

The Kailash Kora: sin free for the moment (9/17/2007-9/19/2007)

According to Tibetan Buddhists completing the kora (walking) around the sacred Mt. Kailash rids one's self of the sins (negative karma) accumulated over a lifetime. It's a bit tougher than walking in to a confessional at your local Catholic Church, but then again Tibetan Buddhism is not a religion for those wishing to practice from an arm chair. This 6714 m (22,156 ft) sacred mountain has been revered for centuries and is the source of both the Brahmaputra and Indus rivers. It is the Mt. Olympus of Hinduism, home of the Gods, specifically the abode of Siva. For Tibetans it is where the great guru Milarepa won a victory over the Bon (the pre Buddhist Tibetan religion) master Naro Bonchung in a religious contest establishing the supremacy of Buddhism in Tibet. For Jains it is where the first of the tirthankars was enlightened. As we approached the mountain, the sky was deep blue, and weather could not have been better. The kora starts from the grubby town of Darchen, a decidedly unholy beginning to this mythical trek. Darchen is a collection of concrete buildings and guesthouses amidst garbage strewn streets. However, once out of town, the trail soon follows the Indus River and offers spectacular views of the mythical mountain. I was excited as I walked along side the mountain past prayer flags and stupas, having wanted to do this trek ever since I had first heard about it last time I was in Tibet. There are three famous treks in the world that having heard of them I had always wanted to do some day. The Inca trail in Peru, which I did a few years ago, the Kailash kora which I was now doing, and the Annapurna circuit in Nepal which was next on my agenda. On completing the first day of hiking, I still had enough energy to hike up to



Approaching Mt. Kailash before starting the Kora.



Sky burial site beneath Mt. Kailash along the Kora.

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the prayer flag adorned glacial overlook at the base of the North face of Mt. Kailash; a spectacular sight. I sat resting from the tough climb in the thin air with the sheer North face encompassing my entire view and thinking how lucky I was to be here and to have such great weather for the trek.

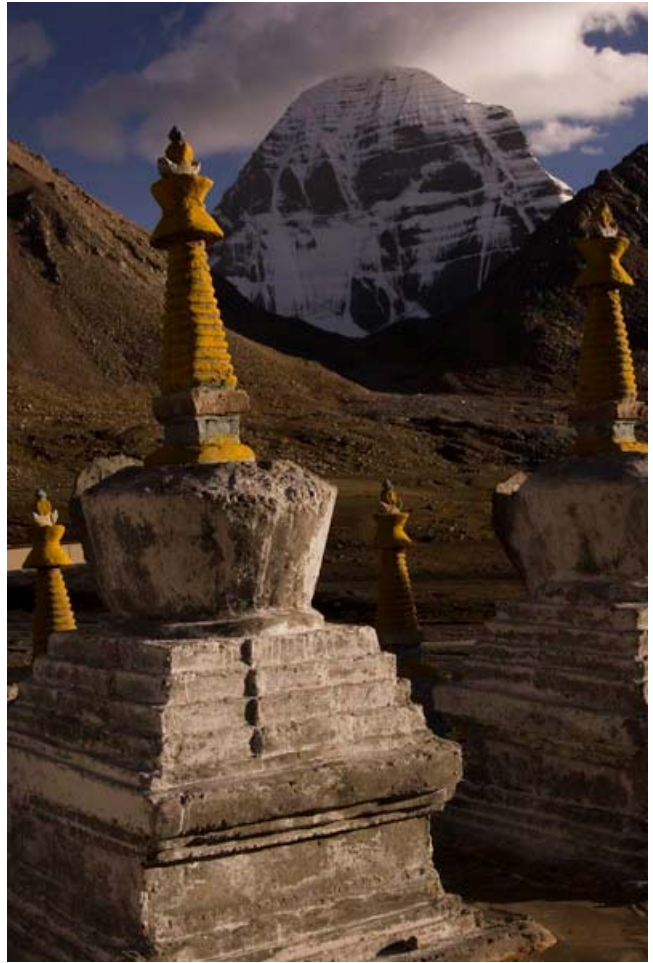
The second day of the trek was the most difficult although my months at high altitude seemed to pay off because getting over the 5650 m (18,645 ft) pass, breaking my personal record from Everest base camp for the highest point I have been, was easier than I had expected. Just before the top of the pass the faithful go through a symbolic death leaving a piece of clothing, or hair behind. Perhaps many would like to die at this point as the air is incredibly thin making the last 600 ft or so to the pass particularly tough. On the other side of the pass we had a brief lull in our good weather as a hail storm moved down the valley. I felt like the storm cloud was following me, I could see blue sky in front and behind me but was unable to walk out of the hail. Fortunately this part of the trek was less scenic, without views of the mountain, so if I had to have bad weather on any portion of the trek I was happy it was during this stretch. The final day of the kora took a mere 3 hours of walking back to the town of Darchen. Tired and sick of instant noodle soup I enjoyed a “sin free” celebratory non-noodle soup lunch with my trekking companions back in Darchen. Amazingly enough many Tibetans do the entire 50 km (31 mile) kora in one day, maybe next time I give that a try when I accumulate enough sins to make the trip back worth while. Or maybe I’ll just take the Protestant way out and, just say “forgive me,” skipping the whole walking part altogether. Of course if you really want to accumulate merit then you can prostrate around Kailash a feat I witnessed two pilgrims performing and which I could not possibly imagine completing.



Me overlooking the glacier and the North face of Mt. Kailash.



West face of Mt. Kailash, and the Indus River.



North face of Mt. Kailash.



North face of Mt. Kailash.



North face of Mt. Kailash.



North face of Mt. Kailash.



Pilgrim on the kora around Mt. Kailash.



Prayer flags Mt. Kailash kora.



North face of Mt. Kailash.



Pilgrim, Mt. Kailash kora.



Pilgrim, Mt. Kailash kora.



At the top of the 18,645 ft pass from left to right, Marc, Me, Silka, Martin (a German guy we ended up trekking with), and in front Santa.



Pilgrim, Mt. Kailash kora.



Pilgrims at the pass on the Mt. Kailash kora.



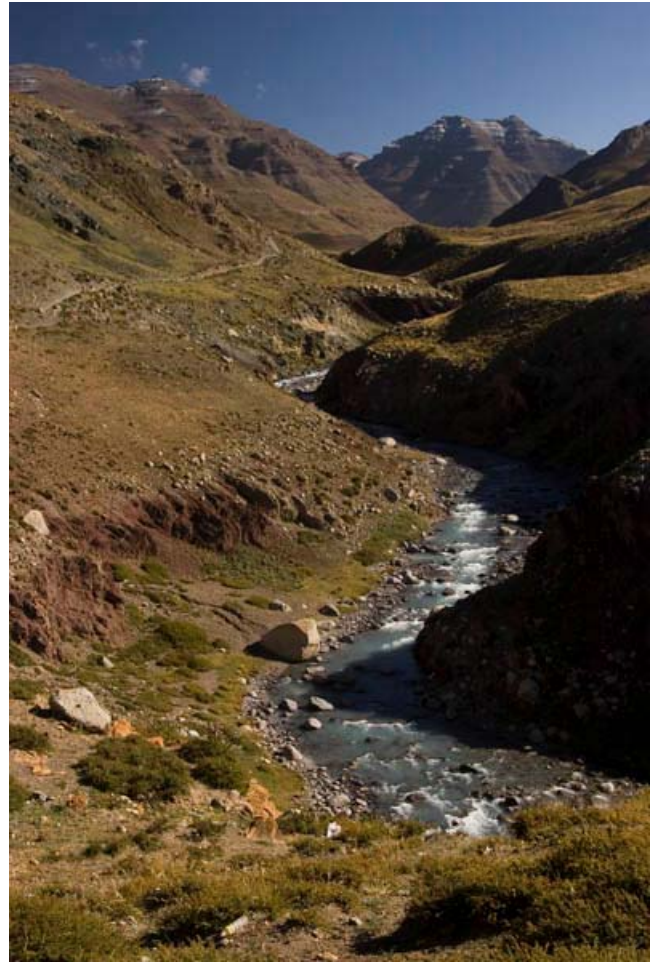
Yaks in the hail storm, Mt. Kailash kora.



Yaks, Mt. Kailash kora.



Pilgrims prostrating around the Mt. Kailash kora.



Brahmaputra River along the Kailash kora.