

Earthbound Expeditions

Overland Kailash Yatra, by Road Both Ways

16 days, from US$2,767 per person

Duration **16 days**	Grade **Moderate to 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 20**
Getting there **Land Cruiser**		

Overland Kailash Yatra, by Road Both Ways Overview

The traditional pilgrim route to Kailash and Mansarovar, by road in both directions, gaining height gradually to make the plateau easier on your body.

Tour overview

Before there were flights to Lhasa, everyone who reached Kailash from the south walked or drove the Kerung road, and most Nepali and Indian pilgrims still use it. The main advantage remains the same: you climb from 1,400 m to 4,640 m over six days rather than ninety minutes, and arrive at the mountain with your body better adjusted to the altitude.

Mount Kailash and its four faiths

Kailash is a 6,638 m peak of dark rock in the far west of Tibet. It has never been climbed, because climbing it is not permitted. Hindus regard it as the abode of Shiva. Buddhists place Demchok on its summit. Jains believe that Rishabhadeva attained liberation here. Followers of Bon walk around it in the opposite direction. The path around the mountain is shared by all four faiths.

The three-day kora

The kora is fifty-three kilometres, starting and ending at Darchen. The first day runs north up the Lha Chu valley below the west face to Dirapuk, twelve gentle kilometres. The second crosses the Dolma La at 5,630 m and is long, cold and demanding. The third descends the Zhong Chu valley to the plain, twelve kilometres, and finishes by lunchtime.

Why the altitude makes it demanding

None of the journey is technical, and no section is steep for long. The difficulty is that even the easiest day is higher than the summit of Mont Blanc. Everything takes longer, sleep is poor, appetite decreases and small problems can become serious. The trip is planned around the altitude rather than the distances.

Key highlights of the Overland Kailash Yatra, by Road Both Ways

- Two days by road from Kathmandu to the plateau, the most gradual way to reach 4,600 m on any route
- A rest day at Kerung before the main altitude gain
- Sunrise and a holy bath at Lake Mansarovar, at 4,590 m the highest freshwater lake in the world
- The 53 km kora of Mount Kailash over the Dolma La, walked in three days
- A reserve day for weather, illness or a second morning at the lake

Itinerary

Day	Route	Hours	Distance	Altitude
1	Arrive Kathmandu	-	-	1,400 m
2	Kathmandu, temples and paperwork	-	-	1,400 m
3	Kathmandu to Timure	7 to 8	150 km	1,900 m
4	Rasuwagadhi border to Kerung	3 to 4	35 km	2,800 m
5	Kerung, acclimatisation	2 to 3	6 km	2,800 m

6	Kerung to Saga	5 to 6	230 km	4,640 m
7	Saga to Lake Mansarovar	8 to 9	470 km	4,590 m
8	Mansarovar to Darchen	2	40 km	4,575 m
9	Yam Dwar to Dirapuk	5 to 6	12 km	4,900 m
10	Dirapuk to Zuthulpuk over the Dolma La	9 to 10	22 km	4,835 m
11	Zuthulpuk to Darchen, then Hor Qu	4 to 5	12 km	4,560 m
12	Spare day at the lake	-	-	4,560 m
13	Hor Qu to Saga	8 to 9	460 km	4,640 m
14	Saga to Kerung	5 to 6	230 km	2,800 m
15	Kerung to Kathmandu	8 to 9	185 km	1,400 m
16	Fly home	-	-	1,400 m

Day 1

Arrive in Kathmandu

We meet you at the airport and take you to your hotel. The afternoon is free to rest after your flight. In the evening we explain the route, the permits and the altitude, and check your equipment, because what is suitable for the Khumbu is not always enough on the plateau.

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

Day 2

Kathmandu sightseeing and group visa

A morning visit to Pashupatinath and Boudhanath, where many pilgrims begin their journey. Your passport is at the Chinese Embassy for the group visa, so this day in Kathmandu is essential. We hire any equipment you are missing in Thamel and repack your belongings into one duffel bag and one daypack.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: Easy walking, 2–3 hrs Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 3

Drive to Timure

Drive north out of the Kathmandu Valley and up the Trishuli valley, on a road that changes from tarmac to gravel and is often damaged by the monsoon. It is a long day in the vehicle for the distance covered. Timure lies in the gorge below Rasuwagadhi, and you spend the first night here at a relatively low altitude.

Altitude: 1,900 m On foot: None, 7–8 hr drive Night: Guesthouse, Timure Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 4

Cross the border at Rasuwagadhi and drive to Kerung

Complete Nepali exit formalities at the bridge, then Chinese immigration, which is thorough and slow. Bags are opened. Books about Tibet and images of the Dalai Lama are confiscated, so do not bring them. After the border post, the road climbs steeply through pine forest to Kerung, gaining nearly a kilometre in an hour.

Altitude: 2,800 m On foot: None, 3–4 hr drive Night: Hotel, Kerung Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 5

Acclimatisation day in Kerung

An important day for acclimatisation. We walk for an hour or two up the side valley behind the town and return to sleep lower down. From here onwards, your guide measures everyone's oxygen saturation morning and evening and records it, so that any decline is noticed early.

Altitude: 2,800 m On foot: 2 to 3 hours Night: Hotel, Kerung Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 6

Drive from Kerung to Saga

The road climbs above the tree line and over the Kongtang La, and from here the landscape is high, brown and vast. Saga is a garrison and lorry town rather than a destination, and it is where most people first feel the altitude. Drink more than you feel you need and eat more than you want to.

Altitude: 4,640 m On foot: None, 5–6 hr drive Night: Hotel, Saga Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 7

Drive from Saga to Lake Mansarovar

The longest drive of the trip, heading west along the Brahmaputra and then away from it, past nomad camps and salt lakes in open country. Late in the day, Gurla Mandhata comes into view on the left, followed by Lake Mansarovar.

Altitude: 4,590 m On foot: None, 8–9 hr drive Night: Guesthouse, Mansarovar Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 8

Lake Mansarovar and drive to Darchen

Sunrise on the lakeshore, which is the reason we stay here overnight. Those who wish to bathe do so briefly, because the water is only a few degrees above freezing. We drive along part of the lakeshore, see Lake Rakshastal, and reach Darchen in the afternoon to organise the loads for the kora.

Altitude: 4,575 m On foot: None, 2 hr drive Night: Hotel, Darchen Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 9

Drive to Yam Dwar and trek to Dirapuk, first day of the kora

A short drive to Yam Dwar, the gate where the walking begins. The valley turns north, with the south face of Kailash above you for most of the afternoon. It is twelve kilometres on a good path with little ascent; the only difficulty is the altitude of around 4,500 metres.

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

Day 10

Trek over the Dolma La to Zuthulpuk

The most demanding day of the trip. We leave before first light and climb the moraine to Shiva Tsal, where pilgrims leave personal items, then make the long ascent to the Dolma La at 5,630 m, which is covered in prayer flags. The descent to the valley floor is steep and loose, and the final hours are flat and very long.

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

Day 11

Trek from Zuthulpuk to Darchen and drive to Lake Mansarovar

An easy final morning down the gorge, past Milarepa's cave, until the valley opens onto the Barkha plain where the vehicles wait. The circuit is complete by early afternoon. We drive east to the lakeshore, which is lower than Darchen, so everyone sleeps better.

Altitude: 4,560 m On foot: 4 to 5 hours, 12 km Night: Guesthouse, Hor Qu Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 12

Reserve day

This day is kept in reserve. It is used if the pass was closed by snow, if someone needed a slower day, or if a vehicle broke down on the plateau. If it is not needed, you have a second morning at Mansarovar and a restful afternoon.

Altitude: 4,560 m On foot: Optional 2–3 hrs Night: Guesthouse, Hor Qu Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 13

Drive back east to Saga

We drive back along the same road in the other direction. Most people sleep for much of the drive. After a week at higher altitude, Saga feels relatively low.

Altitude: 4,640 m On foot: None, 8–9 hr drive Night: Hotel, Saga Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 14

Drive from Saga to Kerung

We cross the Kongtang La again and descend into the forest. Kerung, at 2,800 m, has a milder climate after a week on the plateau, and most people's appetite returns here.

Altitude: 2,800 m On foot: None, 5–6 hr drive Night: Hotel, Kerung Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 15

Drive from Kerung to Kathmandu

Complete the Chinese exit formalities at the border, which can take some time, then cross the bridge at Rasuwagadhi to Nepali immigration. The road down the Trishuli valley is rough, green and warm. We reach Kathmandu in the evening, where you can have dinner wherever you choose.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, 8–9 hr drive Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 16

Departure

After a late breakfast and a free morning, we take you to the airport in time for your flight. If you are staying longer, we can arrange a few days in Chitwan or Pokhara, where the warm lowlands are a welcome change after the plateau.

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

What's included

- All 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
- Three nights in Kathmandu and all accommodation in Tibet, twin share
- Full board from dinner on day one to breakfast on day sixteen, vegetarian throughout
- Land Cruisers with drivers and a support truck for the whole plateau crossing
- A licensed Tibetan guide for the whole time you are in the region, and a Nepali leader from Kathmandu
- Bottled oxygen and a portable pressure chamber, carried in the support vehicle
- A yak or porter allowance of 10 kg per person for the three kora days
- All transport from Kathmandu to the border and back

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 if required
- Lunches and dinners in Kathmandu other than those listed
- Tips for the guide, the drivers and the kora crew
- Any costs arising from a border closure, a permit refusal or weather, which are outside anyone's control

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, or three for urgent processing. Issued to a group of five or more, who must enter and leave China together.	$51 for most nationalities, $140 for US citizens	Chinese Embassy, Kathmandu
Alien's Travel Permit. Required throughout the Ngari prefecture, unlike some other parts of Tibet.	CNY 50, inside the trip price	Public Security Bureau, Shigatse or Ngari
Military area permit. Western Tibet borders India and Nepal, so this permit is separate from the travel permit.	Inside the trip price	Tibet Military Command
Kailash area and kora fee. Collected at Darchen before the kora 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 by the agency once the itinerary is paid
Alien's Travel Permit	$8	CNY 50, and still required throughout Ngari
Military and foreign affairs permits	$60–100	Ngari is a border-sensitive zone
Kailash and Mansarovar area fees	$180–240	Ngari prefecture entry and the Darchen kora fee
Kathmandu to the border by road	$90–140	Two days of vehicle hire, and the night at Timure
Land Cruiser and support truck	$520–720 a head	Eleven days of vehicle hire on the plateau, with drivers

Licensed Tibetan guide	$45–60 a day	Compulsory for the whole time you are in the region
Hotels in Kerung, Saga and Darchen	$45–95 a night	Simple and heated, usually with hot water
Guesthouses on the kora	$25–40 a night	Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk, shared rooms, no heating
Full board, vegetarian	$30–45 a day	Our own cook and supplies on the plateau
Oxygen and a pressure chamber	$60–90 a head	Carried in the support vehicle. Essential on this route
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. There is no helicopter rescue in Ngari
Tips, guide and drivers	$120–180	Per traveller, collected and handed over at the end

Packing list

One duffel and one daypack

The truck carries a duffel bag of up to 20 kg for you from Kathmandu and back. On the three kora days you carry a daypack and 10 kg goes by yak, so pack your duffel with the kora in mind: the things you need at Dirapuk should be easy to find without unpacking everything. Anything you do not need in Tibet can be left at your hotel in Kathmandu free of charge.

For the pass

- Windproof hooded shell, which is more important here than a heavier fleece
- Insulated jacket for the pre-dawn start
- Warm hat, a buff for the dust and wind, and liner gloves under thicker gloves
- Walking poles, which are very useful on the loose descent

Walking

- Worn-in boots with ankle support
- Three pairs of good walking socks
- A 30-litre daypack for the kora days
- Water bottles holding two litres, insulated if possible

Sleeping

- Four-season sleeping bag, comfort-rated to about minus ten
- Silk or cotton liner
- Earplugs, because the kora guesthouses have shared rooms

- Headtorch and a spare set of batteries

Sun and wind

- Category 4 sunglasses
- Factor 50 sun cream and high-factor lip balm, in generous quantities
- Sun hat with a brim, and a scarf for the dust
- Moisturiser, because the plateau is extremely dry

Health

- Your own medication in its original packaging, with the prescription
- Acetazolamide if your doctor agrees
- Rehydration salts, blister plasters, paracetamol and ibuprofen
- Your usual motion sickness remedy, for the road through Nepal

Documents

- Passport valid for six months with two blank pages
- Four passport photographs
- Insurance certificate showing cover to 6,000 m and evacuation
- Photocopies of all documents, kept separately from the originals

Useful

- Battery pack, kept warm inside your jacket
- Chinese plug adaptor
- Cash in small notes for tips, the horse and the guesthouses
- A refillable bottle, as our crew boils and filters water

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	Timure	1,900 m	1,900 m
4	Kerung	2,800 m	2,800 m
5	Kerung	2,800 m	3,100 m
6	Saga	4,640 m	5,236 m
7	Mansarovar	4,590 m	4,750 m
8	Darchen	4,575 m	4,600 m
9	Dirapuk	4,900 m	4,900 m
10	Zuthulpuk	4,835 m	5,630 m

11	Hor Qu	4,560 m	4,835 m
12	Hor Qu	4,560 m	4,560 m
13	Saga	4,640 m	5,216 m
14	Kerung	2,800 m	5,236 m
15	Kathmandu	1,400 m	2,800 m
16	Kathmandu	1,400 m	1,400 m

Travel, permits and visas

Two days by road to the border, a crossing that takes a morning, and permits that take two months to arrange.

Getting to Kathmandu

Fly into Tribhuvan International Airport. Most travellers connect through Delhi, Doha, Dubai, Istanbul, Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur and arrive in the afternoon. Arrive a day early if you can. The itinerary has no spare time before the border, and luggage that arrives a day late becomes a serious problem by day three.

Kathmandu to the border by road

Timure is about 150 km away, and the drive takes most of a day. The Pasang Lhamu highway is tarmac as far as Trishuli, and after that a narrow mountain road shared with lorries, slower after rain. We stop at Timure rather than continuing to the border, to keep the driving time reasonable and to sleep lower on the first night.

The Rasuwagadhi border crossing

Nepali exit stamps are issued on one side of the Friendship Bridge and Chinese entry on the other, and the Chinese checks are thorough. Bags are searched by hand. Books about Tibet, images of the Dalai Lama and anything the officer considers political will be confiscated and not returned. Do not bring any of these, and allow the whole morning.

Permit processing time

The Tibet Travel Permit takes eight or nine working days and is issued only for an itinerary that has already been paid for. The group visa takes a further four days, during which the embassy holds your passport. The Kailash area permits are issued by the Ngari authorities on their own schedule, so allow two months in total.

No helicopter rescue in Ngari

In Nepal, a serious altitude case can be flown to Kathmandu within hours. In western Tibet, no such service is available at any price. Descent is by vehicle on the road you came in on, and the nearest suitable hospital is a day away. This is the reason for the rest day, the oxygen and the pressure chamber.

Accommodation

Where	Nights	Type	Room	Bathroom
Kathmandu	3	Three-star hotel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Timure	1	Border guesthouse	Twin	Private, hot water when the power supply allows

Kerung	3	Simple hotel	Twin	Private, hot water
Saga	2	Simple hotel	Twin	Private, intermittent hot water
Mansarovar and Hor Qu	3	Lakeside guesthouse	Shared by two to four people	Shared, outside
Darchen	1	Simple hotel	Twin	Private, hot water
Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk	2	Kora guesthouse	Shared by several people, mattress and quilt	Outside, no running water

Heating
In the hotels only. None at Dirapuk or Zuthulpuk

Hot water
Reliable in Kathmandu, Kerung and Darchen, sometimes in Saga, never on the kora

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

Wifi
Slow wifi in the hotels in Kerung and Saga. None beyond Darchen

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

Laundry
In Kathmandu and Kerung only

Drinking water
Boiled and filtered by our crew, so you do not need bottled water after Kathmandu

Meals

Meal	Time	What it is like
Breakfast	6.00 to 7.00	Tibetan bread, eggs, porridge, tsampa, and flasks of tea
Lunch	On the road	Noodle soup at a roadside restaurant, or a packed lunch where none is available
Dinner	19.00	Dal bhat, momos, fried rice, vegetable curry, with soup first at altitude
On the kora	Early and late	Our own cook goes ahead, so hot soup is ready when you arrive at Dirapuk

Diet	How we manage it
Vegetarian	Vegetarian food is standard throughout, by custom around the mountain rather than by our rule
Vegan	Straightforward, although butter tea and curd are very common, so tell us when you book

Jain	Can be arranged, including no root vegetables, if you tell us at least a month ahead
Gluten free	Rice and potatoes are easy to find, but Tibetan bread is not gluten-free. Bring your own food for the kora days
Halal	Not reliably available on the plateau. Vegetarian food throughout is the practical option

A typical day

Time	What happens
5.30	Tea at your door, and oxygen saturation measured and recorded
6.00	Breakfast, and bags loaded onto the truck
7.00	Driving or walking, depending on the day
9.00	First stop, on the plateau wherever there is shelter from the wind
12.30	Lunch, at a roadside restaurant or a packed lunch
15.00	Arrival on driving days, and rest before the evening
17.00	Second oxygen saturation check, and a walk up the slope near our accommodation
18.30	Soup, then dinner
19.30	Briefing on the next day: distances, timings and the weather forecast
21.00	Bed. Rest is essential at this altitude

Difficulty and preparation

Difficulty 4 of 5

Long days in a vehicle and three days of walking, one of them demanding. No technical sections; the altitude is the main difficulty.

- 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
- Eight consecutive nights above 4,500 m
- Driving days of eight or nine hours on the plateau
- Two nights in unheated guesthouses with shared rooms and outside toilets
- No helicopter rescue anywhere in the region

Getting ready

4 months before: Build walking endurance
Walk for six hours on hills carrying a daypack. Endurance matters more than speed on this trip.

3 months before: Walk on consecutive days
Walk two long days in a row, then a third. The kora is three consecutive days, and tiredness shows most on the third.

2 months before: Hill walks with height gain
Take walks that climb 800 m in a session. If you have access to high altitude, use it.

6 weeks before: See your doctor
Have a medical check if you are over sixty or have a history of blood pressure, heart or lung problems. Discuss acetazolamide with your doctor.

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

2 weeks before: Reduce training
Take shorter walks and get more sleep. Arriving well rested helps you more on the Dolma La than another long training walk.

Altitude and safety

This journey spends eight days above 4,500 m and crosses 5,630 m once. This is the main difficulty of the trip. Travelling overland is the best protection available: you climb by road over six days, sleep twice at 2,800 m, and reach the plateau already partly acclimatised. Our other measures are straightforward. Your oxygen saturation is measured twice a day and recorded, so that any change is clearly visible. Oxygen and a portable pressure chamber travel with the group. The reserve day means nobody has to cross the pass on a day when they are unwell. Most importantly, we ask you to accept before you book that if the guide tells you to descend, you descend, and this decision is not open to discussion.

What to watch for

- A headache that does not improve with water, food and paracetamol
- Nausea, or no appetite when you should be hungry
- Poor 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

How to prevent it

- Drink four litres of water a day, even when you do not feel thirsty
- Eat even when you have no appetite, because your body needs the energy to adjust
- Walk up the slope near each stop, then come back down to sleep
- No alcohol on the plateau, and no sleeping tablets
- Tell your guide immediately if something is wrong, not at dinner or at the end of the day
- Use the rest day to rest and acclimatise

What we do

1. Gradual ascent by road
Six days from 1,400 m to 4,640 m, rather than ninety minutes to 3,656 m by air.

2. Two nights at Kerung
At 2,800 m, with a walk higher and a return to sleep lower, before the plateau.

3. Daily health checks
Oxygen saturation is measured and recorded morning and evening from Kerung onwards, so that any decline over several days is visible.

4. Oxygen and pressure chamber
Carried in the truck for treatment and descent, not to allow someone who is unwell to continue.

5. The guide's decision is final
If you are told to descend, you descend. There is no helicopter rescue here to provide another option.

Season

The season runs from May to September. The route is closed for the rest of the year, for two different reasons.

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	The kora guesthouses are closed and the pass is under deep snow.
February	-1°C	-18°C	-26°C	We do not run it	Similar to January.
March	3°C	-14°C	-22°C	We do not run it	Tibet usually closes to foreign visitors for the whole month, in addition to the snow.
April	8°C	-9°C	-18°C	Hard	The region reopens before the pass does. There is snow on the Dolma La into May.
May	13°C	-4°C	-13°C	Good	The season starts around mid-May once the pass can be walked. Cold and quiet.
June	17°C	0°C	-9°C	Best	Warm and settled, and the busiest weeks of the year around Saga Dawa.
July	19°C	3°C	-6°C	Best	The warmest month. Cloud builds over the Himalaya, but Ngari remains mostly dry.
August	18°C	3°C	-6°C	Best	Similar to July, with more cloud. The road through Nepal is at its roughest after weeks of rain.
September	14°C	-2°C	-11°C	Best	Clear, cold and less crowded. Our recommended month.
October	8°C	-9°C	-19°C	Hard	The first days of the month can be excellent. The pass closes at some point during the month, without warning.
November	2°C	-15°C	-24°C	We do not run it	Closed. It is cold enough that the kora would require mountaineering skills.

December	-2°C	-18°C	-27°C	We do not run it	Closed.

Averages for the Ngari prefecture. The season shuts at both ends for different reasons: snow on the Dolma La, and an administrative closure of the region in March.

Guides and porters

Your guide and crew

A Nepali leader travels with you from Kathmandu and back, and a licensed Tibetan guide joins at Kerung and, as required by law, stays with the group for the whole time it is in the region. On the kora, a cook and kitchen crew go ahead to the guesthouses so that hot food is ready at Dirapuk.

Vehicles

Land Cruisers carry four people per vehicle, and a truck follows with the baggage, food, fuel, oxygen and pressure chamber. The drivers are Tibetan and have driven this road for many years. They are also the people who will take you down quickly if needed.

Yaks, horses and handlers

Loads on the kora are carried by yaks, arranged through the Darchen yak and horse association, which shares the work among local families in turn. Your 10 kg allowance travels with them. If you want a riding horse and handler, we book it at Darchen the evening before, and the payment goes to the same families.

Tipping

Tips are customary and not included. About $120 to $180 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

Most people on the path are walking it for religious reasons. Walk clockwise, as Hindus, Buddhists and Jains do, 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.

Waste

We carry out everything we bring. There is no waste collection on the kora, and anything left at 5,000 m remains for years. Our crew carries out our rubbish and usually a good deal of other people's as well. Bring a refillable bottle rather than bottled water, and take your used batteries home.

Bathing at Lake Mansarovar

Never use soap, shampoo or detergent in the lake, including biodegradable products. If you bathe, do so as pilgrims do and wash elsewhere afterwards. For the people who live beside it, the lake is a source of drinking water, a sacred site and an ecosystem.

Supporting local communities

Less of your money stays in Nepal than on our other trips. Tibetan permits, vehicles, guides and accommodation are paid in China at rates set there. In Nepal, we employ our own leader, use hotels in Kathmandu and Timure, and employ the kitchen crew, all paid at our usual rates.

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.

Documents we need

A clear scan of your passport at least eight weeks before departure, valid for six months beyond the trip and with two blank pages. Four passport photographs. Your occupation, as you would write it on any official form, and details of any medication you take. Journalists, diplomats and photographers should contact us before booking.

Minimum group size for the visa

At least five travellers must be on one visa, entering and leaving China together. If there are two of you, we will place you on a scheduled departure with other travellers, which is usually easy to arrange in the season. A private overland trip for fewer than five people is not possible.

Refund if the permit is refused

We refund everything you have paid us. Refusals are rare, are made without explanation and are not your responsibility, so we do not keep a deposit in these cases.

Optional extras

Inner kora at Nandi
from $240, 1 day
By custom, only for pilgrims who have already completed thirteen koras. We arrange it for those who have.

Two nights in Lhasa on the way home
from $420, 2 days
Fly from Ngari Gunsa to Lhasa and on to Kathmandu, instead of driving back.

Saga Dawa departure
+$200 on the price
The full moon festival at Tarboche, and the busiest days of the year on the kora.

Chitwan on the way home
from $390, 3 days
Jungle and a warm climate at 150 m, which is a welcome change after the plateau.

Single room where available
$260
Available in Kathmandu, Kerung, Saga and Darchen. Not available on the kora.

Frequently asked questions

Answers to the 24 questions travellers ask us most often. If your question is not here, contact us and we will answer it.

Why drive both ways instead of flying to Lhasa?

Mainly for acclimatisation, and also for cost. Flying to Lhasa takes you to 3,656 m in ninety minutes. Driving from Kathmandu takes you to 1,900 m on the first night and 2,800 m on the second and third, and reaches 4,640 m only on the sixth day. This gradual profile is much better for your body. It is also less expensive, because you do not need a one-way international flight.

How does this differ from your other Kailash journeys?

We offer four routes to Kailash. This one travels by road in both directions and is the slowest, with the most gradual ascent. The route via Lhasa flies in and drives out, and includes the monasteries of the Tibetan capital. The route via Beijing travels through China with time in cities at each end and is the most expensive. The Express uses Simikot and a helicopter; it is the shortest route and the most demanding for acclimatisation.

Why does the trip take sixteen days?

Two of the sixteen days involve very little travel: the rest day at Kerung and the reserve day after the kora. Both are there to protect your health at altitude. Sixteen days is the time needed for an overland Kailash journey without rushing the ascent.

How hard is the kora?

The kora takes three days and covers 53 km in total, on paths with no climbing. The second day is the most demanding: nine to ten hours, twenty-two kilometres, over the Dolma La at 5,630 m. Nobody finds it easy. Fit walkers who have acclimatised well complete it; those who arrive tired and dehydrated often do not.

Can I ride a horse on the kora?

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 carry you only part of the way, because the ground above Shiva Tsal is loose and steep and everyone walks the final section. Book the evening before, not on the morning.

What happens if I cannot finish the kora?

You return the way you came to Darchen with a crew member and wait for the group, which usually means one extra night. Nobody is carried over the Dolma La. Turning back on the first day is straightforward, but turning back on the pass day is not, which is why the decision is made at Dirapuk in the morning rather than partway up.

What permits do I need, and how long do they take?

Four permits, none of which can be obtained individually: a Tibet Travel Permit from the Tourism Bureau, an Alien's Travel Permit, a military permit and a foreign affairs permit, all arranged by us once the itinerary is paid. In addition, you need the Chinese group visa issued in Kathmandu. We ask for passport scans at least eight weeks before departure.

Why does the visa need a group?

The Kathmandu group visa is issued to a group rather than an individual, and the embassy will not issue one to fewer than five travellers. Everyone on it must enter and leave China together, at the same crossing, on the same itinerary. This is the most common reason that small private Kailash trips cannot go ahead.

I already have a Chinese visa. Is that enough?

Not for entering Tibet from Nepal. The embassy in Kathmandu issues a separate group visa on a separate sheet, and obtaining it usually cancels the tourist visa already in your passport. If you hold one and want to keep it, tell us before you book so that we can discuss a route through China instead.

How high does the trip go, and how quickly?

The highest point is the Dolma La at 5,630 m, crossed on the tenth day. The highest place you sleep is Dirapuk at 4,900 m. From Kathmandu at 1,400 m the ascent is spread over nine days, with a rest day at Kerung and a long, gradual climb by road, which is as gradual as any route to Kailash.

Is there a rescue helicopter?

No. There is no helicopter evacuation in the Ngari region of Tibet, and this is the main difference between this trip and a trek in Nepal. Anyone who needs to descend does so by vehicle on the road, and the nearest well-equipped hospital is a long way away. This is why we carry oxygen and a pressure chamber, and why the rest day is compulsory.

Should I take acetazolamide?

Many pilgrims take it and it helps, but you should discuss it with your own doctor. It does not replace the measures that work: gaining height slowly, drinking more than you feel you need, eating even when you have no appetite, and telling your guide immediately if you feel unwell, not at dinner.

When does this trip run?

From May to September only. The Dolma La has snow into May and closes again in October, the kora guesthouses close for the winter, and Tibet usually closes to foreign visitors for the whole of March. June to September is the most settled period, and September is our recommended month for clear air and smaller crowds.

What is Saga Dawa, and should I go then?

Saga Dawa is the full moon of the fourth Tibetan month, when the flagpole at Tarboche is lowered and raised again and thousands of pilgrims walk the kora together. It is a remarkable occasion, but it is crowded, beds are scarce, and the plateau is at its busiest. Decide in advance whether you want the festival or a quieter visit.

Where do we sleep?

Hotels in Kathmandu, Kerung, Saga and Darchen, which are simple but heated and usually have hot water. The two nights on the kora, at Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk, are in guesthouses with shared rooms, a mattress and quilt, no heating and an outside toilet. They are very basic, and there is no alternative accommodation.

What is the food like?

Vegetarian throughout, by custom rather than by rule, and of good quality. Nepali dal bhat on both sides of the border, Tibetan noodle soup and momos, and Chinese vegetable dishes and rice in the towns. We bring our own cook and supplies for the plateau, because little food is available in Saga at short notice.

Can I swim in Lake Mansarovar?

No. Pilgrims bathe briefly as a ritual. The water is only a few degrees above freezing at 4,590 m, so full immersion is a real shock to a body already under strain at altitude. Follow the example of the pilgrims around you: bathe quickly and respectfully, and have dry clothes ready.

What are the road conditions like?

The Tibetan side is mostly good tarmac and covers long distances, so the long days are tiring but not rough. The Nepali side, between Kathmandu and the border, is rough, and after a heavy monsoon it can be very rough. Bring medication for motion sickness if you need it.

What should I bring that I would not need on an Everest trek?

Wind protection above all. The plateau is dry and open and the wind is constant, so a windproof shell, a buff and good lip protection are more important than an extra fleece. You also need a four-season sleeping bag for the kora guesthouses, and much more sun cream than the temperatures suggest.

Can I charge my devices?

In the hotels, yes, with a Chinese plug adaptor. On the kora, no. Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk have no reliable power, so bring a battery pack and keep it warm inside your jacket, because the cold drains batteries quickly.

What about phones and the internet?

Your Nepali SIM card stops working at the border. Chinese SIM cards work in the towns but not on the kora, and many common Western apps are blocked in China unless you arrange access before you arrive. Most travellers spend the eight days on the plateau largely offline.

What if the border is closed?

Rasuwagadhi has closed in the past because of landslides, festivals and politics, sometimes without notice. If it closes before departure, we move you to the Lhasa route where seats are available, or refund you in full. If it closes while we are in Tibet, we leave through the other crossing at our own cost.

What happens if the permit is refused?

We refund your payment. Permits are occasionally refused without explanation, and journalists and people with certain stamps in their passports are refused more often. We do not keep deposits when a refusal is not your responsibility.

How far ahead should I book?

At least two months ahead, and three for the June and Saga Dawa departures. The Tibet Travel Permit alone takes eight or nine working days once the itinerary is paid for, the group visa another four, and every Kailash group in Nepal applies to the same office during the same short season.

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