

Mount Kailash: The **Experience** of a **Lifetime**





Mount Kailash, known as the abode of Lord Shiva, is one of the most revered holy places – not only for Hindus, but also for Buddhists, Jains and Bons. A major peak in the Kailash range, which forms part of the Trans-Himalaya in Tibet, this elusive mountain had been on my bucket list for over three years. Somehow, a trip there had not materialised, but I guess it was bound to happen only according to His will.

When I heard about a Kailash Mansarovar yatra-cum-silent-meditation-workshop that was being planned by the Art of Living foundation, and organised by Mumbai-based Yatra India, I was very excited. Give that I would not only get to see Kailash, but also meditate there, it was a double bonanza.

Many personal and professional factors had to be considered, but the keenness to get to Kailash kept me going. Preparations for the trip – including fitness training, medical tests, and shopping for everything from food items to dry-fit and winter clothing – began a month ahead. Eventually, everything fell in place by His grace, and I had what can only be described as the journey of a lifetime.

Day 1: August 31, 2017

Setting out on this remarkable trip from Chennai, I arrived in Lucknow on the night of August 30th, thrilled to be traversing this path with strangers from all over the globe. The next morning, around 50 of us set out in two huge Tempo Travellers for Nepalgunj, just across the border with Nepal. En route, we had a sumptuous lunch, driving past beautiful fields as well as crowded roads before hitting the mayhem of the border-crossing.

Just after we settled into our hotel, there were heavy showers that lasted well into the night. Realising that we needed to re-pack our luggage to meet the 10 kg per



person check-in limit (with another 5 kg of hand luggage allowed), we hurried through dinner. After several rounds of elimination and clever packing, we arrived at the ideal weight – but only for the bags!

Day 2: September 1

Excitement had set in, and we couldn't wait to get to our destination. We had to be ready by 5:45 am, and were to be sent in batches in a mini aircraft to Simikot, and thereafter in a helicopter to Hilsa, still in Nepal. However, the weather gods had other plans. The heavy rains continued, so no flights were permitted to take off. The first lot finally left for the airport at around 9:30 am, and the second at 11:30 am.

Simikot, an hour's flight in a tiny aircraft, was scenic, and pleasant weather welcomed us. Clouds kissed the green mountain-tops, and there were umpteen colourful flowers all around. While waiting for our helicopter, we were served hot aloo parathas with pickle and tea. Hopping aboard for my first helicopter flight with 4 others, I took umpteen pictures and videos of the scenery below.

In twenty minutes, we were in Hilsa, which lies on the border with Tibet. Dishearteningly, just as we got off, we saw a dead body being moved to another chopper. We learned at the time that close to 10 per cent of visitors to Kailash die each year owing to the high altitude and low oxygen levels. Comfortingly, many believe that they are blessed to breathe their last in this holy place.

Apart from the landing pad, and a few small rooms filled with cots and mattresses, there isn't much in Hilsa. While waiting for the rest of the group to arrive, we binged

on hot noodles and tea. When everyone had finally assembled, we crossed the border on foot, walking across a hanging bridge over the River Kamali that was being blown about by the wind. On both sides of the crossing, immigration officers checked and stamped our passports, and on the Tibet side, there were several rounds of detailed bag-checking.

Formalities over – and with the sun still shining bright at 8pm – we drove on smooth roads along mountain-sides and over acres of barren land to Taklakot (also known to locals as Purang), which lies at an





altitude of 13,200 feet. (No wonder Tibet is called the Roof of the World!) In Taklakot – where we were to spend to nights acclimatising – we joined the rest of the group, who had come in a day earlier. We were now a total of around 70 people from around the world.

Day 3: September 2

Having slept poorly the previous night, my roommate and I went back to sleep after morning rounds of yoga and kriya and a light breakfast. I also had a headache – whether because of the cold weather or the altitude, I do not know. The plan

was to wake up in time for lunch, but we only got up at 4pm, finding that the kitchen was closed and no food was being served.

We decided to visit a nearby supermarket, less than half-a-kilometre away, but the altitude made even this short walk feel like an eternity. Within a few steps, we started to feel the lack of oxygen and became slightly breathless. The supermarket itself was unexciting, and pangs of hunger, clubbed with the headache, made things worse.

Thankfully, another member of the group offered me home-made laddus and snacks that served as

lunch. Instantly, I felt energised, and the headache vanished, too. That evening, we had a lovely satsang, followed by a light dinner of khichdi and kadi.

Day 4: September 3

After a light and early breakfast, we set off for an exciting day ahead. A short and beautiful drive – under an hour – brought us to a spectacular viewpoint. From a distance, I spotted the beautiful, snow-capped peak of Mount Kailash, standing tall and majestic. The other mountains around it had only scattered snow, if any, creating a salt-and-







pepper effect.

We halted at the massive, spell-bindingly beautiful Lake Rakshastal, its still waters a lovely, deep shade of blue, with chill winds blowing around us. Rakshastal is considered variously to be a cursed lake, or the 'lake of the devil'. Smitten by its beauty, and that of the enchanting Mount Kailash, we clicked many pictures here, even though our hands were freezing.

Our next stop was the holy Lake Manasarovar, and all along the way, we had mesmerising views of the holy mountain. After a quick breakfast by the shore, we went to explore the lake, by now glittering in the sunshine. A flock of birds flew past us, and to our left was Mount Kailash, encircled by clouds and standing out against a clear blue sky. It reminded me of an angel emoji with a halo around it!

Enthralled by all this beauty, I went into a meditative state, but by then, it was time to leave for the Manasarovar Parikrama and a dip in another side of the holy lake. So off we went in the bus. This section of the lake was equally beautiful and inviting, painted in various hues of blue, with light waves hitting the shore and Mount Kailash forming a magnificent backdrop. Despite the sunshine, it was still very cold. Most of our group took a dip in the freezing water, and although I was initially very reluctant to do so, I eventually gave in after being coaxed by my group-mates. It was biting cold, yet refreshing.

The travel agent had pitched small tents for the women to change. Since I had not carried a spare set of clothes with me, I dried myself in the warm sun and dressed over the same wet thermals.

We then proceeded on the 88 km Manasarovar Parikrama by bus, chanting 'Om Nama Shivaya' as we drove over very rough terrain. It was past 4pm when we returned to our breakfast spot for lunch. By then, the warmth of the sun had diminished, and the winds had started up. My

inner clothes still wet, I started to feel colder and began to shiver. I was in a state of bliss, but too cold to even talk or do anything about it, and wondered if I might fall sick. Luckily, the travel guide noticed my shivering and immediately offered me a warm cup of black coffee, covering me with yet another thick and warm jacket. After that, I felt better and had my lunch in the open.

From here we drove to Darchen, a small village in the foothills of Kailash, and – at 15,010 feet – the closest point to the mountain where you can find accommodation. We entered our hotel room, only to be greeted by a tiny mouse, which hid itself in the small gap between the cupboard and the door. After a few panic-stricken moments, I mustered the courage to open the door, and the mouse scurried out – maybe to the adjacent room?

Settling in, we were welcomed by our meditation course teacher, Rishi Nityapragya-ji. Our advanced meditation course began with a satsang, after which we were to remain silent for the next few days. The low oxygen levels were very evident here. Be it climbing a flight of stairs or walking a short distance, everything felt like a challenge.

After dinner, we retired to our rooms – in silence – and it was then that I had the strangest experience. Even though I was tired, I could not sleep a wink. Worse, my heart was pounding so fast, I felt like I was sprinting. I tossed and turned, and even with a bed-warmer, thermals and a jacket, I felt cold. I wanted to sleep well so I would be fresh the next day, but nothing worked, and my roommate was also feeling sick.

Thankfully, after about 2 hours, there was a knock at the door. It was the travel agent's doctor, who was checking up on all of us. It was a relief to see him, and I gestured to him – still silent – about my pounding heart and sleeplessness. He gave me an Ayurvedic medicine, and that worked. Finally, I fell asleep, only to wake up again 3



hours later, because we had an early day ahead of us.

Day 5: September 4

We started the morning with yoga and basic stretches, but even taking deep breaths proved to be a challenge. I was one of the few who continued to feel cold despite thermals and jackets. My headache persisted on and off throughout the day, and most of the time I felt neither hunger nor thirst. (Many from our group felt ill – I guess that’s what the high altitude does – but nothing serious, and there was always a doctor on call.) Whenever I remembered to do so, I would sip on hot water, and there was always good vegetarian food to be had.

The day was filled with various forms of meditation, but around

5pm, we set off for the Yam Dwar (‘the gate of immortality’), the closest point to Mount Kailash. We drove for about 30 minutes – and what a splendid site awaited us! A beautiful, clear blue sky framed the majestic Kailash, clad in smooth, soft, pure-white snow. While walking the short distance along the path leading to the Kailash Parikrama, we could not take our eyes off the mountain. Here we also saw some locals performing a ‘namaskar’, a small part of the 20-25 days it takes to complete the full, 52-km Parikrama on foot.

As we got closer, we were amazed to see that the snow atop the peak (temporarily) formed what resembled the third eye of Lord Shiva. It was an astounding moment, and words fail to describe

the experience. I felt blessed and rejuvenated. We clicked pictures, sang bhajans (which was permitted, despite the requirement for silence), and rejoiced.

Returning to our hotel, we continued our meditation and had a brilliant satsang with Rishi Nityapragya-ji that evening, followed by a nice dinner (all in silence). The doctor on duty did a good job treating those who felt unwell. Although I again felt slightly breathless that night, I was amazed that, despite the lack of sleep, I didn’t feel tired.

Day 6: September 5

With quite a few people in our group falling sick, we decided to move back to Taklakot, which was at a somewhat lower altitude. While



and happy to see that I had taken a picture of the clouds flying atop Kailash like an angel: an accidental but cherished photo.

Reaching Taklakot, we resumed our meditation sessions after settling into our rooms. (Our tour guides effortlessly managed our numbered duffle bags, and ensured that we were all comfortable.) This was the day we had a twenty-minute 'meditation in motion' session, which in the past I had found quite challenging. I had never managed to successfully complete it, but this time, I surprised myself by doing so.

The remainder of the day was filled with deep meditation sessions, which we thoroughly enjoyed. That evening, we had another energising satsang, followed by a briefing on how important it was for us to leave early and on time the next morning. The plan was to reach Nepalgunj by evening, failing which we might get caught either in Hilsa or in Simikot, given that a storm was forecast.

Day 7: September 6

We awoke early the next morning ready to bid adieu to Tibet. As Taklakot lies on the border, we soon crossed over into Nepal. Walking across the hanging bridge again, the winds were fast and chill, and the bridge lightly swayed in joy.

Waiting for our helicopters, we enjoyed homemade noodles and hot chai. This time, we were being sent in groups of ten using two helicopters. As we were still meant to be silent, there was not much to do, so we started singing songs on Shiva. This turned out to be such fun, we couldn't resist dancing as well.

In the last but one batch, I flew to Simikot, and was lucky to be the co-pilot. I enjoyed the scenic views of high mountains, greenery, and a winding river, arriving in Simikot in less than half an hour. There, I had to wait nearly two hours for the small aircraft to take off. The weather was no longer cold, and the jackets started to come off one by one. We

continued to sing, taking shelter from the sun under the wing of the plane! The people around us were amused, thinking us to be crazy.

At Simikot, I met a most beautiful person. She was a local – short, probably in her early sixties, and a worker at the airport, but she had the most beautifully warm, genuine smile. She seemed to recognise me from the onward journey, gently tapping on my shoulder and smiling at me. I returned her smile, and was touched to see her working so hard, carrying heavy goods manually. I decided to give her all the extra food I had carried with me – which she accepted gladly. Just after the plane took off, I came to know that this lady had been born dumb, and despite all her hardships, remained cheery.

After an hour's flight, we landed in hot and humid Nepalgunj. Back in the hotel, we claimed the bags we had left behind, repacking them so we were ready to leave the next morning. We were still high on energy from the yatra, and having finally broking our silence, had a brilliant satsang filled with joy, laughter and dance. The next morning we were to return to Lucknow, from where a group of us visited Ayodhya before heading home.

Despite the harsh weather and physical conditions, for the most part, I experienced inner peace throughout the yatra. The mind stayed blank most of the time, and our silence was the icing on the cake. All said, it was an indescribable experience that cannot be explained



– but can only be experienced. Personally, I felt like I was alone with me, myself and my Shiva. Pure bliss. ■

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waiting for the others to assemble, I stepped out in the cold outside, and my goodness, what a site awaited me. I looked up to see the sun-rays gently kissing the peak of Mount Kailash. It was paradise.

The road in front of the hotel was also very scenic: straight and long, cutting through acres and acres of flat, rustic terrain, and seemingly leading into snow-capped mountains.

En route we stopped at Manasarovar for couple of meditation sessions, followed by lunch. Once again, we gazed in admiration at Kailash, and at the many-hued lake, clicking countless pictures. Because the sun was so bright, I didn't realise what I was shooting with my new fish-eye lens. Later, I was both surprised