



Doing it the hard way ... a monk (left) on his essential pilgrimage to Mount Kailash (below). The journeys, even for tourists (below right), are hardly made in comfort. Photos: Claire Scobie

A pilgrim's trail

Tibet's sacred Mount Kailash is not easy to reach, but Claire Scobie finds karma is on her side.

After days of a dusty, bone-rattling ride in a truck along China's National Highway 219, the water of Lake Manasarovar seemed an unearthly blue. The journey had been hard, uncomfortable and exhausting – but then getting to Asia's holiest mountain was never going to be straightforward.

Mount Kailash, in far-west Tibet, is sacred to four religions. Buddhists and more than a billion Hindus regard it as the centre of the universe. It is the holiest place for Tibetan Buddhists, for whom a pilgrimage is essential.

At the mountain's foot lies Manasarovar, venerated by Hindus as the lake of the gods. Close by is Rakshas Tal, known as the lake of demons. Our Tibetan driver slowly circled the shrine marking the gateway to Mount Kailash – a clump of colourful prayer flags and hundreds of cairns of stones built by generations of pilgrims – before stopping.

I staggered out. Mount Kailash was nowhere to be seen: its 6700-metre peak was shrouded in cloud. Having travelled nearly 1000 kilometres from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, I could barely stifle a groan.

The mountain's enigmatic nature is, of course, part of its magnetism. It is 55 million years old, and is mentioned in records dating from the Bronze Age of Mesopotamia. It

has held a fascination for scholars, explorers and spiritual seekers for centuries. The stranger approaches Mount Kailash, wrote the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin in the early 20th century, "with a feeling of awe. Mount Everest and Mount Blanc cannot compare with it."

For now, Mount Kailash remains mysterious and remote. But next month the world's highest railway, connecting Tibet to China, opens for commercial passengers. A British travel agency, G.W. Travel, is booking luxury railway tours for \$6000 to \$10,500. Tibetans fear the railway will bring more waves of Chinese immigrants and that natural resources will further diminish.

Development also threatens Mount Kailash. In the far west, a spectacular landscape in which deserts collide with the world's highest mountains and where ancient traditions endure, the Chinese Government has controversial plans to improve the infrastructure, including an airport and a road around the mountain, and aims to encourage more tourism.

For now, the simplest way to get to Mount Kailash is to join a group with a tour company. My three-week trip was arranged through a Lhasa travel agency. I was joined by Katrina, 31, a frequent visitor who speaks Tibetan fluently, and Jurgen, a German first-timer who

had dreamed of spending his 60th birthday at Kailash, hoping for some sort of spiritual rebirth. Some go to Kailash seeking epiphanies, others adventure.

We had flown to Lhasa from the Chinese city of Chengdu and, after a few days getting accustomed to the altitude (nearly 3700 metres) and stocking up on supplies, we set off in a four-wheel-drive, with a guide, a cook and a truck for the equipment. What is usually an easy half-day drive from Lhasa to Tibet's second-biggest town, Shigatse, turned into a 12-hour marathon as cars were diverted because of work on the main road. After a day exploring Shigatse, which is clustered around the vast Tashilhunpo Monastery, and enjoying our last night in a comfortable hotel, we were ready for the journey.

We left the town at first light and passed through villages of creamy mountain-brick houses, typical of the central Tibetan Utsang region. It was harvest time and, wearing identical vermilion headscarves, women sang as they scythed the fields of barley. Except for the tractors, these were scenes from a pre-industrial age. Farther west, the landscape became more arid and the road rutted, evidence of monsoonal downpours. The ride became a roller-coaster over mountain passes, each one ascending a few hundred metres higher.

By day three we had realised Jurgen was struggling with altitude sickness. Despite his fitness, he had headaches, insomnia and breathlessness – and was not helped by the driver's tale of how "a strong German man" had died from altitude sickness at Kailash only weeks before. Jurgen decided, after much agonising, to return with the four-wheel-drive to Lhasa. Katrina and I were to continue in the truck along Highway 219, the southern route to Kailash.

In the following three days we forded rivers that coursed with melting snow, saw herds of kiang (wild ass) and deer streaming across the rugged, treeless landscape, and passed nomad encampments in which grubby children tended yak. Occasionally we came across a lammergeir, a giant bird that doubles as an undertaker – corpses here are fed to the vultures in the ancient Buddhist practice of "sky burial".

Along the way we had frequent picnics, featuring yak-butter tea (black tea, salt and butter), which tastes like soup and is said to be a good remedy for altitude sickness. Tibetans mix it with tsampa, made from ground, roasted barley flour. I stuck to my stash of Earl Grey and peanut-butter sandwiches.

Some nights we stayed in rudimentary guesthouses with terrible open-pit toilets. I preferred to camp.



Destination Mount Kailash

■ **Getting there**
Thai Airways (www.thaiair.com) offers flights between Sydney and Chengdu (via Bangkok). Onward flight with Air China from Chengdu to Lhasa (one-way, \$269) needs to be booked through a local tour operator who will supply the mandatory permit to enter the Tibet Autonomous Region. Qantas flies Sydney to Beijing from \$1360 return. Flights can be booked through Trailfinders (9247 7666, www.trailfinders.com).

In Lhasa, trips to Mount Kailash can be arranged through local agencies. The writer travelled with Windhorse Travel Agency (www.tibetwindhorse.com), which offers a 22-day round trip from Lhasa including accommodation and meals from \$4104 per person. Groups are often flown from Kathmandu to Lhasa to travel overland back to Nepal via Mount Kailash. Itineraries may include visiting the towns of Sakya and Gyantse, or Mount Everest base camp.

■ **When to go**
The best season is between April and October. Saga Dawa – the Buddha's birthday

– is when Tibetan pilgrims go en masse and usually coincides with the May full moon. July and August can be affected by monsoon. The roads are best from early September to mid-October.

■ **Packages**
Peregrine Adventures (1300 854 444, www.peregrineadventures.com) offers trips to Mount Kailash via Kathmandu and Lhasa. Trans Himalaya (www.trans-himalaya.com) offers trips to Mount Kailash via Beijing and Lhasa. The Australia Tibet Council provides advice on travel within Tibet (9283 3466, www.atc.org.au).

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