



A Caravan to...

Mount Kailash and the Saga Dawa Festival

DETAILED DOSSIER

29 day itinerary

*Kathmandu – Nepalganj – Simikot –
trek to Manepeme – Lake Mansarovar –
Mount Kailash (4 day trek) – (Saga Dawa Festival) –
Guge Kingdom (Tholing and Tsaparang) – Ali –
Changthang Plateau – Pelkho Tso Lake – Kathmandu*

Travel dates: Tuesday 8th June 2010

INTRODUCTION

Far behind the mighty walls of the Himalayas stands Mount Kailash, undoubtedly the holiest mountain in Asia. For the great religions of Bon, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism Kailash is considered to be the mountain at the centre of the universe, for from its slopes flow four of the major rivers of South Asia, including the Indus and the Bhramaputra. Nearby lie the two holy lakes of Mansarovar and Rakshas Tal in an area of awe-inspiring natural beauty. Mysterious, magnificent and exceedingly remote, this is a mountain that is only just 'of this world'. It is said that anyone who circumambulates its mighty slopes can wash away the sins of an entire lifetime, making Kailash the ultimate site of pilgrimage for people from all over Tibet and Asia

The Oriental Caravan has been visiting Mount Kailash since May 2002, each time attending the wonderfully colourful Saga Dawa festival held at the time of the full moon and Buddha's birthday. The climax of the ceremony is the raising of a huge flagpole presided over by trumpeting monks and witnessed by crowds of exuberant and colourfully dressed pilgrims – a truly unforgettable experience.

With a maximum group size of 10 people (plus staff) this trip will be accompanied by Tibetan and Mandarin speaking specialist trek leader Phil Colley. Phil has a wealth of experience travelling leading high altitude treks throughout the Himalayas including Kailash and has a unique knowledge of Tibet having first visited the Forbidden Kingdom back in 1986. By allowing sufficient time for acclimatization the itinerary has been specifically designed to maximise each participant's chances of successfully and safely completing the *kora* or pilgrim circuit – an easy enough trail but which at its highest point mountain reaches an altitude of 5600m. Our route to Kailash incorporates a trek through the beautiful and remote 'Wild West' of Nepal culminating in a stay at the enchanting village of Manepeme. This year for the first time we will also be visiting Guge Kingdom and the rarely seen monasteries of Tholing and Tsaparang before returning to Nepal via the nomadic homeland of the Changthang plateau. For those eligible there will also be the chance of completing the fabled 'Inner Kora' of Mount Kailash.



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ITINERARY (25 day)

Day 1 Kathmandu Group rendezvous in Kathmandu. After time to relax at our 4 star comfortable and centrally-located hotel, for those who wish there will be drinks and dinner in the vibrant entertainment district of Thamel, with its cosmopolitan atmosphere and many shops, bars and restaurants. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 2 Kathmandu We spend the day exploring Kathmandu. In the morning we visit the ancient Monkey Temple at Swayumbinath, from where there are commanding views over the valley. It is considered good luck to climb the 365 steps at the front of the temple, although this is by no means compulsory! Later we drive to Bodhnath, the site of an imposing white stupa. This area is home to a large Tibetan community, and is often the first point of contact for refugees coming over the mountains. After lunch overlooking the stupa, we visit the riverside Hindu temple complex at Pashupatinath where chillum-smoking, *sadhu* holymen mingle with pilgrims, devotees and other worshippers. There are then a few hours free before the group meets up again, in the early evening, for a trip briefing. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 3 Kathmandu A day at leisure, allowing time for group members to independently explore Kathmandu and its outlying districts. At any time of day it is worth taking in the many sights and sounds of Durbar Square – the heart of the city – with its countless tiered pagodas and statues of deities looking both ferocious and benign. Nearby are the ornate and finely carved wooden buildings and towers of the recently opened Royal Palace, as well as Kumari Chowk, where it is sometimes possible to catch a glimpse of the young living goddess Kumari. Today the Kathmandu Valley is one of the most fertile in the Himalayas, and home to some of its richest cultural treasures. According to local legend the valley was once a lake, however, with the blow of a sword more properly used for cutting through ignorance, the god Manjusri cleaved a gash in the mountain wall thus allowing the water to escape. Across the valley, and within easy travelling distance of the capital, is Patan (famous for its handicrafts) and the well-preserved, medieval town of Bhaktapur – famous for its yoghurt. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 4 Nepalgunj An early start, as today we travel to the airport and take a spectacular flight across Nepal to Nepalgunj where we will stay overnight in a hotel on full board basis. Nepalgunj is located mid-western part of the lowland Terai district. Depending on flight availability there is also the possibility that we might continue on today to Simikot *Overnight – hotel*

Days 5 Simikot An early morning flight to Simikot, presuming we haven't flown the day before, followed by the commencement of our trek to Simikot Lagna *Overnight – camp*

Day 6 to 9 On trek For the next few days we trek through glorious scenery in the foothills of the Himalayas through timeless villages little changed for centuries. We will be using established trails at between 3 to 4000 meters through varied terrain that changes from forested to agricultural and passing beneath snow-capped peaks. Travelling through Shinjungma, Talung and on to Tilchu there is much of cultural interest here, particularly among the Bhotia people, as we pass through Tibetan influenced areas and are able to visit remote but active monasteries. *Overnight – camp*

Day 10 We spend our last night in Nepal at the beautiful village of Manepeme. *Overnight – camp*

Day 11 Taklakot (3770m) After crossing the Karnali suspension bridge, we will reach the first village in Tibet proper called Sher where our land cruiser, supporting truck and Tibetan guide will be waiting for us. And then, from there, we will drive to Taklakot paying a visit to Khojarnath Gumpa, which was built in the 10th century by the great Buddhist translator, Rinchen Zangpo. The landscape here is spectacular, crowned by the unmatched beauty of Gurlamandata (7694m) and the Darchula Himalayan range. After immigration formalities done by Chinese army, we will stay in basic guesthouse. *Overnight – guesthouse*

Day 12 Mansarovar (4510m) This morning we begin our three hour drive to Mansarovar Lake keeping picturesque Gurlamandata on our left, a mountain which, when seen from the air, is said to resemble a Buddhist swastika.. We will also pass by the antithetical Rakshas Lake on our approach and either today or on Day 14 visit Chiu Gumpa, the monastery said to be the last resting place of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche). The monastery is situated in a quite photogenic setting, with Kailash in the background, on an isthmus between Lake Mansaravara and Rakshas Tal. We aim to arrive at this mysterious and beautiful lake by early afternoon when we will catch our first sight of Mount Kailash (6,656m) rising majestically in the distance. Mansarovar is particularly important to Hindus, for whom it is considered to be 'a lake formed in the mind of the god Brahma'. Each year many pilgrims make their way from India in order to bathe in its waters and wash away the sins of a lifetime. *Overnight – camp*

Day 13 Lake Mansarovar We have a full day to rest, reflect and explore the area around Lake Mansarovar. The lake was once circled by eight monasteries which represented the eight spokes and eightfold path of the wheel of the Dharma. Most were destroyed at the time of the Cultural Revolution but today we will visit at least one which has since been restored. The area of the lake is also rich in birdlife and with such a tranquil and serene setting provides a paradise for ornithologists. There will also be an excursion to complete the Kailash 'inner kora' today, with those participants meeting up with the rest of the group late on Day 14. According to Tibetan custom only those who have completed the Kailash 'outer kora' 13 times (or once during the Year of the Horse) are entitled to undergo the 'inner kora'. *Overnight – camp*

Day 14 Tarboche We continue the short distance to Darchen the start point for our circumambulation of Mount Kailash. Darchen itself is an existentially challenging Chinese outpost, with something of a 'Wild West' feel about it, and normally has little to attract the visitor. However, at the time of Saga Dawa a vast tent encampment grows up around the town, populated by exuberant pilgrims from all over Tibet, adding a festive atmosphere that can be quite magical. In Darchen we have to register with the local authorities, and make preparations for our trek around the mountain. We will try to camp away from Darchen at Tarboche near the site of the Saga Dawa festival. *Overnight – camp*

Days 15–18 Trek around Mount Kailash Most Tibetans complete the circumambulation of Mount Kailash in one long day, starting before dawn and finishing long after nightfall, or if prostrating the *kora* can take 16 days. We have a leisurely four days in which to make the trek around the mountain allowing time to acclimatise, and to explore and enjoy some of Kailash's more interesting aspects. Setting out from Darchen we soon reach the first of four *chaktsalgang* (prostration points), offering great views of the mountain, before heading north up the Lha Chu valley. Shortly afterwards we descend to Tarboche (4,751m) the actual site of the Saga Dawa festival, and a place we therefore return to at the end of our trek. Each year, during the full moon around the time of Buddha's birthday, prayer flags are replaced here and a huge pole or *tise* is raised symbolising the centre of the universe, which according to Buddhist cosmography is Mount Kailash itself. After passing Choku Gompa the valley narrows and is flanked by huge almost vertical cliffs which occasionally give way to provide splendid views of Kailash's western face. Along the way, with a little imagination, one can see relic reminders of the great spiritual battle which took place here in the 11th century between the poet/saint Milarepa and his rival from the Bon religion Naro Bonchung. According to legend the two had a race to the summit, with Milarepa, travelling by sunbeam, coming out on top. When Naro Bonchung saw he was about to be defeated, his chosen vehicle, a flying drum, fell from the sky, thereby, it is said, causing the great gash that marks the mountain's southern face. At the end of the first day's trek we camp in the area around Drira Phuk Gompa from where a side valley leads up to the true source of the Indus.

The following day is a rest day to allow for acclimatisation before our crossing of the Drolma La pass. One option on this day is to take a half day hike up to the foot of Ghangjam Glacier (5,250m) which affords close up views of Kailash's glistening northern face. The focus of the circumambulation of Kailash is the crossing of Drolma La (5,630m) which we undertake on the third day. The entire circuit of the mountain is considered to be symbolic of the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, with the arrival at the pass being considered the moment of rebirth. En route we pass Shiwachal, a symbolic field of death where pilgrims are required to leave behind a personal item, usually an article of clothing or lock of hair, but occasionally drops of blood are left. The pass itself is marked by huge banks of prayer flags and a large boulder depicting the goddess Tara. After a steep descent, which passes the beautiful Lake Gaurikund, the trail levels out and we eventually reach our camp at Zutul Puk Gompa, a temple which houses a cave where Milarepa is said to have meditated. On the fourth day we complete the circumambulation with an easy walk of 5-6 hours which brings us back to the start point at Darchen. Rejoining our vehicles we retrace our steps slightly as we continue the short distance to our camp at Tarboche where we base ourselves in anticipation of the next day's Saga Dawa festival. *Overnight – camping*

In the 9th century Buddhism in Tibet suffered a severe setback when the anti-Buddhist King Langdarma began a campaign of persecution against an increasingly popular religion as he tried to reinstate the indigenous native religion of Bon. In response to this, fleeing Buddhists led by Namde Osung, one of Langdarma's Buddhist sons, founded the kingdom of Guge safe in the far reaches of western Tibet. For several hundred years this remote kingdom flourished and under the auspices of the great translator Rinchen Zangpo the architecturally astounding monasteries of Tholing and Tsaparang were constructed. As has been the case in many parts of Asia the bringing of Christianity by Jesuit missionaries in the early 17th century proved disastrous for the people of Guge whose kingdom was soon after destroyed by the wars that ensued. On this exciting exploratory addition to our Kailash programme we visit both of these little visited sites and become witness to some of the most sublime Buddhist artwork to be found anywhere in the Himalayas.

Day 19 Thirtapuri. Saga Dawa is the fourth and holiest month of the Tibetan calendar, being the month in which Gautama Buddha was born, reached enlightenment and also died. The benefits of all religious acts performed at this time are considered to be of particular significance, and the colourful festival centred on the raising of the Tarboche Flagpole is one of the most important in Tibet. None is held at a more stunning location. A group of monks from the Nyingmapa 'Red Hat' order play musical instruments to accompany the ceremony whilst pilgrims from all over Tibet dressed in their finest circumambulate the pole. Once the pole, festooned with prayer flags, is successfully raised to vertical the celebrations really begin, with joyful pilgrims throwing huge amounts of *tsampa* barley flour into the air, and over each other, while horsemen of all ages display their equestrian skills. Above Tarboche, and worthy of the steep climb to get there, is a large, slightly eerie, sky burial site with great views up and down the valley. After the ceremonies are over we drive west toward the welcome hot springs of Thirtapuri.

Overnight – camp

Day 20 Tholing Continue to Tsamda County via Sotlej canyon. Visit Tholing Monastery.

Overnight – guesthouse/camp

Day 21 Tholing Short drive to Tsaparang. Explore Tsaparang and the Guge Kingdom. Return to Tholing.

Overnight – guesthouse/camp

Days 22 Ali Today we continue to Ali, the administrative headquarters of Western Tibet and also the gateway to the outstanding Changthang Nature Reserve.

Overnight – guesthouse

Days 23, 24, 25 On the road We spend the next 3 days exploring and passing through the little visited Changthang Nature Reserve via Zhongba, Gertse and Tsochen where we will be afforded a close up view of nomadic life and culture..

Overnight – camp

Day 26 We leave the main road and make a ferry crossing of the Yarlung Tsangpo River. With Mount Shishipangma (8,027m) looming imposingly in the distance we make our way south past the strikingly beautiful Pelkhu Tso (lake). The road here can occasionally be quite rough but the scenery more than makes up for the rigours of the journey. We eventually rejoin the main Friendship Highway linking Tibet and Nepal, and soon climb up to the Lalung Leh pass (5,050m) which, with the massive wall of the Himalayas rising ahead of us, offers one of the most breathtaking mountain vistas in the world. From here the scenery begins to change again, as we make a steep descent through the Po Chu Gorge en route to Nyalam. As we lose altitude the temperature rises and in marked contrast to the arid rather barren plateau we find ourselves in an area of alpine vegetation. Just north of Nyalam we will, if time allows, pause to visit Milarepa's Cave, one of the many former meditation retreats of Tibet's best-loved poet and mystic. A little further on we come to Nyalam (3,750m) where we spend our last night in Tibet either here in a simple but friendly guesthouse (or possibly further down the road in (Zhangmu) Dram.

Overnight – guesthouse

Days 27 & 28 Kathmandu As the winding road continues its descent through densely forested hillsides, and the countryside around us begins to assume an almost tropical air, the rapid transition and marked difference between the high and low altitude worlds of Tibet and Nepal is difficult to ignore. Leaving the architectural chaos of the Tibetan border town of Dram we complete the Chinese formalities before continuing down the road to Friendship Bridge, and just beyond it the Nepali border post. After meeting our Nepali guide and driver we continue past the gushing Bhote and Sun Khosi rivers and on through rice terraces and woodland to arrive in Kathmandu late afternoon. The next day is a free day at leisure in Kathmandu or a spare day in case of delays en route.

Overnight – hotel

Day 29 Journey's end... Most flights from Nepal to Europe depart in the late afternoon or evening allowing time for some last minute shopping and/or sightseeing in Kathmandu.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Price (excluding international flights) –

29 day: £3,880 per person on a twin share basis

Group & staff The group will comprise just 10 members (with a minimum group size of six people) and be escorted throughout by an experienced leader from The Oriental Caravan and an experienced Nepalese *sirdar*. While on trek and in Tibet we will be joined by a local Tibetan guide a cook, and experienced local drivers. On trek there will be horses/yaks and porters to carry necessary goods and supplies as well as a cook and other supporting staff.

Transport Whilst in Tibet transport will be by Toyota 4 x 4 Landcruiser, capable of comfortably negotiating the region's occasionally rugged terrain away from the main highways. We will also be accompanied by a support truck which will transport food, fuel and camping/kitchen equipment. In Nepal transport in Kathmandu and from the border will be by private coach. Airport pick up and transfers between the city and the airport in Kathmandu are included and will be by car or minibus.

Accommodation In Kathmandu we stay in a friendly and comfortable 4-star hotel, conveniently located close to Durbar Marg and within walking distance of Thamel. Elsewhere on the trip we use the best available accommodation. In Nyalam or Dram we stay in a friendly but basic guesthouse. Outside principal towns, en route to and from Mount Kailash and while at the mountain, we will be camping (12 - 14 nights in total). This will be fully supported camping including the services of a cook, dining and toilet tents. Accommodation is on a twin-share basis, however single tents/rooms can be made available on request. For the hotels there is the option of a single supplement at £96.

Food While in Tibet and Western Nepal all meals are included (breakfast, lunch and dinner). In Kathmandu only breakfasts are included – please allow approx. £10 a day for other meals, depending on choice of restaurant.

Weather At the time of year when we will be travelling in the region there is generally plenty of sunshine and blue skies in Tibet but temperatures at night can fall below freezing and in terms of clothing and equipment all participants should be prepared for this. (See 'Special Equipment' below)

Altitude Most travellers travelling in Western Nepal and Tibet experience some of the more minor forms of altitude sickness, such as headaches, sleeplessness and feeling out of breath after only mild exertion. Typically, these symptoms clear up after a few days, and are generally little more than a minor inconvenience. It is extremely unusual for anyone to suffer the more serious effects of acute altitude sickness, however for your reassurance and in case of emergencies we will be taking a Gammow (oxygen) bag. Anyone with a heart/respiratory disorder should consult a physician before considering a journey of this nature. All group members should give details of any pre-existing medical conditions when completing the booking form.

Health Formalities There are currently no statutory vaccination requirements for Nepal or Tibet unless arriving from an infected area. All group members should however ensure that they are reasonably fit, and as much of our route across Tibet is above 4,000m (maximum altitude on trek over 5,600m) consider a medical check-up before departure.

Insurance It is a condition of travelling with The Oriental Caravan that each group member be insured against medical and personal accident risks (including the cost of repatriation) and have adequate baggage cover. In addition, it is strongly recommended that all travellers take out cancellation insurance at the time of booking to cover their costs should they for any reason need to cancel prior to departure. This insurance should also include cover for travel at high altitude. (The Oriental Caravan is able to provide details of a suitable single/multi-trip insurance policy available direct from our preferred broker – please enquire for further details).

Passport & Visa All nationalities require a passport valid for at least 6 months beyond the date of final departure from Nepal. Nearly all nationalities – including British – require a visa for Nepal, and as you will be entering twice a multiple-entry visa is required. This can be obtained before departure, directly from the Nepalese Consulate (cost £55), or if you would prefer to use a visa service, we can recommend Travcour (phone 020 7223 5295). It is also possible to obtain two single-entry visas on arrival at Kathmandu airport and then again at Kodari – allow \$30 (USD; cash) per entry + one passport photo per entry. Obtaining the visa on arrival is quite straightforward and the most economical method. An extra fee (approx. USD15) may be levied if you have visited Nepal previously during the same calendar year). For stays of less than 3 days the Nepali visa is free. The Chinese visa is included and is organised by The Oriental Caravan as a group visa after arrival in Nepal. To ensure the timely processing of the Chinese visa and Tibetan permits we would need a photocopy of the personal details page in your passport at the earliest opportunity. The cost of all other permits are included.

Special Equipment Group members will need a four-season sleeping bag (can be hired in Kathmandu), four-season waterproof jacket, UV sunglasses and skin protection, strong walking shoes or boots, and a water bottle. More specific information regarding clothing and what to pack is included in the 'Pre-departure Information' that will be sent to group members closer to the date of departure.

This dossier, and the itinerary it describes, have been carefully compiled and are provided in good faith. As with any such journey to a remote destination unusual and unexpected conditions can occur at any time and this kind of holiday can be subject to unforeseen changes; to fully enjoy this kind of travel it is, on occasion, necessary for participants to be prepared to adopt a certain amount of flexibility.

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