp, we can return by vehicle or on foot to the Rongbuk Monastery for an afternoon of sight seeing. The Monastery has recently undergone an extensive refurbishment and has been returned to its former magnificence.

Day 23

Heading south from Everest Base Camp we head towards the terminal moraine of the Rongbuk Glacier and follow a path in the ablation valley to the side. We then gain the moraines of the East Rongbuk glacier which feeds into the main valley and head up this to our first glacier camp at an altitude of about 5500 metres. The ice pinnacles of Mallory's Magic Highway can be made out in the distance.

Day 24

From our first glacier camp we continue along the rubble-strewn surface of the East Rongbuk Glacier and eventually reach the central ice section which Mallory so aptly christened the Magic Highway. We follow this southwards, with views of Everest slowly creeping into view. Our campsite for the night is situated on the glacier at an altitude of 6000 metres.

Day 25

After a few hours trekking we finally reach Everest's Advance Base Camp at an altitude of 6400 metres. In front of us lies the North Col with the North Ridge rising up to our left. And descending eastwards from the summit of Everest is the awesome north-east ridge and its fearsome pinnacles which claimed the lives of Joe Tasker and Pete Boardman.

Day 26

We have a free day at Advance Base Camp. For those with some energy, a fantastic glacier excursion can be made across the upper basin of the East Rongbuk Glacier to the Raphu La (6550m), a prominent col which lies at the foot of Everest's North-East Ridge. From this col we can gaze into Nepal and the awesome spectacle of Makalu rising in front of us.

Day 27

An early start is required for the long trek back down the East Rongbuk Glacier to Base Camp.

Day 28

Breaking camp very early, we board our jeeps and make the sensational drive to Zhangmu. This road is without doubt one of the World's great wonders. Cut into the almost vertical sides of a narrow gorge, the road requires excellent concentration from our drivers! We pass through Nyalam and then continue downwards to Zhangmu, the border town between Nepal and Tibet. This is a typical Chinese garrison town and the squalid ness of the place is enlivened in the evening with rowdy karaoke bars and pool halls. Quite a sight after the peacefulness of our journey.

Day 29

We exit China and drive down through no mans land to the Nepalese border town of Kodari. At an elevation of just over 1500 metres, the warmth and humidity will be immediately noticeable to us. We are met by our private vehicle and travel the few hours back to Kathmandu which we should reach late afternoon.

Day 30

Free day in Kathmandu. For those who need to get back home, we can arrange a flight for this evening which will arrive back into London on the morning of Day 31. Otherwise...

Day 31

We have most of the day free in Kathmandu before transferring to the airport for an evening flight back home.

Day 32

We arrive into Heathrow Airport