

The sun was fierce during the day but at night we needed heavily padded sleeping bags. After all that, it was hard not to feel slightly disappointed by the time we reached Darchen, at the foot of the mountain.

Darchen is a rubbish-strewn pit with at least three guesthouses under construction, a mobile-phone tower and a handful of brothels catering for the Chinese military. It feels like the Wild West of Asia.

But Darchen is dwarfed by the majestic Kailash. Known as Kang Rinpoche – Precious Jewel of Snows – to Tibetans, the mountain is too sacred to be climbed. Instead, the goal for a Tibetan is to walk clockwise – or to make a kora – around the mountain. One kora purifies the sins of this lifetime, 108 koras secure a ticket to Nirvana. Some Tibetans make the 51.5-kilometre kora around the mountain in a day. Most Westerners take three. It is a strenuous trail that crosses a 5600-metre pass before descending to a river plain.

As we set off, the mountain was still obscured by cloud. The starting point was the giant flagpole, Tarboche, which is raised during the Saga Dawa festival every May/June, when the pilgrimage season starts. From there, the path ascends gently along the Lha Chu – the “five-coloured rainbow stream” – before reaching Dronglung (or Wild Yak Valley), which, with a sprinkling of snow, could be a scene from C.S. Lewis’s Narnia books.

We stopped at a monastery and in the dim, smoky kitchen rubbed shoulders with pilgrims drinking yak-butter tea. I was assailed by the acrid smell of burning yak dung, used as fuel for fires, mixed with incense and unwashed bodies. The pilgrims, in thick, multicoloured tunics, many

with knives in scabbards encrusted with jewels, could have been figures from a medieval pageant.

On the first night, we slept under the north face of the mountain, snow barely clinging to the sheer, jet-black rock. Before dawn I heard the familiar Buddhist chant *Om Mani Padme Hung*, muttered by Tibetan pilgrims as they passed our tent. Keen to complete the kora in a day, many had set off in the middle of the night. From here it was a tough 6.5-kilometre ascent to the Dolma La pass, and with each step the air became thinner.

We saw only one Chinese pilgrim – a soldier in combat gear – and one other group of Westerners, six Buddhists from Germany. Occasionally a Bonpo pilgrim passed us going anti clockwise – Mount Kailash is also the holiest shrine for Tibetan Bonpos, who practise the animist Bon religion that predates Buddhism. It was hard not to be moved by the devotion. Mani walls, each rock intricately carved with prayers, litter the landscape.

Under a big boulder is a narrow passage, about 4.5 metres long, through which pilgrims must wriggle on their bellies. Tibetans believe that only the virtuous can get through, so that even the slimmest sinners will get stuck. We wriggled through it successfully. There are also the ruins of stupas, shrines blown up by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution, when pilgrimage was outlawed in Tibet (restrictions on religious practice were relaxed in the early 1980s).

On the final day of our kora, the sun illuminated the snowy south face, which is marked by a jagged striation known as the Stairway to Heaven. From there we continued to the Tirthapuri hot springs, where Tibetan pilgrims end their journey. You can’t immerse yourself in the

sulfurous pools, but they can provide a soothing foot bath.

The lunar landscape continues into the west to the pre-Buddhist kingdom of Guge. Some groups continue on, but we turned back to spend time on the shores of Lake Manasarovar. Such are the vagaries of the weather that by the time we arrived at the guesthouse on the lakeside there was a snowstorm. The crystalline-blue waters became waves of steely grey, and Kailash had again disappeared from view. Still, it was a good excuse to drink sweet tea and snuggle up by a fire stoked with yak pats.

On the drive back we stopped at a guesthouse where I overheard a Dutchman complain: “We went to Kailash and couldn’t go around the mountain. It was closed because of snow.” I felt for him; it did seem a shame that he had travelled so far without setting eyes on the sacred mountain. When I told our Tibetan guide, however, he merely shrugged and smiled. “It’s karma,” he said.

Claire Scobie is the author of Last Seen in Lhasa, to be released in Australia on July 3; \$35.



Signs of devotion ... pilgrims (left), holy Mani walls (below) and yaks (bottom left) characterise the trek to Tibet’s sacred mountain. Photos: Claire Scobie



Culture clash

Mount Kailash remains remote. But, with plans to improve the region’s infrastructure, including a civilian airport in the regional capital of Ngari and a rumoured ring road around the mountain, it’s unlikely to remain that way. The Free Tibet Group in London has stepped up a campaign for the area to be turned into a World Heritage site. There is support from UNESCO for this, but the Chinese Government has to apply for the status and no application has been made.

The Chinese authorities recognise Tibet’s tourism potential. In 2004 the “autonomous” region attracted more than a million visitors and the authorities hope for more than 10 million by 2020. Among young Chinese people the roof of the world has already become chic: it’s not uncommon to see young jeans-clad people from Beijing swinging prayer wheels.

Numbers are likely to rise with the introduction of the \$5.4 billion Golmud-Lhasa railway, the “centrepiece” of China’s Western development campaign. Thawing permafrost on the vast Qinghai-Tibet plateau could make it inoperable after only a decade. But, meanwhile, the railway is expected to increase militarisation of Tibet and threaten the environment. In a recent interview, the Tibetans’ exiled leader, the Dalai Lama, said: “Some kind of cultural genocide is taking place ... In general, a railway line is very useful in order to develop, but not when politically motivated to bring about demographic change.”

Despite greater economic freedom in Tibet as China opens up to the West, religious and political repression continues, preventing any Tibetan move towards self-determination. Even in remote areas, authorities control the monasteries. Tibetans are banned from worshipping the Dalai Lama, viewed by China as a pariah who threatens the unity of the Motherland. Many still do so secretly. Practising their faith is a form of quiet resistance.

“Every stone is important, every piece of land is something special,” says one pilgrim. “Please tell people in the West that if they build a road, Kailash is finished.”

Claire Scobie



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