

BRUNCH

JEWEL OF THE SNOWS

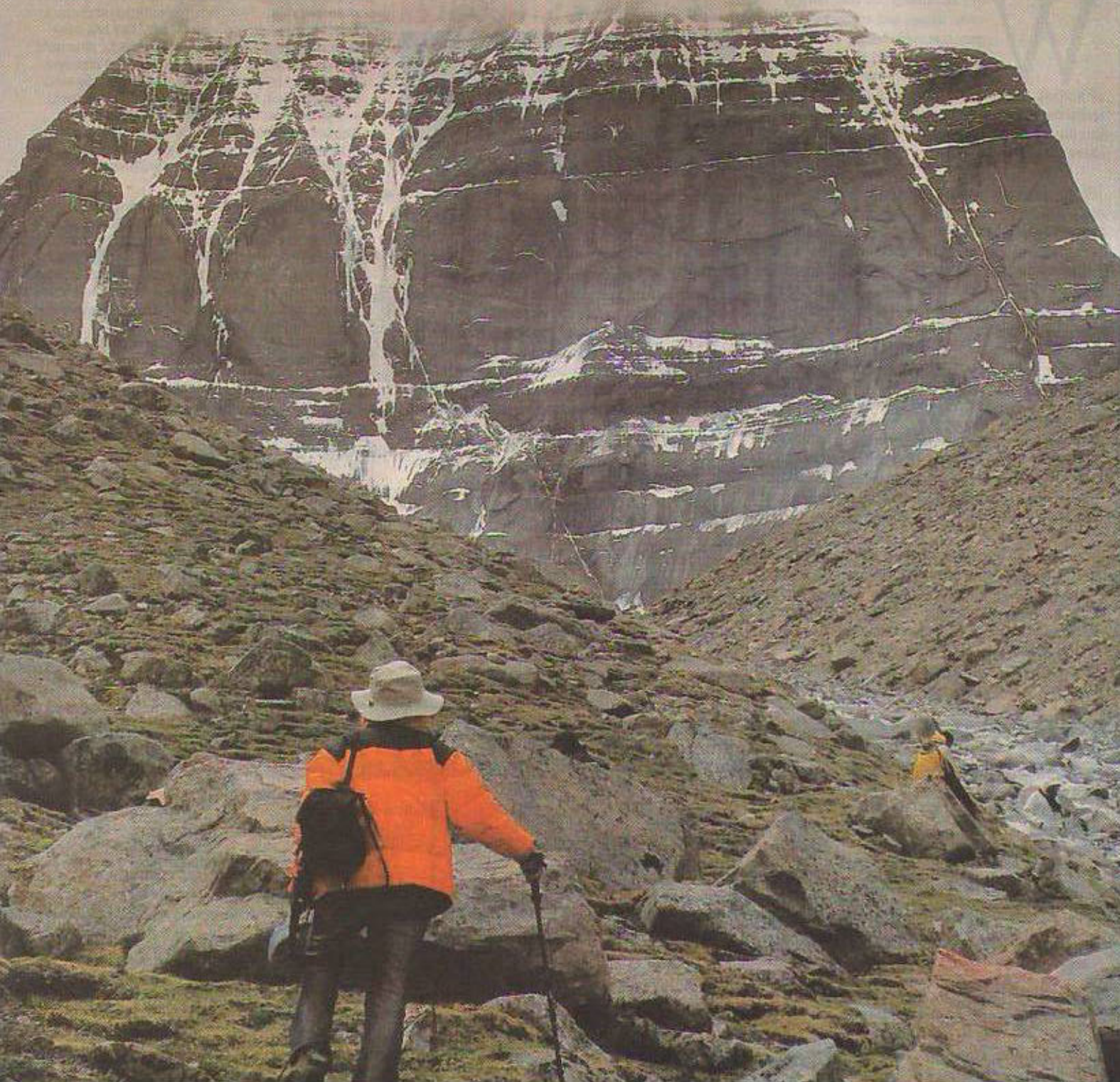
Whether you're a pilgrim or a traveller, journeying to the magical Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar is an experience of a lifetime



Pilgrims on the banks of Lake Mansarovar in Tibet

COVER STORY

FROM THE HOLY MOUNTAIN



Whether a pilgrim or a traveller, the journey to Kailash-Mansarovar won't fail to move you

Text and photographs by Colleen Braganza

OUR TOYOTA Land Cruiser, one of a convoy of 38, circled past a colourful Tibetan flag post with a flourish and screeched to a halt. "Gang Rinpoche, Kailash, Kailash," said our Tibetan driver Tashi, pointing excitedly.

I stumbled out of the car, glad our dusty journey was almost at an end, and started taking photographs of the majestic Mount Kailash in the distance. That's when I realised I was being oblivious to one of the most overwhelming moments of this journey. The brilliant blue Lake Mansarovar was shimmering in the afternoon sun in the distance. Mount Kailash's forehead shone as it towered over the other mountains in its range. But that wasn't it.

All around me, pilgrims wept. Some stood transfixed, others prostrated themselves on the ground in the direction of the mountain. They sobbed, they prayed and chanted. After five days of being bounced on a dusty dirt road, after ascending from about 50 feet (the altitude at Mumbai) to nearly 15,000 feet in little over a week, after dealing with altitude sickness – severe headaches, nausea, dizziness, breathlessness and blurred vision – the pilgrims had finally glimpsed the holy mountain. It was surreal.

THE ULTIMATE JOURNEY

Most Hindus, Buddhists and Jains aim to go on the Kailash Mansarovar yatra at least once in a lifetime. It is also a journey anyone with the slightest passion for adventure will want to do. But it isn't easy.

The mountain and the adjoining Lake Mansarovar are situated in a remote, sparsely inhabited part of the western Tibetan plateau where food and supplies are scarce, the weather violently unpredictable and the terrain rocky and inhospitable. It also involves ascending to altitudes on land most of us have never



THE ROADIE

Would you like to go to Kailash Mansarovar? asked the boss. I needed little convincing

ascended to or will never ascend to again in our lives. The trek to see the face of Mount Kailash or to do the parikrama around it involves ascending to between 16,000-19,000 feet (Leh is at 11,500 feet), a trek even the most fit among us labour through. This is because at this altitude, the air is thin and simple activities like putting on hiking boots make one

MYTH AND FACT

Mount Kailash

Regarded as the spiritual centre of the universe, Mount Kailash (21,778 feet), a mass of sheer black rock, is revered by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Bon-pos (followers of an ancient Tibetan religion). Hindus believe Kailash is where Shiva sits in a state of eternal meditation, holding the universe together with the force of his will. There have been no recorded ascents of the mountain. In 2001, China gave permission to a Spanish expedition to climb the mountain. However, the expedition abandoned their plans in the wake of widespread international protests.

Lake Mansarovar

At an altitude of approx 15,000 feet, Mansarovar is one of the highest freshwater lakes in the world. It covers an area of approx 320 sq km. According to legend, Mansarovar was created by Brahma using his mental powers (hence manas = mind and sarovar = lake). Legend also has it that Parvati performed the penance that won her the hand of Shiva on its bank. Hindus believe their sins of many lives will be washed away if they bathe in the lake's icy waters. To the west of Mansarovar is Rakshastal, said to symbolise evil, the way Mansarovar symbolises good.

THE ABODE OF SHIVA

A pilgrim takes a look at Mount Kailash shrouded in mist before descending to the camp below. This point was the closest we got to the mountain.

breathless rapidly.

It is not unusual for yatis to never return either. This June, at least 10 Indian pilgrims died because of bad weather and high-altitude sickness enroute to Mount Kailash. No wonder then that in the run-up to my trip more than one person called me to highlight the deaths, asking me to pull out of the yatra.

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

I was with a group of 150 meditators from the Isha Foundation (see box) who had converged from all corners of the globe: Germany, the UK, US, Coimbatore, Mumbai and Gurgaon. The pilgrims in my group were as young as 16 and as old as 73. I was one of two journalists and the only person who had not been initiated into Isha yoga.

After flying into Kathmandu where we spent two nights, we drove to the Nepal border for the much-anticipated crossing into Chinese territory. We had all been briefed about dealing with Chinese immigration (don't argue) and had been warned against carrying any 'free Tibet' literature or T-shirts or photos / posters of the Dalai Lama since that would jeopardise the yatra for the entire group.

We literally walked into China, crossing the Friendship Bridge over a raging river in the company of pushy young Nepali porters who harassed us to hire them to carry our backpacks (the tour operators transferred the rest of our luggage across) because there were landslides / floods / heavy rain / hail / snow on the other side.

Of course, that was just a ploy to make us hire them. The travellers who succumbed paid as much as Rs 400 for the porters to carry bags across the immigration hall that perhaps measured 50 metres and then another 250 metres to the cabs waiting on the other side. On the return, we were much smarter. Everyone chose to carry their backpacks on their own.

We stayed overnight in the border town of Zhangmu. With its rolling mists, shops, telephone booths and traffic jams, it was just like a hill station in India, except for the Chinese signs. At an altitude of about 7,400 feet, the town is situated in the green, green Himalayas. It was the last time we would see trees till we returned.

Crossing into China also meant that from being a date and time obsessed city-dweller, I lost all



AN EMOTIONAL MOMENT

At the first glimpse of Mount Kailash, pilgrims wept, stood transfixed, prostrated themselves on the ground and prayed

sense of time. All days merged into one. 'It's Sunday? Really?'

HIGHWAY THROUGH HEAVEN

The 'real' journey started when our Land Cruisers purred out of Zhangmu early one morning for the nine hour drive to our next stop, Saga. We dozed because of the early hour and woke to find ourselves in the middle of exquisite beauty. We were on a metalled road that snaked like a black ribbon through barren, brown hills. The low snow-capped peaks in the distance looked close enough to reach out and touch. The sky was a brilliant blue.

The black ribbon soon ran out and gave way to a dirt track through largely uninhabited swathes of desert land that continued for the rest of our journey. The Land Cruiser negotiated the slopes of gravelly Aravali-sized hills, and we drove past hillsides of sharp rocks, sand dunes and rivers, pastures and lakes. The arid landscape threw up a surprising amount of colour - brown, beige, bronze, russet, ochre, slate-green, olive, emerald and a hundred shades of grey, all contrasting against the striking, blue sky.

In the midst of this desolation, it was not uncommon to suddenly come across an under-construction town, part of the Chinese government's attempts to kick start the area's economy, or a military camp. Intermittently, children would wave to us by the wayside, seemingly miles from any habitation.

ALTITUDE STRIKES BACK

The military town of Saga is an unimpressive windy, dusty and concrete town that smells of yak and is perched on the banks of the Brahmaputra. Saga was the last point of 'civilisation' as we know it and we were advised to stock up on anything we needed for our trip. Its supermarkets were well stocked - from loofahs to raincoats to packed meat and underwear. It was also the last time we enjoyed modern shower and toilet facilities. We didn't bathe



ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Yaks carry supplies uphill to our final destination Dirapuk. They are sure footed but reluctant beasts of burden so there was no guarantee that supplies would reach us the same day

for the next seven days.

We were forbidden from taking photos at Saga, though why anyone would want to take any is anyone's guess.

At a height of 14,300 feet, Saga is also where the high altitude starts taking a toll on your body. We all were on a drug, Diamox, to help us acclimatise faster (it also made us want to pee every two hours). But despite that, the combination of the long drive and high altitude meant many travellers were unwell, suffering from breathlessness because of the thin air, nausea and headaches, keeping the many doctors in our group busy.

Sadhguru, the spiritual leader of the Isha Foundation, who joined us at many points on this journey, warned us in Kathmandu that Isha would run the yatra like a boot camp since that was the only thing that would ensure we would get back



home alive. In Saga, I found out he was serious.

We reached Saga at 4 pm. After 11 hours on the road, all that many of us wanted to do was to drop into bed and sleep. But respiration decreases during sleep and sleeping prematurely would hamper acclimatisation. So Isha volunteers made sure no one slept till after dinner, knocking at our doors every half an hour to ask if everyone was doing well and ensuring none of us slept.

CAR WITH A VIEW

The drive to our next stop, Paryang, was perhaps the dustiest on this trip. We started wearing dust masks out of Saga, but despite a face mask and a scarf around my nose and with all the windows up, I could still smell the dust.

We stayed in an ashram that provided very basic facilities. The sheets in our room had obviously not been changed for a while and there was one east-



THE MISSING LINK

We were a convoy of 38 Land Cruisers. Here, seven that sped ahead waited two hours for the rest to catch up. Why were they delayed? They were having breakfast!

ern and one western toilet for 150 people. But no one was complaining. We had been warned. And also after the long road journeys, we were quite comfortable using the great outdoors as a loo. In fact by the end of this journey, most of us didn't even bother looking for a mound or a stone to squat behind (there were no shrubs). We were ready to squat where we were standing.

Just out of Paryang, on the way to Mansarovar, was something I'd never seen before. There were two different landscapes on either side. Look right, and there was a brown and dusty desert. Look left, and we could see yaks and sheep gambolling in green pastures. I even spotted a rare Tibetan antelope standing alone in the middle of a massive grassland as if confused which direction to take.

After the emotional first glimpse of Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar, we drove to our campsite by the lake, at which point we were showered briefly with hailstones that sent us scurrying for cover.

A JEWEL IN THE DESERT

It's difficult to describe the beauty of the massive lake. Mansarovar is like a jewel in the middle of the desert. It's a million shades of blue-green that sparkle in the sun and compete with the changing landscape of the sky. There is a protective ring of mountains around it with the white-capped Mount Kailash presiding over the magnificent scene from the distance. Our cameras also failed to capture its beauty. You have to see the real thing to believe it.

The highlight here was the dip in Mansarovar that Hindus believe washes away the sins of many lives. We were scheduled to take a collective dip in the presence of Sadhguru the next morning and though I intended to take a dip, though not for religious reasons, when morning dawned, I had serious apprehensions.

It can get bitterly cold in Mansarovar at all times, particularly in the morning and night. When we assembled at 6 am by the bank, I was wearing five layers of clothing on top. The temperature must have been 2-5 degrees Celsius and the wind chill at least -5 degrees Celsius. I had two pairs of socks on and was in slippers, not shoes. At that altitude, wearing the heavy hiking shoes was a struggle and I reasoned that I had to take them off anyway for the dip, so there was no point wearing them.

That was a big mistake. By the time Sadhguru and the group of meditators completed their meditation, I was an icicle. I had made up my mind then that I would have to be completely out of my mind to take a dip in the freezing waters and since I had no religious compulsions to do so, I reasoned I'd sit in my nice, warm down jacket and watch everyone freeze, thank you very much.

Then everyone got up with their plastic bags of spare clothes and headed towards the lake - even 50, 60 and 70 year olds from South India.

That's when it became an issue of pride. I remember thinking if South Indians, who wore monkey caps the moment it got cloudy, could dare go for a dip, so could I. So, I stripped down to my tracks and T-shirt, shivering uncontrollably, locked arms with Kalpana, a friend I made on this journey, and chattered my way into the lake.

The first 30 seconds were agonising. The water was about zero degrees and I could feel my toes entangle in some seaweed stuff. But after 30 seconds, I couldn't feel the cold anymore. Actually, I couldn't feel my feet. They were numb.

That's when I got braver and threw myself into the water keeping my head clear. And with the confidence of a veteran, I urged another pilgrim who asked me how I did it to not think. "Just do it," I said. She did. Many others rolled in the water like



SMART TRAVEL

Some pilgrims carried clotheslines that were put to good use after the dip in Lake Mansarovar

Weather



The Kailash Mansarovar yatra will take you to an altitude of 15,000-19,000 ft. The weather is unpredictable and can range from warm to below freezing. It can also rain without warning. The sun is

harsh so it is essential to use sunscreen or cover your face and arms when in the sun (this works best against sunburn). Travellers are advised to dress in layers to be able to strip and dress as the weather changes. Clothing should be layered, light, wind-proof, water-repellent and warm.

What you need



- Wind-proof and waterproof jacket with hood
- Down jacket with hood
- Sleeping bag
- Sweaters
- Woollen cap and scarf
- Warm, waterproof gloves
- Two sets of thermals
- Woollen socks

- Cotton socks
- Waterproof trousers
- Long-sleeve T-shirts / sweatshirts
- Sun glasses with chain
- Hiking boots
- Wide brimmed hat
- Sunscreen (75 SPF)
- Water bottle
- Headlamp with extra batteries
- Large raincoat
- Pouch for camera / money / medicines / documents
- Large plastic garbage bags to protect your luggage
- Toilet paper rolls
- Wet wipes
- Hand sanitiser
- Medicines for allergy, high-altitude sickness, stomach upsets, headache, fever and cold
- Bedsheet
- Flask for hot water
- Biscuits
- Dry fruits (almonds, figs, raisins)
- Sweets, chocolates and energy or nutrition bars
- Electrol or glucose
- Castor oil (15 ml) or vaseline (to line the insides of your nostrils that dry and start bleeding)

Health



This year, the Isha Foundation took pilgrims as young as 16 and as old as 73 on the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra.

However, all participants are required to undergo specific medical tests and furnish a doctor's certificate stating that they are physically fit to travel to high altitudes.

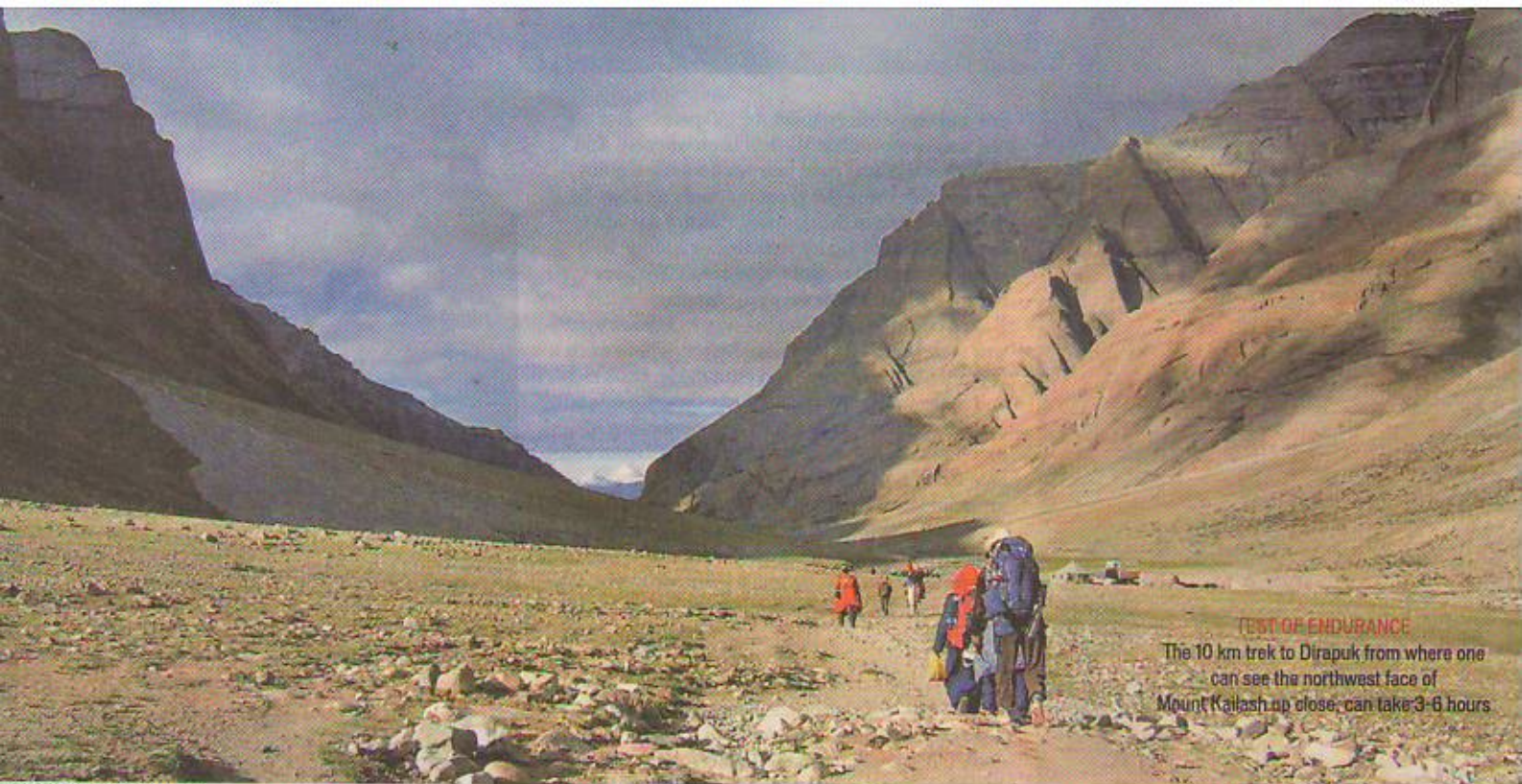
Those with cardiac problems, uncontrolled blood pressure, severe asthma, those who suffer from epilepsy and those with physical handicaps are advised against making this yatra.

All 'healthy' pilgrims are also required to fill an indemnity bond declaring that they are undergoing the yatra at their own risk.



TOUGH LIFE

A Tibetan nomad and her son in her tent at Mansarovar. She sold bottled water and noodles and Tibetan tea



TEST OF ENDURANCE
The 10 km trek to Dirapuk from where one can see the northwest face of Mount Kailash up close, can take 3-6 hours

PHOTO: KALPANA MANIAR

ISHA Foundation



The Isha Foundation, founded by yogi and mystic Sadhguru in 1992, is a volunteer-run, international nonprofit organisation dedicated to cultivating human potential. Isha organised its first

Kailash Mansarovar Sojourn in 2006. This year, Isha took 505 people on the yatra in four groups. Sadhguru accompanied all groups. Every group also has a team of 7-8 doctors who have been specifically trained to deal with high-altitude sickness. The foundation hopes to take at least 1,000 pilgrims for the yatra in 2010. Isha takes pains to emphasise that it is not a tour company. "We take people so that they can experience Kailash and Mansarovar in its true depth and dimension," says Maa Gambhiri, who was responsible for planning the 2009 yatra. For details write to yatra@ishafoundation.org or call +91-9442543331, +91-422-2580141

How to get there



The best time to go on this yatra is between June and September. From India, there are two options:

1. You join a group with a private tour operator. This route takes you through Kathmandu or Lhasa and involves extensive travel by road. The entire trip can last 14-16 days. Be careful while choosing a tour operator as there are many fly-by-night operators who offer cheap deals with hidden costs. Such operators are also not equipped to handle medical emergencies. Costs can range from Rs 90,000 to Rs 1,70,000.

2. The Ministry of External Affairs organises a yatra between June and September every year. The route goes over the Himalayas up to the Lipu Lekh Pass on the Indo-Tibet border and takes 26 days to complete. Advertisements for the yatra are usually out in January. Since the number of applicants is higher than the number that can be accommodated, the MEA selects yatis through a computer-generated random selection process. Cost: Approx Rs 60,000 (not including expenditure on camping equipment, food, porters and ponies.) For details go to: <http://meaindia.nic.in/kmsmealink1.htm>

they were at a sunny beach or something.

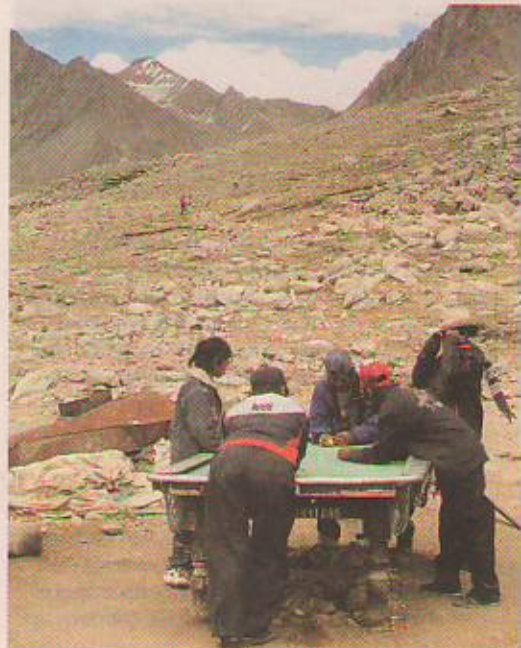
We spent the rest of the day thawing our frozen feet and resting for the trek up to Mount Kailash, the highlight of this yatra for the meditators.

TO THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

The next day after a hearty breakfast to fortify us, we drove to the starting point of our 10 km trek to Dirapuk, the site of a 13th century monastery, from where one can gaze on the imposing northwest face of Mount Kailash. The trek started after an initiation by Sadhguru on the banks of the river near the starting point.

The trek took us through a spectacular landscape. We walked through something that looked like a miniature Grand Canyon – its sheer rock cliffs on either side buffed and battered by the wind to an unusual smoothness. The walk was undulating and not as difficult as I expected and slowly took us up from approx 14,300 ft to 16,100 ft. Each group of four was given portable oxygen cans to use in case of extreme breathlessness but I was happy to see that though I carried my own backpack (I didn't use a porter) and though I got breathless at every ascent (that's normal), and though I don't do yoga, I didn't need additional oxygen, hurray! My lungs were in good shape. We were also fortunate to have had good weather.

We rested for the night at a newly-constructed



POOL AT 16,200 FEET

Porters indulge in a game of high-altitude pool at Dirapuk

ashram in Dirapuk (travellers in previous years stayed in tents) and we headed up a stream to Mount Kailash for a meditation session the next morning. This ascent was considerably steeper with climbers negotiating through boulders and even ice by the side of the stream that descended from Mount Kailash.

We stopped at a clearing for a meditation session guided by Swami Ulasa, the efficient leader of our group. This was the closest we would ever be to Mount Kailash. As the Isha meditators chanted, calling out to Shiva, the eternal meditator, I closed my eyes. I was at 16,500 feet. I had reached a spot most people back home would give an arm and a leg to be at. I was thankful for that opportunity. I was struck by the devotion of people around me, humbled by the magnificence of the beauty before me and grateful to have made it so far from home without any mishap. I was cold and tired too. But resting my back against a huge boulder, I prayed.

cbraganza@hindustantimes.com

STEP BY STEP

