

Earthbound Expeditions

Kailash Express, by Air and Helicopter

11 days, from US$3,290 per person

Duration
11 days

Grade
Strenuous

Max altitude
5,630 m

Start and end
Kathmandu

On the trail
5 to 10 hours a day

Best season
May to Sep

Accommodation
Guesthouses

Meals
Full board, vegetarian

Group size
5 to 12

Getting there
Flights and helicopter

Kailash Express, by Air and Helicopter Overview

The shortest route to Kailash, by air to Simikot and by helicopter to the border, for pilgrims who cannot take three weeks away.

Tour overview

Most journeys to Kailash take almost a week to reach the mountain. This one reaches Taklakot, a short drive from Lake Mansarovar, on the fourth day, by flying to the far north-west of Nepal and crossing the border by helicopter. It is designed for pilgrims who cannot take three weeks away.

Rapid altitude gain

The disadvantage is the speed of the ascent. Nepalgunj is at 150 m on the plains and Taklakot at 3,900 m, and this itinerary allows one day between them. For this reason, the fifth day is a rest day, oxygen and a pressure chamber travel with the group, and we advise some travellers to choose the overland trip instead.

Mount Kailash and its four faiths

Kailash rises to 6,638 m in the far west of Tibet and has never been climbed, because climbing it is not permitted. Hindus regard it as the abode of Shiva, Buddhists as the home of Demchok, and Jains as the place where Rishabhadeva attained liberation. Bon followers walk around it anticlockwise, while all others walk clockwise.

The three-day kora

The kora is fifty-three kilometres, starting and ending at Darchen. It goes north to Dirapuk below the west face, over the Dolma La at 5,630 m on the long second day, and down the Zhong Chu valley to the plain on the third day. It is a walk, not a climb, but the altitude makes it demanding.

Key highlights of the Kailash Express, by Air and Helicopter

- Kailash and Mansarovar in eleven days from Kathmandu and back
- The flight into Simikot and the helicopter over the Humla gorges to Hilsa
- Lake Mansarovar at 4,590 m on the sixth day rather than the tenth
- The full 53 km kora over the Dolma La, walked in three days
- No long drive across the plateau: the Saga road is replaced by two flights and a twenty-minute helicopter flight

Itinerary

Day	Route	Hours	Distance	Altitude
1	Arrive Kathmandu	-	-	1,400 m
2	Kathmandu, visa and temples	-	-	1,400 m
3	Fly Kathmandu to Nepalgunj	1	-	150 m
4	Nepalgunj, Simikot, Hilsa, Taklakot	6 to 8	-	3,900 m
5	Taklakot, acclimatisation	2	4 km	3,900 m

6	Taklakot to Lake Mansarovar	3 to 4	100 km	4,590 m
7	Mansarovar, Darchen, Yam Dwar to Dirapuk	5 to 6	12 km	4,900 m
8	Dirapuk to Zuthulpuk over the Dolma La	9 to 10	22 km	4,835 m
9	Zuthulpuk to Darchen, drive to Taklakot	4 to 5	12 km	3,900 m
10	Taklakot to Hilsa, Simikot, Nepalgunj	6 to 8	-	150 m
11	Fly Nepalgunj to Kathmandu	1	-	1,400 m

Day 1

Arrive in Kathmandu

We meet you at the airport and take you to your hotel. In the evening we give a full briefing, because this route gains height faster than any other and you need to understand how this is managed before you start. We check your equipment and hire anything that is missing.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, arrival day Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Dinner

Day 2

Kathmandu and the group visa

Your passport goes to the Chinese Embassy with those of the rest of the group. Meanwhile, we visit Pashupatinath, where many pilgrims begin their journey, and repack your belongings into one duffel bag and one daypack. The baggage limit on the Simikot flight is strict and low, which is why we do this today rather than at the airport.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: Easy walking, 1–2 hrs Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 3

Fly to Nepalgunj

A one-hour flight south-west to the Terai, where the climate is very different: Nepalgunj is hot, flat and 150 m above sea level. We stay here because the Simikot flights leave from Nepalgunj at first light. Have an early night, with your bags packed for an early start.

Altitude: 150 m On foot: None, flight day Night: Hotel, Nepalgunj Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 4

Fly from Nepalgunj to Simikot, helicopter to Hilsa and cross into Tibet

Fly by Twin Otter to Simikot at 2,910 m, landing on a 549 m runway, which is why flights operate only in clear morning conditions. Then a twenty-minute helicopter flight over the Humla gorges to Hilsa at 3,640 m, the bridge across the Karnali, Chinese formalities at Zherwa, and a short drive to Taklakot. It is a very long day.

Altitude: 3,900 m On foot: None, flight day Night: Hotel, Taklakot Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 5

Acclimatisation day in Taklakot

This is the most important day of the itinerary. You have climbed from 150 m to 3,900 m within twenty-four hours. We take a gentle walk up the hill above the town, return, drink plenty of water, and measure everyone's oxygen saturation twice. Nobody goes higher until the readings allow it.

Altitude: 3,900 m On foot: 2 hours Night: Hotel, Taklakot Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 6

Drive from Taklakot to Lake Mansarovar

Drive north over the Gurla La, with views of Gurla Mandhata, to Lake Mansarovar, the main destination of the trip. The afternoon is spent on the shore. Those who wish to bathe do so briefly, because the water is only a few degrees above freezing at 4,590 m.

Altitude: 4,590 m On foot: None, 3–4 hr drive Night: Guesthouse, Mansarovar Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 7

Drive from Mansarovar to Darchen and Yam Dwar, trek to Dirapuk

Sunrise at the lake, then a short drive to Darchen and on to Yam Dwar, the gate where the kora begins. We walk twelve kilometres north up the Lha Chu valley below the west face, with little height gain, and arrive at Dirapuk in the late afternoon, facing Kailash.

Altitude: 4,900 m On foot: 5 to 6 hours, 12 km Night: Guesthouse, Dirapuk Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 8

Trek over the Dolma La to Zuthulpuk

The hardest day of the journey. We leave before dawn, climb the moraine past Shiva Tsal, and make a long, slow ascent to the Dolma La at 5,630 m, which is covered in prayer flags. The descent to the valley is steep and loose, and the trail then flattens and continues for several hours. The day takes nine to ten hours in total.

Altitude: 4,835 m On foot: 9 to 10 hours, 22 km Night: Guesthouse, Zuthulpuk Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 9

Trek from Zuthulpuk to Darchen and drive to Taklakot

An easy final stage down the Zhong Chu valley, past Milarepa's cave, to the plain where the vehicles wait. The circuit is complete before lunch. We drive south to Taklakot, and the descent of eight hundred metres helps your recovery after three days at high altitude.

Altitude: 3,900 m On foot: 4 to 5 hours, 12 km Night: Hotel, Taklakot Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 10

Taklakot to Hilsa, fly to Simikot and Nepalgunj

Complete the Chinese exit formalities, cross the bridge back into Nepal at Hilsa, and take the helicopter to Simikot when the weather allows. Then take the fixed-wing flight to Nepalgunj. The schedule includes its only spare time here, because the Simikot flight is the least reliable in the country.

Altitude: 150 m On foot: None, flight day Night: Hotel, Nepalgunj Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 11

Fly to Kathmandu and departure

Take the morning flight back to Kathmandu. The afternoon is free. If your international flight is the same evening, we book a day room for you. If weather delayed you at Simikot for an extra day, this day covers the delay, and we will already have contacted your airline.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, departure day Night: No overnight Meals: Breakfast

What's included

- All Tibetan permits: Tibet Travel Permit, Alien's Travel Permit, military and foreign affairs permits, and the Kailash area fees
- The Chinese group visa, arranged in Kathmandu, with the embassy fee charged at cost
- Flights from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj and Simikot, and back
- The helicopter between Simikot and Hilsa in both directions
- All accommodation: hotels in Kathmandu, Nepalgunj and Taklakot, and guesthouses at Mansarovar and on the kora
- Full board from dinner on day one to breakfast on day eleven, vegetarian throughout
- Vehicles with drivers throughout Tibet
- A licensed Tibetan guide in the region and a Nepali leader from Kathmandu
- Bottled oxygen and a portable pressure chamber, with the group at all times
- A yak or porter allowance of 10 kg per person for the three kora days

Not included

- International flights to and from Kathmandu
- Nepal visa on arrival
- Travel insurance, which must cover trekking and evacuation to 6,000 m
- A horse and personal porter on the kora, about $180 to $260
- Accommodation and meals after day eleven if the Simikot flight is delayed by more than the one spare day in the itinerary
- Tips for the guide, the drivers and the kora crew
- Any costs arising from a border closure, a permit refusal or weather

Permits and other costs

Permit	Fee	Issued by
Tibet Travel Permit (TTB). Eight or nine working days, and only once the itinerary has been paid for.	Inside the trip price	Tibet Tourism Bureau, through a licensed agency
China group visa, issued in Kathmandu. Four working days. Issued to a group of five or more who enter and leave China together.	$51 for most nationalities, $140 for US citizens	Chinese Embassy, Kathmandu
Alien's Travel Permit. Required throughout the prefecture.	CNY 50, inside the trip price	Public Security Bureau, Ngari
Military area permit. Hilsa and Purang are on a sensitive border, so this permit is checked carefully.	Inside the trip price	Tibet Military Command
Kailash area and kora fee. Collected at Darchen before the walk begins.	Inside the trip price	Ngari prefecture and the Darchen authority

Other cost	Amount	Note

China group visa, Kathmandu	$51–140	$140 for US citizens, $85 for Canadians, $51 for most others
Tibet Travel Permit	$70–120	Applied for once the itinerary is paid, eight or nine working days
Alien's Travel Permit	$8	CNY 50, required throughout Ngari
Military and foreign affairs permits	$60–100	Western Tibet is a border-sensitive zone
Kailash and Mansarovar area fees	$180–240	Ngari prefecture entry and the Darchen kora fee
Kathmandu to Nepalgunj flight	$120–150	Each way, jet, about an hour
Nepalgunj to Simikot flight	$180–240	Each way, Twin Otter or Dornier, 15 kg baggage
Simikot to Hilsa helicopter	$380–520	Each way, 20 minutes, shared charter
Vehicles in Tibet	$240–340 a head	Much less driving than on the overland routes
Licensed Tibetan guide	$45–60 a day	Compulsory for the whole time in the region
Hotels and guesthouses	$40–90 a night	Simple in Taklakot, basic at the lake, very basic on the kora
Full board, vegetarian	$30–45 a day	Our own cook and supplies beyond the border
Oxygen and a pressure chamber	$60–90 a head	Essential on a route that gains height this quickly
Horse and porter on the kora	$180–260	Not included. Arranged at Darchen the evening before
Travel insurance to 6,000 m	$140–220	Must cover evacuation and travel delay

Packing list

Baggage limit of 15 kg

The Simikot aircraft and the helicopter have a strict baggage limit of about 15 kg, plus a small daypack. This limit is the main constraint on this trip. Pack for eleven days within it, keep a change of clothes and your medication in your daypack in case your duffel bag travels on a later flight, and leave everything else at your Kathmandu hotel, free of charge.

Clothing

- Windproof hooded shell, which is more important on the plateau than extra insulation
- Insulated jacket for the pre-dawn start on the pass
- Three base layers, merino or synthetic, not cotton

- One fleece and one light insulated mid layer

For the kora

- Worn-in boots with ankle support
- Walking poles, which are very useful on the loose descent from the Dolma La
- A thirty-litre daypack for the three walking days
- Liner gloves under warmer gloves

Two unheated nights

- Four-season sleeping bag, comfort-rated to about minus ten
- Silk or cotton liner
- Earplugs, because the kora rooms are shared
- Headtorch and spare batteries

Sun and wind

- Category 4 sunglasses
- Factor 50 sun cream and high-factor lip balm, in generous quantities
- Brimmed sun hat and a buff for the dust
- Moisturiser, as the plateau air is very dry

Health

- Your own medication in its original packaging, with the prescription
- Acetazolamide if your doctor agrees, tried at home first
- Rehydration salts, blister kit, paracetamol and ibuprofen
- Effective throat lozenges, because the dry air affects your voice

Papers

- Passport valid for six months with two blank pages
- Four passport photographs
- Insurance certificate showing cover to 6,000 m, evacuation and travel delay
- Copies of all documents, carried separately

Useful

- A change of clothes in your daypack, in case your duffel bag travels on a later helicopter
- A battery pack, kept warm inside your jacket
- A Chinese plug adaptor
- Small notes for tips, the horse and the guesthouses

Altitude profile

Day	Place	Sleep at	Highest point
1	Kathmandu	1,400 m	1,400 m
2	Kathmandu	1,400 m	1,400 m
3	Nepalgunj	150 m	1,400 m
4	Taklakot	3,900 m	3,900 m
5	Taklakot	3,900 m	4,100 m
6	Mansarovar	4,590 m	4,650 m
7	Dirapuk	4,900 m	4,900 m
8	Zuthulpuk	4,835 m	5,630 m
9	Taklakot	3,900 m	4,835 m
10	Nepalgunj	150 m	3,900 m
11	Kathmandu	1,400 m	1,400 m

Flights and possible delays

Simikot has a short runway at nearly 3,000 m, and flights operate only in clear morning conditions.

Flights and helicopter

Kathmandu to Nepalgunj by jet, one hour. Nepalgunj to Simikot by Twin Otter or Dornier at first light, landing on a 549 m runway at 2,910 m. Simikot to Hilsa by helicopter, twenty minutes over the gorges. Then a short road journey into Tibet. Every stage depends on the weather, and the two middle stages depend on it completely.

Simikot flight delays

Humla has no proper road connection to the rest of Nepal, so everything arrives by air. The aircraft are small, the airstrip is short and high, and pilots fly only in clear, calm morning conditions. Delays of one to three days happen in every season. We include a spare day for this and ask you to book a flexible ticket.

The Hilsa border crossing

Hilsa is at 3,640 m on the Karnali river, and the Chinese border post at Zherwa is across a bridge on the north bank. Formalities are thorough, bags are searched, and any political material about Tibet will be confiscated. It is a remote crossing with short opening hours, so we keep to the schedule.

Permits and visa processing

The Tibet Travel Permit takes eight or nine working days and cannot be applied for until the trip is paid. The Kathmandu group visa takes four more days, during which the embassy holds your passport. The Kailash permits are issued in Ngari on their own schedule. Eight weeks is the minimum and ten weeks is comfortable.

No helicopter rescue in Tibet

The helicopter that takes you to Hilsa is a Nepali charter and cannot cross into Tibet to collect a casualty. Once you are over the border, descent means travelling by vehicle on the road to Taklakot, and then crossing the same border during its opening hours. This is the most important difference between this trip and a trek in Nepal.

Accommodation

Where	Nights	Type	Room	Bathroom
Kathmandu	2	Three-star hotel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Nepalgunj	2	Business hotel	Twin or double	Private, air conditioned
Taklakot	3	Simple hotel	Twin	Private, hot water
Mansarovar	1	Lakeside guesthouse	Shared by two to four people	Shared, outside
Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk	2	Kora guesthouse	Shared by several people, mattress and quilt	Outside, no running water

Heating
In hotels only. None at Mansarovar or on the kora

Hot water
In Kathmandu, Nepalgunj and Taklakot only

Power
Mains power in the towns, with a Chinese adaptor after the border. None on the kora

Wifi
In Kathmandu and Nepalgunj. Do not expect any after Simikot

Oxygen
Bottled oxygen and a portable pressure chamber travel with the group throughout

Toilets
Western-style in the hotels, squat toilets outside from Mansarovar onwards

Baggage
About 15 kg on the Simikot flight and the helicopter, strictly enforced

Drinking water
Boiled and filtered by our crew, so no bottled water is needed after Kathmandu

Meals

Meal	Time	What it is like
Breakfast	5.30 to 7.00	Eggs, Tibetan bread, porridge and tea, served early on flying days
Lunch	Wherever the day reaches	Noodle soup, fried rice, or a packed lunch on the kora

Dinner	19.00	Dal bhat, momos, vegetable curry, with soup first at altitude
On the kora	Early and late	Our cook goes ahead, so hot soup is ready when you arrive at Dirapuk

Diet	How we manage it
Vegetarian	Vegetarian food is standard throughout, as is customary around the mountain
Vegan	Manageable, although butter tea and curd are very common. Tell us when you book
Jain	Can be arranged, including no root vegetables, with a month's notice
Gluten free	Rice and potatoes are easy to find, but Tibetan bread is not gluten-free. Bring your own food for the kora
Halal	Not reliably available beyond Nepalgunj. Vegetarian food is the practical option

A typical day

Time	What happens
5.00	Tea, and oxygen saturation measured and recorded
5.30	Early breakfast, because the mountain flights leave early
6.30	To the airstrip, or start walking
9.00	First rest stop, sheltered from the wind where possible
12.30	Lunch, packed on the kora days
15.00	Arrival on the shorter days, and time to rest
17.00	Second oxygen saturation check, and a short walk uphill
18.30	Soup, then dinner
19.30	Briefing on the next day's plan, including how the weather may affect it
21.00	Bed

Difficulty and preparation

Difficulty 4 of 5

A short trip that is demanding because it is short. There are three days of walking, and the ascent to altitude happens in a single day, which is the main difficulty.

- From 150 m to 3,900 m in a single day, on day four
- Three kora days: 12 km, then 22 km over a 5,630 m pass, then 12 km
- The pass day starts before dawn and lasts nine to ten hours
- Four nights above 3,900 m, two of them above 4,800 m
- Two nights in unheated shared guesthouses with outside toilets

- Flights that weather can delay for days, and no helicopter rescue beyond the border

Getting ready

4 months before: Build walking endurance
Walk for six hours on hills with a daypack. On this route, good fitness partly compensates for the speed of the ascent.

3 months before: Walk on consecutive days
Walk two or three long days in a row, because the kora is three consecutive days and the last one is the hardest on tired legs.

10 weeks before: See your doctor
This route gains altitude quickly. Discuss acetazolamide with your doctor, and tell them about any previous altitude sickness or any heart or lung conditions.

8 weeks before: Send us your passport details
This is the latest point at which the permits can be applied for with certainty.

1 month before: Test your boots and equipment
Walk in everything you plan to wear on the pass. Do not buy new boots after this point.

2 weeks before: Rest
Take shorter walks and get more sleep. Arriving well rested is more useful than more training.

Altitude and safety

This trip has the steepest altitude profile of any we run, and you should know this before you book. You sleep at 150 m on the third night and at 3,900 m on the fourth. This is not ideal, and it is the consequence of an eleven-day yatra. We take every available precaution: a full rest day at Taklakot before going higher, oxygen saturation measured and recorded morning and evening, bottled oxygen and a portable pressure chamber with the group at all times, descent to 3,900 m as soon as the kora finishes rather than another night at altitude, and a guide whose decision to send someone down is final. If you have had altitude sickness before, or have never been above 3,000 m, book the overland trip instead. It costs less, takes five days longer and is much easier on your body.

What to watch for

- A headache that does not improve with water, food and paracetamol
- No appetite when you should be hungry
- Broken sleep, and waking short of breath
- Dizziness, or feeling drunk without having had alcohol
- A cough that starts dry and becomes wet
- Loss of interest in the trip, which is often a warning sign
- Any loss of balance or coordination, which is an emergency and means descending immediately

How to prevent it

- Drink four litres of water a day, even when you do not feel thirsty
- Eat at every meal, even without appetite
- Use the Taklakot rest day to rest and acclimatise
- Consider an extra night at Simikot on the way in, which we can add

- No alcohol after Kathmandu, and no sleeping tablets
- Tell your guide immediately if something is wrong, not at dinner

What we do

1. A full rest day at Taklakot
At 3,900 m, with a short walk higher and a return to sleep, before anyone goes to the lake.

2. Daily health checks
From Taklakot onwards, oxygen saturation is measured twice a day and recorded, so that any decline is clearly identified.

3. Oxygen and pressure chamber
These travel with the group for treatment and descent, not to allow someone who is unwell to continue.

4. Descent to 3,900 m after the kora
We descend immediately rather than spending a fourth night above 4,500 m, as a shorter itinerary would.

5. The guide's decision is final
There is no helicopter rescue in Ngari, so decisions to descend are made earlier than they would be in Nepal.

Season

The season runs from May to September, with the clearest flying weather in May and September.

Month	Daytime at Darchen	Night-time at Darchen	Dawn on the Dolma La	Conditions	Note
January	-3°C	-20°C	-28°C	We do not run it	Guesthouses are closed, the pass is under snow, and the Simikot flights rarely operate.
February	-1°C	-18°C	-26°C	We do not run it	Similar to January, with slightly more daylight. The region remains closed.
March	3°C	-14°C	-22°C	We do not run it	Tibet usually closes to foreign visitors for the whole month, regardless of snow.
April	8°C	-9°C	-18°C	Hard	The region reopens before the Dolma La does. Spring haze in Humla makes flights unreliable.
May	13°C	-4°C	-13°C	Good	The season opens in mid-May, and flying conditions into Simikot are at their most settled.
June	17°C	0°C	-9°C	Best	Warm and busy on the kora. Pre-monsoon cloud begins to affect the Humla flights.
July	19°C	3°C	-6°C	Good	The warmest month on the plateau. The monsoon over Nepal causes delays on the Simikot flights.

August	18°C	3°C	-6°C	Good	Tibet remains mostly dry, while Nepal is at its wettest.
September	14°C	-2°C	-11°C	Best	Clear, cold and quieter, and flights become reliable again. Our recommended month for this route.
October	8°C	-9°C	-19°C	Hard	Good weather early in the month, then the pass closes without notice.
November	2°C	-15°C	-24°C	We do not run it	Closed. The kora would require mountaineering skills.
December	-2°C	-18°C	-27°C	We do not run it	Closed.

Averages for the Ngari prefecture. On this route the Nepali weather matters as much as the Tibetan: the monsoon does not reach Ngari but it does close Simikot.

Guides and porters

Your guide and crew

A Nepali leader travels with you from Kathmandu and back, and a licensed Tibetan guide meets the group at the border and, as required by law, stays with you until you leave Tibet. A cook and kitchen crew go ahead on the kora, so hot food is ready at Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk.

Vehicles in Tibet

Land Cruisers carry the group, and a support vehicle carries the baggage, food, oxygen and pressure chamber. The distances are short compared with the overland routes, but the vehicle is still the only way to bring someone down quickly if needed.

Yaks and horses on the kora

Loads are carried by yaks, arranged through the Darchen association, which shares the work among local families in turn. Your 10 kg allowance travels with them. A riding horse with a handler can be booked at Darchen the evening before the walk, and the payment goes to the same families.

Tipping

Tips are not included and are customary. About $90 to $140 per traveller covers the guide, the drivers and the kora crew on a trip of this length. We collect tips at the end and hand them over together, and we will tell you what a fair amount is.

Responsible travel

Respecting the pilgrimage

Almost everyone on the path is walking it for religious reasons. Walk clockwise unless you follow Bon. Ask before photographing anyone, and respect a refusal. At Shiva Tsal, where pilgrims leave clothing and hair, leave the ground as you found it.

Supporting local communities

Humla is one of the poorest districts in Nepal. Simikot has a short, busy season of Kailash travellers and little other income. We use local lodges and porters in Humla rather than flying a full crew in from Kathmandu, and we pay Kathmandu rates for the work.

Waste

We carry out everything we bring. There is no waste collection on the kora, and nothing decomposes at 5,000 m. Our crew carries out our rubbish and often other people's as well. Bring a refillable bottle, since we boil and filter water, and take your used batteries home.

Bathing at Lake Mansarovar

Do not use soap, shampoo or detergent in the lake, including biodegradable products. Pilgrims bathe briefly as a ritual and wash elsewhere. The lake is a source of drinking water and a sacred site for the people who live beside it.

Booking and payment

How to book

No Tibetan permits can be applied for until the itinerary is booked and paid for. We take a deposit and apply for everything, and your place is confirmed once the permits are issued. If the permits are not issued, we refund your payment in full.

Documents we need

A clear scan of your passport at least eight weeks before departure, valid for six months beyond the trip with two blank pages, and four passport photographs. Your occupation as you would write it on any official form. Details of any medication you take and any previous problems with altitude, which we will ask you about directly on this route.

Minimum group size for the visa

The Kathmandu group visa is issued only to a group of five or more who enter and leave China together. If there are two of you, we will place you on a scheduled departure. A private Express trip for fewer than five people is not possible, because the embassy will not issue the visa.

Flexible return flights

We ask all travellers on this trip to book a flexible ticket home. The Simikot flight is the least reliable in Nepal, and a delay can become very expensive if you hold a non-changeable international ticket two days after your scheduled return to Kathmandu.

Optional extras

Two extra nights in Kathmandu
from $180, 2 days
Recommended on this trip as a buffer against delays at the end.

A night at Simikot on the way in
from $150, 1 day
Sleeping at 2,910 m before Taklakot reduces the effect of the rapid altitude gain. We recommend it.

Priority helicopter seat

from $260

A seat on the first helicopter from Simikot when the group is split across two flights.

Chitwan afterwards

from $390, 3 days

Jungle and a warm climate, and it also makes your return date more flexible.

Single room where available

$220

In Kathmandu, Nepalgunj and Taklakot only. Not available at the lake or on the kora.

Frequently asked questions

Answers to the 22 questions travellers ask us most often. If your question is not here, contact us and we will answer it.

Why is this the shortest way to Kailash?

Because it avoids the drive across the plateau. The overland routes spend four days crossing western Tibet by road from Kerung or Lhasa. This route flies to the far north-west of Nepal, crosses the border by helicopter, and reaches Taklakot, twenty kilometres inside Tibet, on the fourth day. The approach is a fifth of the distance.

What is the disadvantage of the shorter itinerary?

Less time to acclimatise. On day three you sleep at 150 m in Nepalgunj. On day four you sleep at 3,900 m in Taklakot. This is a larger gain than any doctor would recommend, which is why day five is a compulsory rest day. This route suits travellers who are fit, who have been to high altitude before, or who have time to arrive in Nepal early and trek first.

How does it compare with your other Kailash journeys?

Overland by road in both directions takes sixteen days and is the easiest on the body. The route via Lhasa takes fourteen days and includes the monasteries. The route via Beijing is the most comfortable and the most expensive. This trip takes eleven days and is the most difficult for acclimatisation. It is designed for pilgrims who cannot take three weeks away.

Who should not book this trip?

Anyone who has had altitude sickness before, anyone over seventy without a recent high-altitude trip, anyone with heart or lung disease, and anyone who has never been above 3,000 m. This is not about fitness. It is about how quickly this itinerary gains height, and the overland trip is more suitable in all these cases.

How likely is the Simikot flight to be delayed?

Delays are common enough that we include a spare day for them. Simikot has a 549 m runway at nearly 3,000 m, and aircraft fly only in clear, calm morning conditions. Delays of one to three days happen every season, in both directions. Most trips lose no time. Some lose a day, and a few lose more.

What happens if I am delayed at Simikot on the return?

We provide your food and accommodation and immediately start arranging your onward flight. The itinerary includes one spare day for this. After that day, extra nights and any change to your airline booking are at your own cost, which is why we ask everyone to book an international flight that can be changed and to take out insurance for travel delay.

Is there a road instead of the helicopter?

Yes. A 51 km road and bridge were built from Simikot to the border in 2016. The road is rough, slow and prone to landslides, and the journey takes most of a day each way. We use the helicopter because it takes twenty minutes and because the road is not reliable during the season.

What is the baggage limit?

The limit is strict. The Simikot aircraft and the helicopter allow about 15 kg of checked baggage and a small daypack. Anything over the limit either stays in Nepalgunj or travels on a later flight if there is space. Pack for eleven days within the limit and leave everything else at your Kathmandu hotel, free of charge.

How hard is the kora itself?

The kora takes three days and covers 53 km, the same circuit that every Kailash pilgrim walks. The first day is twelve kilometres and gentle. The second is twenty-two kilometres over the Dolma La at 5,630 m, takes nine to ten hours and is very demanding. The third is twelve kilometres downhill and ends before lunch.

Can I take a horse?

On the first and third days, yes. A horse with a handler is arranged at Darchen for about $180 to $260. On the pass day, a horse can take you only as far as the terrain allows, and everyone walks the steep section above Shiva Tsal. Decide the evening before, because the horses are allocated in turn.

What if I cannot complete the circuit?

You return to Darchen with a crew member and rejoin the group when it completes the circuit. This decision is made at Dirapuk in the morning, before the pass, not partway up it. Nobody is carried over the Dolma La, and on this route in particular we prefer that someone stops early rather than continues.

How do you manage the altitude?

We include a rest day at Taklakot, measure and record your oxygen saturation twice a day, carry bottled oxygen and a portable pressure chamber with the group, and your guide's instruction to descend is final. We also take you down to Taklakot at 3,900 m as soon as the kora is finished, rather than keeping you at altitude for another night.

Is there a rescue helicopter in Tibet?

No, and this is especially important on this route. There is no helicopter evacuation anywhere in Ngari. Descent means travelling by vehicle and road, back the way you came, and the border at Hilsa may not be open at the time you need it. Your insurance must cover evacuation to 6,000 m, and we check your policy.

Should I take acetazolamide?

Ask your own doctor, early enough to try it at home first. Because this route gains height quickly, more travellers take it than on our other Kailash trips. It does not replace the rest day, drinking enough water, or telling your guide as soon as you have a headache.

What permits are needed?

The same four permits as any Kailash journey: a Tibet Travel Permit, an Alien's Travel Permit, a military permit and a foreign affairs permit, all arranged by us. In addition, you need the Chinese group visa issued in Kathmandu, which takes four working days and requires a group of at least five travelling together.

How far ahead do I need to book?

At least eight weeks. The Tibet Travel Permit takes eight or nine working days once the itinerary is paid for, and the Kailash area permits are issued in Ngari on their own schedule. With the group visa and the Simikot flight, which sells out in the season, two months is the realistic minimum.

When does this run?

From May to September. Outside these months the Dolma La has snow, the kora guesthouses close for the winter, and Tibet usually closes to foreign visitors for the whole of March. On this route, the Simikot flights are most reliable in the clear weeks of May and September.

Where do we sleep?

Hotels in Kathmandu and Nepalgunj, a simple hotel in Taklakot with heating and hot water, a lakeside guesthouse at Mansarovar, and two nights in kora guesthouses at Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk. The kora guesthouses have shared rooms with a mattress and quilt, no heating and an outside toilet.

What is the food like?

Vegetarian throughout, as is customary around the mountain. Dal bhat and Nepali food as far as Simikot, Tibetan and Chinese food beyond, and our own cook carries supplies for the kora. Appetite decreases at altitude, so we serve soup first and often, and make sure nobody skips a meal.

Can I charge a phone or get online?

In the hotels, yes, using a Chinese adaptor after the border. At Mansarovar and on the kora, no. Your Nepali SIM card stops working in Tibet, Chinese SIM cards have no coverage on the kora, and many common apps are blocked in China. Bring a battery pack and keep it inside your jacket, because the cold drains batteries quickly.

What should I pack that I might not think of?

Wind protection is more important than extra warmth, because the wind on the plateau is constant and dry. A four-season sleeping bag for the two kora nights. More sun cream and lip balm than you expect to need. A change of clothes in your daypack, because if the helicopter is delayed your duffel bag may be on a later flight.

What if the permit is refused or the border closes?

If this happens before departure, we refund everything you have paid us, and where dates allow we offer you the overland trip instead. If a border closure leaves the group inside Tibet, we bring you out through the other crossing at our own cost.

Photos, videos and reviews of this trip: earthbound.rajansimkhada.com/kailash-express