Special Feature: Kailash Yatra
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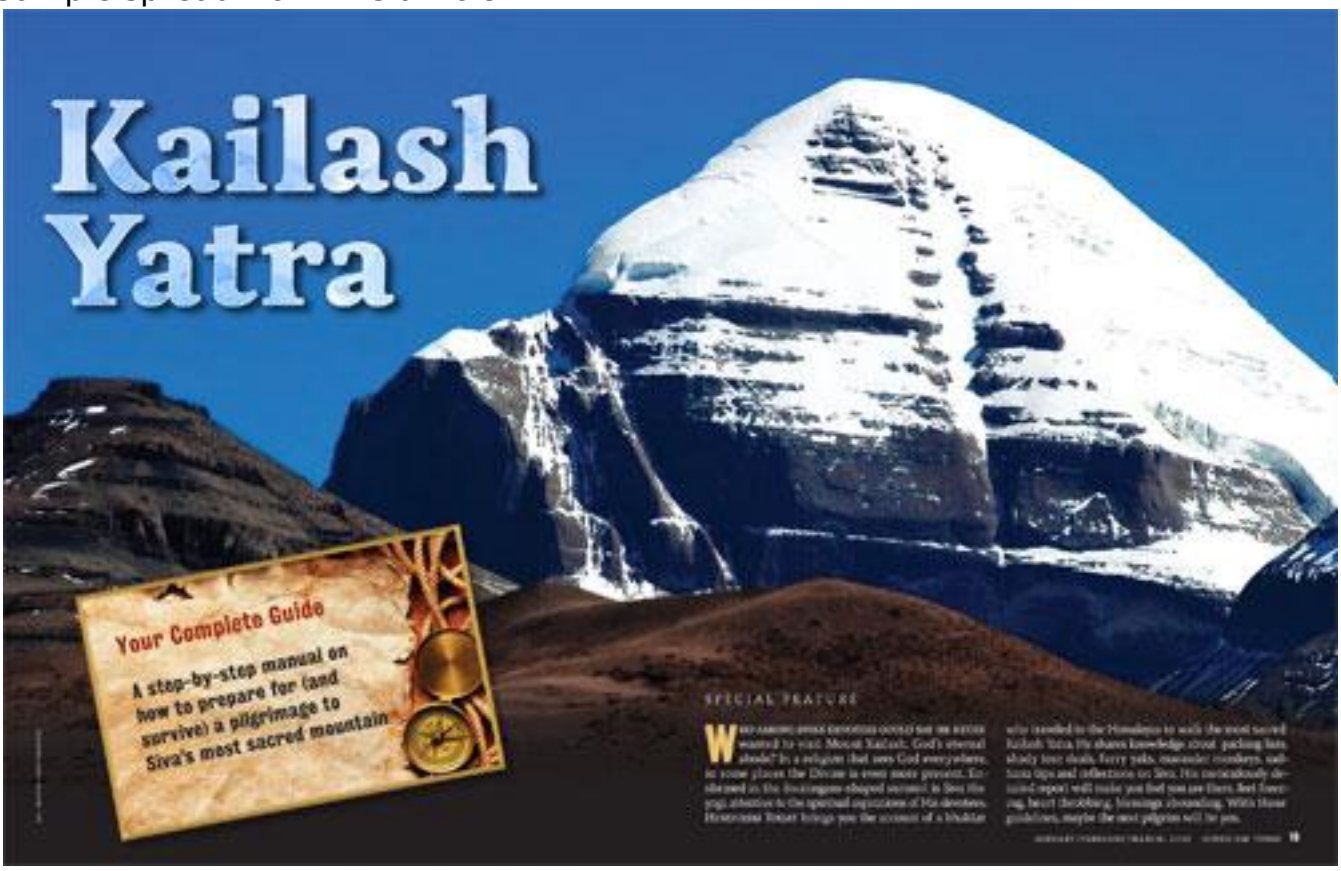
Special Feature

Kailash Yatra

Your Complete Guide: A step-by-step manual on how to prepare for (and survive) a pilgrimage to Siva's most sacred mountain

By Dr. T.S. Mohan, Bengaluru

Sample spread from this article



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Who among Siva's devotees could say he never wanted to visit Mount Kailash, God's eternal abode? In a religion that sees God everywhere, in some places the Divine is even more present. Enshrined in the Sivalingam-shaped summit is Siva the yogi, attentive to the spiritual aspirations of His devotees.

Hinduism Today brings you the account of a bhaktar who traveled to the Himalayas to walk the most sacred Kailash Yatra. He shares knowledge about packing lists, shady tour deals, furry yaks, marauder monkeys, sadhana tips and reflections on Siva. His meticulously detailed report will make you feel you are there, feet freezing, heart throbbing, blessings abounding. With these guidelines, maybe the next pilgrim will be you.

T.S. Mohan, PhD, left behind his busy life as an IT expert in Bengaluru to go on one of Earth's most sacred pilgrimages: the Kailash Yatra. Here is his personal account.

Since before recorded history, the people of India have poured their sincere devotion at the feet of Lord Siva. Sages, saints and ordinary devotees have long undertaken pilgrimages to places where His power shines bright, sites of mystical communion and intense religious practices. Siva's abode in Mount Kailash is one of these destinations--maybe the most idyllic of them all, a mountain shaped in the form of a Sivalinga that is said to be God's home.

Mount Kailash, called Gang Rinpoche in Tibetan, is a peak in the Gangdise Mountains, which are part of the Himalayas in Tibet. It lies near the source of some of the longest rivers in Asia: the Indus, the Sutlej (a major tributary of the Indus), the Brahmaputra and the Karnali (a tributary of the Ganges). Near the foot of the mountain is Lake Manasarovar, its still waters inviting the mind to enter a yogic state of contemplation.

The Vishnu Purana describes Lord Siva seated in lotus pose, meditating inside the mountain, immersed in eternal bliss. It also says, perhaps metaphorically, that Kailash is the pillar of the world: from here, Siva sustains the Earth.

This summit and its surroundings are sacred ground for more than one religion. It is

considered holy in Hinduism, Boen (the tribal faith that predates Tibetan Buddhism), Buddhism and Jainism. For Jains, Mount Kailash is the site where the first Jain tirthankara (liberated soul), Rishabhadeva, attained moksha. Tantric Buddhists believe that Mount Kailash is the home of the Buddha Demchok, who represents supreme bliss. And Milarepa, Tibet's 11th-century legendary yogi, bested the evil Naro Boen-chung in a magic duel by arriving at the top of the mountain riding the rays of the sun--so the story goes.

This pilgrimage, or yatra, is unusual because there is no temple, no shrine, no facilities. The only house of worship for Siva is the one He built Himself, the mountain. It is also unusual in that circumambulating the mountain (walking around it) is considered mandatory. This is usually an optional display of devotion in other places. A strenuous walk around Kailash is the very rite of worship. It is called parikrama, or kora.

The route starts at Tar Po Che, the "valley of Gods," and runs mostly along beautiful river valleys, except when crossing the Drolma La pass (at an altitude of 5600m) and the glacier nearby. The trail is done clockwise around the mountain by Hindus, Jains and Buddhists, but counter-clockwise by the Boen--who are arguably the most committed. Almost every single Boen traverses the roughly 52 km of sand, rocks, boulders, rivulets and snow, not by walking but with continuous body-length prostrations.

Even in our contemporary times, numerous curious trekkers and unreligious mountaineers do the kora reverentially. No such adventurer has tried to climb the mountain, in due respect and reverence to the feelings of devotees. According to all religions that revere the mountain, setting foot on its slopes is a dire misdeed. Word is that many people who defied the taboo died in the process. Italian mountaineer Reinhold Messner was given permission by the Chinese government (which controls the area) to climb to the top in the 1980s, but he did not feel it was the right thing to do. "If we conquer this mountain, then we conquer something in people's souls...," he explained. The closest attempt was that of Spanish expedition in 2001, which initially received Chinese permission but saw it quickly revoked among loud international protests. It is now illegal even to try.

Every year thousands make a pilgrimage to Kailash. Some pilgrims believe the entire walk around Kailash should be made in a single day, which is not an easy task. A person in good shape, walking fast, would take perhaps 15 hours to

complete the trek. Only the most devout accomplish this feat, little daunted by the uneven terrain, altitude sickness and harsh conditions. The many Boen and few brave Hindus who perform body-length prostrations follow a simple, strenuous ritual: the pilgrim bends down, kneels, prostrates full-length, makes a mark with his fingers, rises to his knees, prays, and then crawls forward on hands and knees to the mark made by his fingers before repeating the process. Covering the distance by this discipline of endurance requires at least four weeks.

Mount Kailash is located in a particularly remote and inhospitable area of the Himalayas. Few modern amenities, such as benches, resting places and refreshment kiosks exist to aid pilgrims. Planning is more than essential: it can be a lifesaver.

This report is my detailed journal of an extraordinary trip, intended to be of use to potential yatris (pilgrims). This "how-to" includes tips on selecting and negotiating with the travel agency, ideas about the journey, details of medical fitness (but talk to your doctor!) and more.

Why Do the Yatra?

Some have asked why I decided to perform this yatra. I was inspired by the image of Lord Siva as a great tapasavin, sitting and meditating in the Himalayas, blessing all, an austere Lord lost in oneness with His true Self, the Parabrahman. I asked myself, can we imbibe that degree of spiritual absorption when we sit for prayer and meditation, with our senses in cool control? Can we have that peaceful calmness in ourselves, too?

To me, Lord Siva as Pashupathinatha rules over animals, but also over our own instinctive demons. The reptilian part of the brain inside of our heads, as well as the limbic system, is animal in nature, fostering anger, jealousy, envy and attachments. With our sincere devotion to Lord Siva, we can overcome and keep in check these unconscious emotions. My quest was for Siva as Lord Dakshinamurti--calm, youthful, blissful and silent!

With such lofty aspirations and Siva enshrined in my heart, my journey began.

Preparing for the Yatra

The Kailash Manasarovar yatra can be undertaken via two routes: the Kathmandu route and the Indian one via Kumaon in Uttaranchal Pradesh. Pilgrims who have done both reported vastly greater satisfaction, more trekking and healthy acclimatization on the scenic and inspiring trails in Uttaranchal. The organization is better, and tour groups allow more time in Kailash and Manasarovar at a lesser cost. The caveat is the difficulty in getting approved. It is available only to Indian nationals. There are quotas of pilgrims every year, and there are too many competing for a chance. Only the robustly healthy and medically fit qualify through the rigourous Indian government selection. If you get approved, consider yourself lucky. Applications are invited during February or March of every year. The screening procedure will look daunting. Persist, and you may succeed.

I took the Kathmandu route. Either way, this yatra is a year-long affair, for one needs to be fully prepared even without the prod of the Indian permit. Timing is essential. Typically, the yatra is done such that one is at Lake Manasarovar on a purnima day (full moon). The most auspicious purnima is that in the month of Shravana (July-August), though heavy rains at that time often cause disruptions such as landslides, overflowing rivers and washed-out roads.

The concept is to visit Manasarovar either before or after doing the parikrama--the circumambulation of the mountain. Tour programs run from May through August every year. Early June is pretty cold; August is rainy, although relatively warm during the day. The temperatures are just about right in late July and early August. Warm days of 30oc under the sun and 18oc in the shade are pleasant, and the nights are relatively better but still cold, down to 6oc.

The Indian crew starts from New Delhi. After a overnight bus ride, the trekking formally begins at Dharchula. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police checks the medical fitness once more near the border. Escorted by Chinese officials, one reaches Darchen.

As for the yatra via Kathmandu, I will tell you all about it!

What to Expect

It was the month of Shravana in 2004 when I did my blessed pilgrimage. Taking a cue from an earlier yatri, I booked it through a travel agency in Kathmandu by phone and paid on arrival. They did what I discovered is a typical "big on talk, low on delivery" act--see the sidebar for some wisdom on getting around these perils.

At the local travel agencies I bought a package that included the service of staff to handle the cooking, the tents and even Chinese visas for the group. These agencies partner with the state-run Chinese agencies across the border, whose guides actually handle the entire tour and are ultimately responsible for your yatra experience. They manage transportation, act as interpreters, choose appropriate wayside inns to overnight in case of inclement weather, handle the yaks and horses and even do the cooking. Yatris are pretty much in their hands.

Apart from the (bossy) guides and their broken English or unintelligible Hindi, other Tibetans will not be able to communicate with you.

If an incompetent crew is assigned to your group, no amount of complaining to your Nepali travel agency can help. Fortitude, resignation and a spirit of tapas and humility do help. Smile bravely, focus and get on with your pilgrimage goals. With tact, you can get the Chinese guides to listen and help.

The fee I paid for the yatra was about USD 1,200, from Kathmandu back to Kathmandu. Items included in the costs were: a bed-and-breakfast stay for two days before the start and one day after the return at a good Kathmandu hotel; transportation by bus, truck or land cruiser when needed; permits; the help of a Chinese guide; services of a sherpa cook-guide-worker; plus food for the entire journey in Tibet. travel within Tibet was done aboard Toyota Land Cruisers, four yatris to a vehicle. We stayed overnight in tents and, sometimes, in wayside inns. The journey was on foot only around Kailash itself.

Kathmandu

The yatra started to seem real once I reached Kathmandu, ready to start. Kathmandu is a bustling, overcrowded city of peace-loving Nepalis. Most roads are narrow, dotted with ancient temples. Thamel is the central tourist district, with souvenir shops, trekking gear outlets, lodges and eating joints. You will also find

several tourist agencies offering competitive tours to Mount Kailash here. These agencies are usually aggregators, who channel traffic to a few who organize the programs.

While in Kathmandu, apart from visiting the famous Pashupathinath Temple, one should plan to visit Hanuman Dhoka at the old Royal Palace; the Kumari Temple where the Virgin Goddess resides embodied as a prepubescent girl; Taleju Temple, an architectural achievement; Bhimsen Temple, Viswanath Temple and Krishna Temple. Plan the journey with a few buffer days at Kathmandu before and after the parikrama. There is much to see.

Also interesting is the tourist district, where you can buy precious stones, gems, antiques and artware. Remember to bargain and visit several shops. Rudraksha malas are excellent in Kathmandu, but be careful to buy authentic ones (way below the first price sellers ask for!).

I climbed to a hill temple and, while chasing away some monkeys who were harassing a young mother and her small child on her hip, I felt giddy. Sitting down on the steps, my head down between my knees, I lost consciousness and toppled forward. Pilgrims rescued me. I came back into awareness with some blood on my face and a hurt nose, having learned the lesson that the high altitude is a humbling challenge. It was a useful warning for the journey ahead.

Vegetarian food

Most Nepalis, if not all, eat non-vegetarian food. Veggie fare is hard to come by. There are simple vegetarian joints in Thamel near the Thamel Chowk, such as the Shree Lal Vegetarian Restaurant. Saktar, a punjabi vegetarian place, offers an excellent dhal roti. Hotel Gangjong is also one of the few vegetarian havens.

Visiting Pashupatinath Temple

I went to Lord Siva's ancient Pashupatinath Temple to offer my devotion as a last preparation step before my yatra. The 7th-century complex is the heart of local Hinduism and a pride of Nepal.

The many monkeys within the temple complex can be brutes. They will grab bags from people's shoulders and turn them upside down looking for food. But shoo them and you will get the fright of your life when they put up a fight, holding you by your clothes and snarling. Ladies who scowl at them sometimes have their saris pulled! The best strategy is to give them a fruit; they will run away to eat it somewhere quiet.

At its main shrine, South Indian purohits (priests) handle the day-long continuous chants and pujas in a way familiar to me. The other shrines reflect the local heritage and a tantric background, with wildly different rituals.

The temple complex is located on the banks of the river Bhagmati, where people bathe barely upstream from a crematory ghat. Lining up along the temple and the river are several rooms filled with old people awaiting their last breath: people come here to die at an auspicious place.

In a poignant experience, I observed that on the balcony with a view of the temple were devotees lost in devotion; but from on the rooms underneath came ghastly wails and sorrowful cries, from those in the last lap of their lives and their mourning families. Soon, emerging from seemingly nowhere, a cortege arrived at the steps to the sacred river, carrying a body draped in white. They laid it on a stone slab which touched the waters on one side and a large Sivalingam on the other.

A female Nepali priest directed the rituals, even as, on the opposite river bank, tourists excitedly ran for prime spots with their camcorders and cameras, pointing big zoom lenses, devoid of any respect. All the while, the river flowed by nonchalantly.

This event immersed my mind in thoughts of Lord Siva. The Sri Rudram hymn says, "O Siva, you are Lord of the auspicious and the souls; you are the Lord of the inauspicious and death; you are the Lord of this profound play; you are the silent witness of the contradictions of reality, and you are Reality itself!"

The Yatra Begins

Monday 26th July 2004 From Kathmandu to Kodari to Zhang-mu

My tourist agency delayed the start of our itinerary by three days, spinning tales of border confusion and Westerners breaching security rules in Tibet. Meanwhile, we were acclimatizing for the altitude. Drinking a lot of water is important, and since water in Kathmandu is rather unsafe, we lived off two or three liters of mineral water a day! After a persistent push, our group of five (two Hindus plus three Westerners with a deep interest in Buddhism), along with three sherpas (one guide, one cook and one helper), sailed off in a small bus on the 26th July early morning, headed to the border village of Kodari.

We knew there would be no bath during the yatra, except for the dips in Lake Manasarovar. I took an extra long shower and put on the outfit that would last the whole trip. (You change only your inner garments and use an extra dose of cologne if you start smelling.)

After a stunning five-hour scenic drive through valleys, mountains and river gorges, we reached Kodari, where the small river Bhode Kosi flows rapidly, tumbling down the mountains. While our agents handled immigration formalities, we relaxed in a wayside restaurant, eating lunch and getting pestered by eager Chinese banking "entrepreneurs" who offer a not-so-friendly exchange rate from rupees to the riminbi. From there we walked across Friendship Bridge into Tibet, jumping on Land Cruisers headed to the town of Zhang-mu higher up in the mountains. The roads are dirt-tracks, rough, narrow and hugging the mountainsides, slippery with waterfalls and stream crossings, going in hairpin loops to higher altitudes. A complacent slip of the steering wheel could send the vehicle tumbling down the steep mountainside into the gorge. You could meet Siva a little earlier than planned!

The beauty of the Himalayas is astounding, especially in July, when the rains are generous and a thousand waterfalls blossom along the lush green mountainsides, while occasional clouds float by and around you.

The small hamlet of Zhang-mu has colorfully bright buildings. We stayed at an inn overnight. The room was simple, overlooking the valley where one could see the distant Kodari down below. I had the temerity to drive out a wasp from the room, where it was nesting. It was an Asian giant hornet, its wing span 3 inches! I was given a grand sting, with a pain that lasted for several days. Pilgrimages involve austerities of all kinds.

Tuesday 27th July 2004 From Zhang-mu to Nyalam-mu

The next day, after a lot of dilly-dallying from our guides, we left after lunch for the village of Nyalam-mu--literally "gateway to hell" in Tibetan--up in the Tibetan plateau. It was cold. We were shivering, in spite of multiple layers of woolen clothing. After a long delay at a police check post, we reached Nyalam-mu.

Sor far, everyone was mostly silent, each one absorbed in his or her thoughts. This would be true for all of the yatra.

I ventured to take a stroll uphill, but because of the altitude, I felt like an ill man who had left his hospital bed for the first time in a long while.

Going from Kodari (2,700m) to Zhang-mu (3,200m) to Nyalam-mu (4,200m) was quite an altitude transition. The green forests and waterfalls were behind, giving way to grassy mountains and eventually to nothing but the arid, mountainous plateau of Nyalam-mu.

The key to an enjoyable Kailash yatra is to become acclimatized to the increased elevations and avoid altitude sickness. Doing so makes an enormous difference. I suggest reading mountaineering guides about how to best prepare. Otherwise, the only medical option is to immediately go down in altitude, back to Zhang-mu, and quit the pilgrimage altogether. A tough call.

Wednesday 28th July 2004 From Nyalam-mu to Saga

After a semi-civilized tug-of-war with the Chinese guides, we got to choose the place of stay for the night in the village of Nyalam-mu: a decent hotel with toilets. The effects of high altitude were evident on everyone. Strain a bit, and you immediately become breathless. Our journey kept taking us up and up; we were supposed to stay at Nyalam-mu to acclimatize for 24 hours, but hardly 12 hours had gone by when we headed into our vehicles at 4am in the morning. Our destination was the town of Saga, on the Tibetan plateau.

There is a competition among the tourist operators, who start the day this early so they can be sure to make it to the ferry that crosses the River Brahmaputra, which can only take four vehicles at a time. In the daybreak hours, our headlights light up

the barren mountainside, our road leading to the highest pass (5,120m or 16,787ft) in the vicinity of the Sisha-pang-ma mountain range. It was very foggy.

As the day dawned, the views were fantastic. Rolling mountains and wide, flat valleys with no trees or human habitations anywhere! Occasionally nomadic families could be seen camping around; and a few yak herds livened up the terrain. The drive was strenuous: bumpy and dusty. Despite the tireless sales pitch of the Nepali agency, promising "the best of comforts and reliability!" for their vehicles, we had several vehicle breakdowns.

Somehow our Chinese guides would fix the problem and move on--this happened every day of our journey, in the middle of nowhere. It felt like we were a moving machine shop. The incredible drivers know how to rip apart and put together their land cruisers and the truck. Just don't look too closely at the contraptions fashioned to hold these things together!

I came to realize that bigger groups have better food, the cooking being better organized. Small groups may fare badly. We had something packed in plastic bags and given to us in the early morning, nothing I care to remember. We drank a lot of mineral water. I carried 25 one-liter bottles for the trip, and they did not last long. With the high-altitude sickness medications we were taking, daily water consumption averages four liters per person.

We traveled more than 200km following faint vehicle tracks on a shortcut, for there is no direct road between Nyalam-mu and Saga. We reached the ferry point around 4pm, and after an hour we crossed the river using an interesting device. Barges were guided by a thick wire tied across the river. The river current makes the barge move quietly, its angle controlled by the pilot.

Finally we arrived in Saga. But there were no amenities waiting for us; we quickly left it behind. Crossing the hamlet, we reached a field and pitched our tent alongside a stream!

The first night in the tent! I was thrilled. One tent for each person, plus kitchen and

dining tents. It rained on us, too, adding to the atmosphere. Dinner was a simulation of European fare. For a toilet, a makeshift structure was put up at some distance.

Breathlessness was common, even for small tasks. Running or climbing a hill quickly produced the inevitable reaction: giddiness and a slide down to one's knees.

The night was interrupted by the visits of grazing yaks and the yak-herd dogs sniffing around, often a few inches away from the tent. Dog howls and dog fights punctured the calm of a windy Himalayan night. Sleeping was not an easy task.

Thursday 29th July 2004 From Saga to Paryang

After a quick breakfast, we were off to the next stop, 250 km away: Paryang, a quaint little village. Along the way were a few rustic home, crowded with little children who were clear about what they wanted: pens, plastic bindis and chocolates. But just about anything is happily received.

The landscape became an endless variation on the same theme, broken perhaps by different Himalayan peaks and the occasional huge lake, drawing pilgims into a meditative state. Any unexpected stream was negotiated by trying to find a proper ford. Road breaches were common.

We camped outside Paryang for the night, near a small lake. The vast, rolling stretches of plateau, the distant mountains and the gathering dark rain clouds made our evening interesting. We were under a heavy storm, with lightning, thunder and hail, for about an hour. A big question was, "What if the lightning strikes our metallic tent poles?" We were within a few inches of the pole most of the time.

Friday 30th July 2004 From Paryang to Lake Manasarovar

Next morning we left for Lake Manasarovar. After a grueling seven-hour journey and another 250km or so, we reached the prayer spot that marks the first sightings of the Holy Lake and the Holy Mountain on the route. The tall prayer flagstaff, along with Buddhist prayer flags, adds to the spiritual ambience. The vehicles circle it and

later the Tibetan drivers prostrate full length on the ground. A beautiful place, a wonderful sight.

Half an hour later, we started a partial circumambulation of the lake towards our night halt near the Chiu Gompa. Its glistening aquamarine-green waters, framed by distant peaks and dark clouds, added to the mystery of this most sacred place. I could not stop marveling at the fact that this was sacred Manasarovar in the Himalayas. It was wonderful.

Many green shrubs and small flowering plants bloomed on the banks. There was hardly any habitation or wildlife, and definitely there were no boats! The lake has a perimeter of about 140km, growing and shrinking with the seasons. A typical parikrama around the lake takes three days on horseback, or a few hours by vehicle.

After a few hours' drive, we drove westward to Manasarovar's sibling, Lake Rakshastal. When Lake Manasarovar becomes full, it overflows into Rakshastal via a rivulet. Here another beautiful sight greeted us--the sun setting over the water and the distant mountains. According to Hindu lore, it was on the banks of Rakshastal that the demon-king Ravana worshiped Lord Siva, who resided on nearby Mount Kailash.

We drove for more than an hour in the dark along Rakshastal before heading back towards Lake Manasarovar. After an hour, we reached the campsite, where a warm meal awaited us. Then the full moon, holy Shravana purnima, rose in the sky! The moon was bright and lustrous over the lake.

That was a special time and place for deep meditation, bhajans and chants. After a dinner loaded with garlic to aid us in the upcoming trek, we dispersed, each to his own world. There was the moon, the most sacred lake, and the unseen but nearby Mount Kailash. I was surrounded by quiet and solitude. My mind suggested, "Meditate... Meditate... Meditate!" And I did. Despite the garlic.

Saturday 31st July 2004 From Chiu Gompa to Darchen

After daybreak, some of us approached Manasarovar to quietly pray and meditate. It was cold. My frantic shivering did not add to the spiritual ambience. Nevertheless, the prayers and chants continued for more than three hours. We chanted Sri Rudram, Chamakam, Lalitha Sahasranamam, Devi Sthuthi, Durga Suktam, Siva Sthuthi and other mantras.

This was the day for a snanam (bathing) in the Lake. The shivering devotees took their dip quickly. Three dips with namaskarams to the distant Mount Kailash seemed enough, along with argyam (saluting ablutions) to all the Gods and forefathers, as well as prayers for all our people.

Later we briefly joined another group performing a Gayatri homa nearby. The sun was blazing hot, but glacial winds were blowing! The lake glistened at the noon while we, enraptured, listened to the deep chant of a Buddhist Lama's assistant; it was wonderful. Again I heard inner orders: Meditate... Meditate... Meditate!

After lunch we packed up and left for the village of Darchen near the base of Mount Kailash, over the Parkha Plains. It is wonderful to see Kailash's southern face. Mount Nandadevi and other peaks in India were visible, too. Everyone was excited.

Once dinner was over and the horses and yaks cared for, everyone retired.

The night was so cold.

Sunday 1st August 2004, From Darchen to Tar Po Che to Dheerpuk

Day one of the parikrama had arrived: we were ready to walk around the mountain.

We packed light for the three-day trek. Most of our personal luggage was left behind in the truck; the basics were brought on the yaks. After breakfast we were taken in the vehicle to the general Buddhist starting point, called Tar Po Che, Valley of the Gods, about 6km away. It had a tall flagpost with many Buddhist prayer flags--the main prayer, Om Mani Padme Hum--tied around it in several directions. With

salutations to Lord Siva, Ganesha and guru, we started the parikrama! We were each one on our own, within shouting distance of one another.

We hiked along the banks of the river Lha Chu in the valley between two close mountain ranges. Wonderful scenes, both sublime and spiritual.

I passed several devotees from other groups and wished each one of them a warm "Aum Namah Sivaya." They hailed from Chennai, or Mumbai, or Gujarat, or Delhi or the nearest Chinmaya Mission. Many were Tibetans. Coming in the opposite direction were the Boen devotees who counter-circumambulate the Holy Kailash, doing full body prostrations for more than 50 km. What stamina! What faith! I saluted with a namaskar everyone I come across. With every step, the mind is immersed in Lord Siva and His beautiful creations around, resounding to the continuous inner chant of Aum Namah Sivaya and other mantras.

After several hours of trekking, and with several mildly breathless hikes up the increasing slopes, we reached Dheerapuk (altitude 4800m), a lofty place from where Mount Kailash blesses you with a wonderful view of its north-northwestern face. In fact, this spot on the parikrama trail is the closest and offers the best view of the holy Mountain. Beyond this point, for the next two days, we were not be able to get a glimpse of it again.

Camp was set up beyond the Dheerapuk monastery, near a primitive bridge over the river. After separate dinner within our tents, I fell asleep, exhausted, my thoughts immersed in Lord Siva.

Monday 2nd August 2004, From Dheerpuk to Drolma La to Zutul Puk

Again we woke up to a breakfast heavy in garlic; we would need the extra fire in our bellies. That was the most challenging day of the parikrama. We had to climb up more than 800m and cross the Drolma La pass (altitude 5600m).

Each step of the climb left me breathless. I had to stop frequently to calm down my palpitating heart. "Om Namah Sivaya," I thought, and that kept me going.

The not-so-steep climb goes through pathways amongst huge boulders and rocks. Several yaks and horses with their passenger-riders passed me. Some presented a funny sight. Desperately clinging to the animal, not having had any training whatsoever in riding, many yatris make a heroic effort to stay balanced on these wayward animals. Horses walking on rocks are jittery; and yaks do not follow any set path, straying frequently to eat grass or brush against each other. They will get into streams in wrong places with devotees precariously perched on their backs. "Well," I thought, "thank God I have the stamina to walk!

Plastic bottles and wrappings, aluminum Red Bull cans, chocolate wrappings and medication containers littered the ground even in these remote and sacred areas. There are also broken beer bottles--Lhasa Tibetan beer! The Bon also have a tradition of leaving some of their belongings behind as a symbolic spiritual gesture, which works when they leave clothes or wood, but they have not updated their thinking to modern times and often leave non-degradable materials that will last for ages. I insisted that our sherpas burn part of our trash, and we brought back the rest.

At Drolma-La there is a huge offering of prayer flags tied everywhere. I had bought one in Kathmandu. After offering my prayer to Devi Tara, or Goddess Drolma, I tied the flags, strung on a long cord about 20 feet in length. Some yatris offered incense and ahir (rice grains). I gathered my belongings and spent some time with the other devotees of Lord Siva. Amongst them was Revered Swami Ishwaranandaji from the Chinmaya Mission, Mumbai.

The place invited contemplation. Meditate, meditate, meditate!

A few meters down the path we saw Lake Gouri Kund below, its water greenish blue, almost the color of the sky.

On the pass, all pilgrims riding yaks and horses must dismount for safety reasons. Of course, no one had warned the yatris, and the elderly and weak complained. We descended the valley slope by foot.

We crossed a mini glacier, a mass of snow that had hardened into ice. Huge boulders surrounded us, cut out of the rock by the movement of ice and water. Further down, seeing the first signs of habitation, we were relieved to be back to some form of civilization, where tame animals grazed.

Quite thirsty and with no water, I drank from a river, accepting the risk of stomach infections. Though the waters are free of chemicals, they are polluted by the animals and the bacterial moss growth along the way. I survived, though. After a long trek, we reached our campsite. It was achingly beautiful, but we just went to sleep, exhausted.

Tuesday 3rd August 2004, From Zutul Puk to Hor-Chu

Day three of parikrama. The morning was bright, the Sun just behind the peaks. On the way we visited Zutul Puk monastery, the site of a cave where the famous Buddhist monk Milarepa meditated. Yak-ghee lamps burned before the various Buddhist Deities and Sakyamuni Buddha.

We started trekking. A friendly and faithful yak-herding dog led my way from the monastery. A giant Tibetan marmot, three feet long, added life to the otherwise desolate landscape. After walking for several hours along the gorges cut by the Lham Chu river, we reached the parikrama completion point, marked by a prayer flag. Our vehicles were waiting. I had to say goodbye to the dog.

We drove to Manasarovar. The lake was inviting, with the sun shining bright above and winds that were not too cold. We took long and pious dips, offering our devotion! Mount Kailash was always visible in the distance, giving a darshan that shall remain etched in our minds for ages. The lake bed near the shore was shallow, a few feet deep only, so the water was warm enough for us to remain in it for more than 30 minutes.

Using a small setup, we performed abhishekam and then puja, chanting Sri Rudram and other mantras for more than three hours until the Sun started setting. Cold winds made us shiver. What a great occasion! I sat in silence and meditated over the setting Himalayan sun.

At the village of Horchu that night, we had a quasi-pizza made with yak cheese. The night was relaxed and meditative, punctuated by the distant barks of shepherd dogs and the far sound of merry sherpas celebrating their arrival with loud music, drums and booze.

Wednesday 4th August 2004, From Hor-Chu to Paryang

We woke up feeling lazy, but it was time to hustle. Camps packed, we set our sights on Paryang. The land cruisers had their quota of problems, and so did the trucks. There was notice of rains along the way, with possible road breaches and river overflows. Absorbed in the experiences of the parikrama, we rode silently back to Paryang. It rained and rained. The after-effects of the spiritual experiences were visible in each of us, manifesting an enjoyable silence and inner solitude.

Thursday, 5th August 2004, From Paryang to Saga

We hit the road again but did not get far. Several rivulets had breached the road, and tour guides and yatris had to fill up the breaches manually with rocks.

We reached the town of Saga in the evening, but the heavy rains had spoilt all camping places; they were soggy and freezing. So we decided to stay at an inn. These inns are typically a row of mud-built rooms, brightly painted, with an uneven mud floor. Often rooms are used as kitchens.

The bedding included a mattress and a quilt. A single light bulb and a big hot water flask were my luxuries.

There was a communal toilet at one corner of the compound. Toilets in these Tibetan inns are odd structures, elevated, parapet-walled open potholes with a big under-cavern that accumulates human wastes in unpleasant perpetuity. Camp life was better. Dinner was not until almost midnight; then we all retired for a well-earned sleep.

Friday 6th August 2004, From Saga to Nyalam-mu

Sleep proved to be difficult and light. Then came the shocker: we were awakened at

3am. There would be a huge rush of vehicles needing to cross the River Brahmaputra--so we were asked to get ready to claim our queue slot in the front so we could cross early and proceed with the day's drive to Nyalam-mu. Otherwise, we were told, our team would spend the day at the shore, waiting for our turn. Painfully but with discipline, we got ready. But the drivers were nowhere to be seen. We waited and waited. It turned out they were too tired and continued to sleep until 9 am. Adding to our misery, before we could finally leave, they had to repair a vehicle that broke its suspension. O God, bless us. The group walked away and spent the time chanting mantras.

It was noon by the time we reached the river crossing station. Ahead of us were 50 land cruisers and a few trucks. Again we waited patiently. It was 5:30pm when we finally crossed the river and resumed our journey. But, alas, nobody had anticipated the serious austerity of a night drive over unmarked terrain, with no plans to pitch a camp. On top of everything, the trucks failed, as expected. Again we stood by. As night fell, the Sisha-pang-ma peaks glowed eerily. We sailed out once more. Our driver put on some loud Hindi and English pop music and drove like crazy. Time passed by. Stars shone thickly in the clean and clear sky. Midnight arrived.

Into the darkest night, with just tire marks as a faint road, our headlights peering no more than a few meters ahead along curvy paths, driving at high speeds, the driver seemed possessed. He had to reach Nyalam-mu at dawn--maybe his job depended on that. No dinner. We were exhausted, but none dared to sleep. "Aum Namah Sivaya... Aum Namah Sivaya... Aum Namah Sivaya...." I chanted and chanted in my mind, to keep the noise of the pop Western music at bay.

Saturday, 7th August 2004, From Nyalam-mu to Zhang-mu to Kodari to Kathmandu

Stressed by our frantic blind ride, we reached Nyalam-mu at 2am. Later in the morning, we reconnected with other members of our convoy, for not all vehicles had arrived together.

By noon we were back on the road, for we had to reach Kathmandu that night. Missing the flight out of Nepal the next day was just not acceptable for some of us--Indian Airlines flies to Kolkata three times a week. Miss the Sunday flight and the next flight is on Wednesday--if you can get a seat. We went through the border in a hurry.

Fortunately, we reached "Friendship Bridge" before it closed for the day. Nepal, at last! There was relief. As we proceeded to Kathmandu, there were several checks by the military, because of political insurgencies in Nepal.

The highlight was when we finally arrived, late in the evening, at a real hotel in Kathmandu. A bath, at last! I soaked for more than an hour under the shower.

The Kailash Yatra had been successfully completed!

The inner journey was replete with meaningful experiences. About it, all I can share is a deep inner silence. And how could it be otherwise? Drawing from the words of Sri Ramakrishna, I can say I went to the mango orchard and ate the sublime fruit that is the Kailash Yatra. I can tell you about the orchard, but as for the mango--you have to go eat one yourself.

Never the Same: Reflecting on My Journey

Looking back at the more than seven years since the blessed experience of my Holy Kailash Yatra, I stand amazed at how much work it was to prepare and then do it. But I am much more in awe of how much I have benefitted. Immensely is a word that would not do it justice.

It is true that concrete blessings manifest: the only property I own, in the heart of Bangalore, came to me in auspicious ways right after my return. But most of the benefits have come at a sookshmam, or subtle, level. No doubt we often follow an act of worship with a request trailing the prayer; but this was not my motivation at all. All boons from the pilgrimage were just an incidental consequence. All that I did, I did it as an offering to Siva--Sivaarpanamasthu! Yet, this yatra indeed had a significantly deep impact on me, my personal life and my world view.

The Kailash Yatra enhanced my understanding and faith in Lord Siva, the versatile God who is simultaneously experienced by many as an accomplished yogi amongst the living, the dying and the dead; as a householder like many of us, setting the example for a spiritual family life and marriage; and Lord Siva the accomplished

sadhaka in Kailash, steady, calm and absorbed as Parabrahman.

I now see Siva as Mount Kailash, who stands still and resilient despite the erosion, the ravaging mountain slides, corroding streams and rivers around it. He is a true sannyasin and a parivrajaka (wandering mendicant). And within my heart, my eternal Siva remains an inspiration for leading a life of sadhana, appropriately blending modern-day commitments with spiritual practices, for that leads to an unruffled, steady determination that results in success.

The holy Kailash Yatra freed me from incongruous notions about how we treat other religions, and our own. Seeing Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Boen-pas simultaneously and harmoniously worshiping Kailash was overwhelming. The Boen-pa and the Hindu wished each other "Aum Namah Sivaya" and "Taashi Delek" with true mutual respect. We celebrated the differences, rather than being either exclusivist on one extreme or diluting our faith on the other. In this light, the bland and mildly offensive term "tolerance" (would you "tolerate" your guests?) and the extremes of terrorism seemed even more absurd.

After my return, something that jarringly stood out was the extent to which our society opposes the spiritual drive that impelled me to do the yatra. The impulse for a pilgrimage is embedded in our spiritual traditions. Yet, those traditions are daily eroded by insidious attacks coming from inimical and intolerant modern or secular lifestyles. The sensory stimulations of modern life are largely adharmic; how do we keep from being sabotaged by them? How to preserve and protect the profound purity found in an experience such as the pilgrimage to Kailash? The printed media, TV and the Internet erode our inner life. In fact, neither the schooling system nor our contemporary culture respect a need for sadhana.

What has happened to the practicing Hindus? We allowed our spiritual traditions to become merely tolerated with contempt, pushed to the sidelines of modern society rather than being at the center of what a person should pursue. That harms the nurturing of a culture that embraces sadhana in our everyday Hindu family life. It is up to us to strengthen our sadhanas, in spite of the opposition, and engage in religious festivities with the family and the community.

It Should Not Stop at Kailash

I would like to add two key insights about a post-Kailash yatra life. First, customize and fine-tune your personal goals, having a clear plan that is aligned with your sadhana and spiritual values. Second, each one of us should go on pilgrimage at least twice a year, preferably with the family, for living Hinduism to the fullest is the best way of sharing blessings with all of them.

Where shall one go for a spiritual, or aadhyatmic, yatra? There are plenty of worthy temples, ashrams and destinations. Just start searching.

From within India, for those who cannot go to Mount Kailash, there is the yatra to Adi Kailash (the Om Parvati mountain, strikingly similar to Kailash) in Uttaranchal. The trek is organized by Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam (www.kmvn.org) in the summers.

Lord Siva can be sincerely worshiped anywhere, be it in the Himalayas or on the banks of Wailua River on Kauai. Let us pray that our sadhana efforts hold strong, and that by worshiping Siva we can transform for the better both ourselves and the world. PIpi

A blueprint for any pilgrimage--including the Kailash Yatra

Fifteen Spiritual Tips

1. Make a firm samkalpa for the yatra. Samkalpa, a Sanskrit word, means a complete mental picture coupled with a firm intention to see it through.
2. If you can find someone who has performed this pilgrimage, ask for all the details--the nitty gritty details. Read anything you can find on it.
3. Ask yourself how this kind of yatra fits in with your spiritual goals and practices. You may remember that this is not just the fulfilling of a refined spiritual desire, but also a great opportunity to become closer to your Ishta Devata.
4. Don't get sidetracked by the will of the group. Try to understand each religious practice, instead of blindly following the rituals others have done during the trip.
5. Start planning months in advance.
6. Design a 40-day sadhana period with the yatra as the culmination. For each day, practice early morning prayers and meditations; perform the yoga arts of pranayama, dharana and dhyana. Prepare body, mind and spirit for the trip.
7. Analyze your pre-yatra eating habits in a thoughtful, but joyous way: if you begin to see the preparations and cleansing process as a burden, you may

lose the enthusiasm that is so necessary to the trip. Wisdom should be the guide.
8. Free yourself from all addictive food: caffeine, nicotine and alcohol. Cultivate moderation.
9. Kindle the soul with evening chants, bhajans and satsangs. Attend pujas and abhishekams.
10. Cut the gossip! Observe mauna (silence) and undertake periodic solitude.
11. Eschew unnecessary and worldy reading, even news.
12. Avoid non-spiritual company. Cultivate satsang, being in the presence (physical or virtual) of wise and truthful people.
13. Fast mentally as well as spiritually: enjoy the purity that comes from abstaining from TV, parties and senseless internet drifting.
14. Lead a conscious, goal-oriented daily life.
15. Ask yourself during this process, has my bhakti for Lord Siva increased? Did I do my daily activities and work in the spirit of karma yoga? Was I compassionate toward others? Have I upheld dharma?

Six Down-to-Earth Tips

1. Draw out a concrete itinerary, meticulously listing all details: transportation plans, hotels, where to eat, a list of medical establishments along the yatra. Plot all costs, timings and alternatives. Try to anticipate difficulties and create a few "plan Bs" for accidents, injuries, inclement weather and even getting robbed. Instead of being anxious, be prepared.
2. Work hard on the luggage list. When badly done, a lot of unnecessary stuff is carried around and the most useful items are left out. I have laid out a sample packing list in my yatra website: www.vedanta-family.org/kailas/
3. On the appointed day, start the pilgrimage with a visit to a Lord Ganesha temple. Go thank Him after the yatra, too.
4. The more you are dependent on others or on material resources for your sadhana, the more the inconveniences. When circumstances are outside of your control, do mental tapas inside and observe peace outside.
5. After completing your pilgrimage, set aside time to meditate on and document the lessons learned, the experiences and the blessings. Few people do this, but it is vital for your pilgrimage to not be just another trip.
6. Finally, a pilgrimage destination does not have be a far and inaccessible place. It could be the nearest hill town with a shrine to a Deva or Devata. The most important aspect of the yatra is your relationship to the Divine, both inside and outside of yourself.

Guidelines To Keep You Sane and Alive

Picking the right agency is crucial: your experience on the yatra depends on who is running the show. Talk to several tour operators. Remember, most sales folks have absolutely no idea of what the yatra is like and will promise the moon at times. Here are hard-earned tips.

1. Our travel agency's managing director deliberately put a wrong mobile number in his business card, so that we would never call and complain! When cornered, he sheepishly corrected it.
2. Book your air tickets early. I had to postpone my trip because getting confirmed reservations was difficult. Some airlines are unreliable; check their history of flight arrivals.
3. Try to gather like-minded spiritual people to go with you, in multiples of four for the vehicles.
4. Do not buy yatra accessories from the tourist agencies: you can get them cheaper elsewhere.
5. State your option for a vegetarian cuisine and ask that it be cooked and served appropriately. Many times, the cook and the helper sherpas cut short their cooking chores by frying all food in the same pan with the same oil. Politely convey your requirements to the cook and others during the yatra to ensure that it happens.
6. Bargain on the price up front. Year 2004 prices were around 53,000 rupees, all inclusive except the stay in Kathmandu (add another 50% for other expenses). Ensure that the standards of the trip are agreed upon in writing. Do not pay any money before reaching Kathmandu, only after visiting the travel agent's office. Ask for receipts: "What receipt?" they will say. Insist.

Require Your travel Agency to Commit to the Following

1. The stay will be in decent guest houses, inns and hotels. that include proper toilets as well as ventilated windows within the rooms. Ask for the right to inspect before selection at every place, or demand to move to another establishment.
2. Extra costs due to delays in starting or in completing the itinerary will be fully borne by the agency, including costs of staying at Kathmandu. This includes incidentals, such as extra meals.
3. The group and the sherpas will not be split up. The sherpa guide will accompany the group on foot during all walks.
4. Good vehicles shall be provided. Ask for the new versions (less than 5 years old) of the Land Cruisers. This might add to your overall costs another INR 4000, but it is well worth it. The agency will likely promise such vehicles but not deliver! Tell them you will pay separately on return in case you do get them for the trip in Tibet.
5. The guides shall have the resources to solve problems that arise, and respond to the communications with the yatris. In our case, after spending money on truck repairs, they tried to stay on budget by saving on the food they were expected to feed us.
6. The Chinese drivers should: A) stop the vehicle upon request (we were all drinking lots of water); B) be courteous in their interactions with the yatris; C) respect the group's religious sentiments; D) not smoke inside the vehicles; E) not play their pop music loud.

7. Mineral water will be packed and served as part of the general package and not be charged for separately.
8. The guides must take the yatris to Chuggu Gompa, Chiu Gompa and its hot springs, Rakshas Tal, Darchen Gompa, Ashtapad, Tar-po-che, Dheer Puk Gompa, Gauri kund, Zutul Puk Gompa and Thirthapuri hot springs--plus Lake Manasarovar. Many of these destinations are skipped if you are not attentive.
9. The price for yak and horse rides during the parikrama will be capped up front. Many times, after reaching the mountains, pilgrims get a shock with the price tags, leading to unpleasant arguments.
10. Luggage will be kept always clean and dry in the trucks. It often gets dirty and drenched, being exposed to rain and fuel.
11. On the parikrama around Mt. Kailash, the sherpas shall bring the toilet tents and mineral water bottles on the yak. If you don't ask for this, they will bring only minimal equipment.
12. Any monetary tips that you will give to the sherpas or the drivers will be based on your satisfaction: there shall be no mandatory tipping! This helps ensure their good behavior and performance.
13. Ask the agency what procedure would be adopted if, during the yatra, one is: a) ill with food poisoning b) ill with high altitude sickness c) down with broken limbs d) down due to flu, fever or cough.
14. Every member of the group shall have a separate, rainproof tent in good condition. (Mine leaked.) You live in your private world within it, resting and meditating! In other groups, ladies and gents were packed eight members to a small tent!
15. Every day's menu will be shared upfront the previous day! Oil used once for frying will not be used again. Non-veg cooking will be separately handled with no interchange of used oils, pans or spoons.

Do's and Don'ts of the Kailash Yatra

1. Don't get your shoes wet, ever! Walk carefully, especially across rivers and rivulets. Use a walking stick or a hiking pole. Use waterproof trekking shoes meant for cold countries. If your shoes get wet, dry them out as early as possible! A soggy boot can injure your feet in no time.
2. Carry with you an ample supply of water and energy-giving food (not junk snacks). In an emergency, you might have to live on those rations, stranded for long hours before someone discovers you. Each day, take a food box with items from breakfast.
3. While shopping anywhere, bargain using sign language. Start at 60 percent of the asking price. Forty percent may work, too.
4. Bring a couple of small padlocks so you can lock your tent zipper.
5. At many of the stops, you will encounter small children asking for gifts, or poor people begging. Carry small items with you to give away.
6. You can mix lukewarm water with the cold water before drinking. This helps with coughs and cold-sensitive teeth.
7. Pack a pair of sandals, in addition to your shoes. Wear them at the camp to

give your feet and your shoes time to breathe.
8. Ladies should bring a makeshift mini-tent to answer nature's call when the cars stop. There is little place to hide, really.
9. Pack all your clothes and belongings in plastic bags. That will help prevent dampness and possible drenching. In addition, it separates the used from the unused. No laundry service available!
10. Bring your own sleeping bag if possible, one that can sustain you in -5oc.
11. When sleeping in a tent, do not cover your face. Use lip balm and wear gloves. Never allow your feet to be without socks (keep a separate pair of woolen/nylon socks for sleeping only).
12. Nurse any foot problems every night; they get worse fast, and cold. plus injury can result in gangrene.
13. Never use candles or matches inside a tent.
14. Carry a small, deodorant-size oxygen cylinder with you always.
15. During the journey, report any sickness of any kind to the sherpa and Chinese guides.
16. Never skip a meal and never stop drinking water, for you could weaken and dehydrate in no time. Never over-exert yourself. Breathlessness can make you dizzy, and you could trip on rocks and fall.
17. Do the parikrama at a steady pace.
18. The water in big flasks in the rooms of the inns are typically for washing your face, not for drinking. This is the only bathing that you will have on the road.
19. Carry your own garbage bag. Bring all bottles and cans back to the cities.
20. Use lip balm or vaseline for your lips and sunscreen lotion on your face and hands. The rarefied atmosphere makes for high UV exposure.
21. While walking on ice use your pole to check its thickness. Beware!
22. You cannot recharge batteries anywhere except Kathmandu. Take several spare charged batteries. Watch out for dust damage to your cameras.
23. Never part with your passport and other vital documents except when at customs. Ask to have them back as soon as the guides are done with the paperwork.
24. Practice silence. The yatra is not about the company. Soak in the grandeur of the Kailash region, the plateaus, valleys, mountains and lakes!