Tough Trek to the Top of the World
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Madras Yogi Guides US Explorers on 1,440-mile, 20-day Trail to Kailas

Sri T.K.V. Desikachar was deeply moved as he stood high on the sides of Mt. Kailas and gazed upon the ruins of the monastery he believed his father once studied in. It was the culmination of decades of hope and two years of serious planning for Desikachar and his three yoga students: Prof. William Skelton (67), Mrs. Mary Louis Skelton (66) and Dr. Craig Wilson (45). The Skeltons' friends tried to dissuade the distinguished music professor from going on the decidedly hazardness journey, but Skelton quipped, "It was more of a concern to me that we might not get it done than the something would happen."

Desikachar had learned from his father, Sri T. Krishnamacharya, about his training from 1917 to 1924 at an ashram on the shores of Lake Manasarovar. He lived there in a cave with his teacher, Sri Ram Mohana Brahmachari. "After that, his entire approach to the teaching of yoga took a totally new dimension," said Desikachar, 54, who founded the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Madras to carry of his father's teaching.

Finding the way to Kailas

As Ayodhya or Vrindaban is for the Vaishnavite, Mount Kailas is for the Saivite. Overlooking the origins of four of India's sacred rivers - the Indus, Sutlej, Karnali and Brahmputra - this unique peak has been the objective of pilgrimage for thousands of years. Kailas is the Mount Meru of Hindu cosmology, center of the universe, home of Lord Siva.

Kailas is sacred to four religions. To the Hindus it is home of Lord Siva; the Manasarovar Lake below created from the manas, the divine mind, of Lord Brahma. To the Buddhists it is Kanga Rinpoche, the "precious Snow Mountain," associated with their famed sage Milarepa. To the Jains it is Mount Ashtapada upon whose top their founder, Rishabanatha, attained mukti, liberation. And to the Bonpo, Tibet's ancestral, pre-Buddhist shamanistic faith, the 22,028-foot peak is the "Nine-Story Swastika Mountain" and a Deity in its own right.

Indian pilgrims can enter a lottery by the government of Himachal Pradesh to earn one of 200 yearly visas to approach Kailas along the traditional route from India through the Himalayas on foot. Restrictions by the Chinese government, presently in control of Tibet where Kailas lies, limit the number of pilgrims on this truly arduous seven-day hike. National of other countries have to enter through Kathmandu, Nepal, to Lhasa in Tibet and then Shigatse, Lhatse, Kailas and back through Saka to Kathmandu.

An enterprising travel agent in any country should be able to make the necessary arrangements. It is not cheap. Insight Travel of Ohio, USA, is taking 23 pilgrims to Kailas this year on a one-month pilgrimage. Round trip cost lay in stiff fees charged by the Chinese government, plus the need to truck everything along, including outrageously expensive diesel fuel, into one of the most remote places on earth. For the truly adventuresome, he said it is possible to hitchhike one's way into the area on the occasional passing truck - but take note that the Skeltons reported long stretches of road where their convoy passed but a single vehicle in an entire day.

Sri Desikachar and his students opted not to take a tour (or to hitchhike), but to make the arrangements themselves. "We flew from Kathmandu to Lhasa, from where we hired an all-terrain Toyota Landcruiser and a truck to cart our luggage and camping gear. A Tibetan guide, three seasoned drivers and a Chinese cook were hired there," said Mr. Desikachar. The guide and drivers were excellent, but the government-supplied cook not only couldn't adjust to the pilgrim's vegetarian diet, he seemed not to know how to cook at all! The group covered 1,440 miles in 20 days, mostly cross-country as roads were few. Camp was pitched in the open expect for a few nights.

"There were no bridges, and we had to cross the streams in the shallowest stretch. At one point we had to negotiate seven rivers in just an hour," relates Mrs. Skelton. Six days of travel brought them within sight of Kailas, shortly after crossing the

Indus River. "That clear day," Prof. Skelton told HINDUISM TODAY, "We had the grand view of the abode of Lord Siva. The tranquil setting, the vastness made us feel small and humble. We did some prayers and went round Mt. Kailas. We negotiated the Dolma pass [halfway point of the circumambulation] at 18,600 feet. In that rarefied atmosphere, our lungs, seemed to be on fire. It was not hard on the legs, but the heavy breathing due to low oxygen drained all energy." Pilgrims traditionally take the 35-mile parikrama path around the base of the mounting, traversing with camps along the way, as did Desikachar's group.

Once at Kailas, Desikachar searched the area described in his father's diaries, especially the cave he mentioned living in. "On the something that looked like a cave. We had to climb up some thousand feet and found that it was the ruins of a very big monastery. We feel my father must have lived on this side. From here we could see all those great mountains which are very important for Hindus. Then on the shore of Lake Manasarovar, we spent three days - daily three to four hours doing Ganapati puja, then Siva puja." After a week at Kailas the group returned by the southern route to Kathmandu.

The Cultural Revolution

The ruins which are common around Kailas are not because the veneration of mountain has lessened, but are the direct result of China's takeover of Tibet in 1950. In the 50s pilgrims managed to circumambulate the mountain only at night. Then in 1960 the Cultural Revolution's Red Guards attacked the area's religious structures, some by heavy artillery fire. "In 1980 China's Tibet policy began to relax," explain Russel Johnson and Kerry Moran in their book, The Sacred Mountain of Tibet. "In 1981, under a special agreement between India and China, the first group of Hindu pilgrims in 22 years visited Kailas and Manasarovar. Despite hasty reconstruction efforts, the devastation of the Red Guards was apparent. Of the thirteen monasteries and innumerable monuments that once lined the pilgrim circuits, not a single one remained. Now the situation has again changed. Ten of the thirteen monasteries have been rebuilt with government funding. Tibetans are allowed a degree of religious freedom, and pilgrims are returning to Kailas and Manasarovar in increasing numbers. In 1987 over five thousand circled Kailas."

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