

Earthbound Expeditions

Kailash Yatra via Beijing and Lhasa

18 days, from US$3,890 per person

Duration
18 days

Grade
Moderate to strenuous

Max altitude
5,630 m

Start and end
Beijing to Lhasa

On the trail
5 to 10 hours a day

Best season
May to Sep

Accommodation
Hotels and guesthouses

Meals
Full board, vegetarian

Group size
2 to 16

Getting there
Fly or train to Lhasa

Kailash Yatra via Beijing and Lhasa Overview

Kailash reached through China: Beijing, the railway or a flight to Lhasa, the monasteries, and then the long road west to the mountain.

Tour overview

Most pilgrims reach Kailash from Kathmandu. This journey travels through Beijing and Lhasa instead, for two practical reasons. It uses an ordinary Chinese visa obtained at home rather than the group visa issued in Kathmandu, which ties five travellers to one document. It also gives you three nights at 3,656 m in a city with hospitals and hotels before the demanding part of the trip begins.

Three nights in Lhasa

The three nights in Lhasa are central to the trip. You visit the Potala, the Jokhang with pilgrims prostrating at its door, Drepung on the hillside and the debating courtyard at Sera. This is also where your body acclimatises for the plateau, which is why the arrival day has no activities planned.

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 forbidden. Hindus know it as the abode of Shiva, Buddhists place Demchok on its summit, Jains hold that Rishabhadeva was liberated here, and Bon practitioners walk the circuit anticlockwise while everyone else walks clockwise.

The three-day kora

The kora is fifty three kilometres from Darchen and back. You walk north below the west face to Dirapuk, cross the Dolma La at 5,630 m on the long second day, and descend the Zhong Chu valley to the plain on the third. None of it is technical. The difficulty comes from the altitude, and two weeks of gradual approach is the best preparation.

Key highlights of the Kailash Yatra via Beijing and Lhasa

- Two days in Beijing, including the Forbidden City, on the way to a Tibetan pilgrimage
- The option of the Qinghai Tibet railway, which crosses the Tanggula Pass at 5,072 m in oxygen-enriched carriages
- Three nights in Lhasa at 3,656 m: the Potala, the Jokhang, Drepung and Sera
- The classic overland drive west through Shigatse and Saga to Lake Mansarovar
- The full 53 km kora of Mount Kailash over the Dolma La

Itinerary

Day	Route	Hours	Distance	Altitude
1	Fly to Beijing	-	-	44 m
2	Beijing, the Forbidden City	-	-	44 m
3	Beijing to Lhasa, air or rail	4 or 40	-	3,656 m
4	Lhasa, arrival and rest	-	-	3,656 m
5	Potala and Jokhang	2 to 3	-	3,656 m

6	Drepung and Sera	2	-	3,656 m
7	Lhasa to Shigatse	6 to 8	350 km	3,840 m
8	Shigatse to Saga	8 to 9	450 km	4,640 m
9	Saga to Lake Mansarovar	8 to 9	470 km	4,590 m
10	Mansarovar to Darchen	2	40 km	4,575 m
11	Yam Dwar to Dirapuk	5 to 6	12 km	4,900 m
12	Dirapuk to Zuthulpuk over the Dolma La	9 to 10	22 km	4,835 m
13	Zuthulpuk to Darchen, then Hor Qu	4 to 5	12 km	4,560 m
14	Spare day at the lake	-	-	4,560 m
15	Hor Qu to Saga	8 to 9	460 km	4,640 m
16	Saga to Shigatse	8 to 9	450 km	3,840 m
17	Shigatse to Lhasa	5 to 6	280 km	3,656 m
18	Fly out of Lhasa	-	-	3,656 m

Day 1

Fly to Beijing

You fly from Kathmandu or Delhi to Beijing, where we meet you and take you to your hotel. There are no activities planned today. If your flight lands late, the programme begins tomorrow and there is no early start.

Altitude: 44 m On foot: None, arrival day Night: Hotel, Beijing Meals: Dinner

Day 2

Beijing sightseeing

You visit the Forbidden City in the morning, then Tiananmen Square and the Temple of Heaven, at a pace that suits the group. It is an unusual start to a Himalayan pilgrimage, and most travellers value it afterwards. The evening briefing covers altitude, which becomes a factor from tomorrow.

Altitude: 44 m On foot: Easy walking, 3–4 hrs Night: Hotel, Beijing Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 3

Travel from Beijing to Lhasa by air or rail

You travel either by a four hour flight over the Kunlun mountains or by railway, which takes two nights and crosses the Tanggula Pass at 5,072 m in carriages with enriched oxygen. The train is neither faster nor cheaper, but it is a better introduction to the plateau, and most of our travellers who have done both would choose it again.

Altitude: 3,656 m On foot: None, flight day Night: Hotel, Lhasa, or the train Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 4

Rest and acclimatisation day in Lhasa

This is your first full day at 3,656 m, and the programme is kept light on purpose: a short walk in the Barkhor, tea and an early night. Oxygen saturation is measured morning and evening from today. Travellers who do a lot of sightseeing on this day are more likely to feel unwell at Shigatse.

Altitude: 3,656 m On foot: Optional 1–2 hrs Night: Hotel, Lhasa Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 5

Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple

You visit the Potala in the morning on a fixed timed ticket. The climb through it is the most strenuous exercise since you arrived. In the afternoon you visit the Jokhang, where pilgrims prostrate themselves at the door, and walk the Barkhor kora around it, clockwise with the other pilgrims.

Altitude: 3,656 m On foot: 2 to 3 hours Night: Hotel, Lhasa Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 6

Drepung and Sera monasteries

You visit Drepung in the morning, once the largest monastery in the world, and Sera in the afternoon for the monks' debates, which involve a great deal of clapping and are interesting to watch even in translation. This is the last evening in a city with restaurants for ten days.

Altitude: 3,656 m On foot: 2 hours Night: Hotel, Lhasa Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 7

Drive from Lhasa to Shigatse

The route follows the Yarlung Tsangpo west. The river becomes the Brahmaputra much further downstream. If the group chooses the longer road, it passes Yamdrok Lake and the Karo La glacier. Shigatse is Tibet's second city and the seat of the Panchen Lamas, and you can visit Tashilhunpo Monastery in the late afternoon.

Altitude: 3,840 m On foot: None, 6–8 hr drive Night: Hotel, Shigatse Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 8

Drive from Shigatse to Saga

Today you reach the high plateau: high, brown, vast and almost empty. The road crosses several passes above 5,000 m by vehicle, with a long, steady gain in altitude that you will notice by evening. Saga is a garrison and truck-stop town and serves as an overnight stop on this route.

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

Day 9

Drive from Saga to Lake Mansarovar

This is the longest drive of the journey, heading west past nomad camps and salt lakes. Late in the day Gurla Mandhata comes into view on the left, followed by the lake, which is very large and deep blue. We stay on the shore rather than continuing to Darchen.

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

Day 10

Lake Mansarovar and drive to Darchen

You see dawn over the lake, which is the reason for staying here. Anyone who wishes to bathe should be quick, as the water is only a few degrees above freezing. We drive along part of the shore, look across to Rakshastal, and reach Darchen in the afternoon to organise loads and rest before the kora.

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

Day 11

Trek from Darchen to Dirapuk

A short drive takes you to Yam Dwar, the gate, where the walking begins. You walk twelve kilometres north up the Lha Chu valley with little height gain, with the west face of Kailash above you for most of the afternoon. Dirapuk faces the north face directly, and the view at dusk is one of the highlights of the trip.

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

Day 12

Trek over the Dolma La to Zuthulpuk

This is the hardest day. You set off before first light and climb the moraine to Shiva Tsal, where pilgrims leave a personal item behind, then make the long ascent to the Dolma La at 5,630 m, which is covered in prayer flags. The descent is steep and loose, and the valley that follows is flat and long.

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

Day 13

Trek from Zuthulpuk to Darchen and drive to Lake Mansarovar

An easy morning walk down the gorge past Milarepa's cave until the valley opens onto the Barkha plain, where the vehicles are waiting. The kora is complete before lunch. We drive back east to the lake shore, where the lower altitude helps everyone sleep better.

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

Day 14

Spare day at Lake Mansarovar

This day is kept in reserve. If the pass was closed by snow, someone needed a slower day, or a vehicle broke down, this day allows for it. If it is not needed, you have a second morning at Mansarovar and a free afternoon, which is a useful rest at 4,560 m.

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

Day 15

Drive back east to Saga

You drive the same road in the opposite direction. Most of the group sleeps for much of the journey. After the past week at higher altitude, Saga feels comfortable in the evening.

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

Day 16

Drive from Saga to Shigatse

You continue east, slowly losing height, and pass the first villages with trees. After Ngari, Shigatse offers shops, hot water and a choice of restaurants for the evening.

Altitude: 3,840 m On foot: None, 8–9 hr drive Night: Hotel, Shigatse Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 17

Drive from Shigatse to Lhasa

This is the final drive, back along the Tsangpo to Lhasa, arriving in the afternoon. You have an hour in the Barkhor for any shopping, followed by a farewell dinner. Your permits are returned to the authorities tomorrow.

Altitude: 3,656 m On foot: None, 5–6 hr drive Night: Hotel, Lhasa Meals: Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Day 18

Departure from Lhasa

You fly home from Lhasa, either through Beijing or directly to Kathmandu, depending on your ticket. We take you to the airport and help you through the first checks, which are more thorough on departures from Tibet than most people expect.

Altitude: 3,656 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
- Two nights in Beijing with sightseeing and a guide
- Beijing to Lhasa by air, or by the Qinghai Tibet railway in a soft sleeper if you choose it
- All accommodation: four star in Beijing and Lhasa, three star in Shigatse and Saga, guesthouses at the lake and on the kora
- Full board from dinner on day one to breakfast on day eighteen, vegetarian from Lhasa onward
- Vehicles and drivers for the whole plateau crossing, with a support truck
- A licensed Tibetan guide throughout the region, and a national guide in Beijing
- Bottled oxygen and a portable pressure chamber from Lhasa onward
- A yak or porter allowance of 10 kg a person for the three kora days

Not included

- International flights into Beijing and home from Lhasa
- The Chinese tourist visa, which you obtain in your own country
- Travel insurance, which must cover trekking and evacuation to 6,000 m
- A horse and personal porter on the kora, roughly $180 to $260
- Lunches and dinners in Beijing beyond those listed
- Tips for the guides, drivers and kora crew
- Anything arising from a permit refusal, a closure or weather

Permits and other costs

Permit	Fee	Issued by
Chinese tourist visa. Apply as a visit to Beijing. Mentioning Tibet on the form often leads to a refusal.	$60–185, paid by you at home	Chinese embassy or visa centre in your own country
Tibet Travel Permit (TTB). Takes eight or nine working days, and can only be applied for once you have your Chinese visa.	Inside the trip price	Tibet Tourism Bureau, through a licensed agency
Alien's Travel Permit. Required throughout the Ngari prefecture.	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 and takes longer.	Inside the trip price	Tibet Military Command, Lhasa
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

Chinese tourist visa	$60–185	Obtained at home and not included in the trip price. US citizens pay the highest fee
Tibet Travel Permit	$70–120	Applied for against a paid itinerary once you have your visa
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
Beijing to Lhasa flight	$290–420	One way, about four hours
Qinghai Tibet railway, soft sleeper	$180–260	Two nights, which must be booked well ahead in the season
Two nights in Beijing with a guide	$240–320	Four star, with the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven
Land Cruiser and support truck	$560–760 a head	Eleven days of vehicle hire across the plateau, with drivers
Licensed Tibetan guide	$45–60 a day	Compulsory for the whole time you are in the region
Hotels in Lhasa, Shigatse and Saga	$50–110 a night	Four star in Lhasa, simpler at Saga
Guesthouses on the kora	$25–40 a night	Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk, shared rooms, no heating
Full board	$35–55 a day	Chinese food in Beijing, vegetarian from Lhasa onward
Oxygen and a pressure chamber	$60–90 a head	Carried from Lhasa onward
Travel insurance to 6,000 m	$140–220	Must cover evacuation. There is no helicopter in Ngari

Packing list

One duffel and one daypack

The truck carries one duffel of up to 20 kg for you across the plateau, and you carry a daypack on the three kora days. Pack the duffel so that what you need at Dirapuk is easy to reach without unpacking everything. Anything you need only in Beijing can be left at the Lhasa hotel free of charge, so you do not carry city clothes to 4,900 m.

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, no cotton
- Lighter clothes for Beijing, which is hot and humid in summer

For the kora

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

Sleeping

- Four season sleeping bag, comfort rated to about minus ten
- Silk or cotton liner
- Earplugs, for the shared kora rooms and the sleeper train
- Head torch and spare batteries

Sun and wind protection

- Category four sunglasses
- Factor fifty sun cream and a high factor lip balm, in generous quantities
- Brimmed sun hat, and a buff for the dust
- Moisturiser, because the plateau air is extremely dry

Health

- Your own medication in its original packaging, with the prescription
- Acetazolamide if your doctor agrees
- Rehydration salts, blister kit, paracetamol and ibuprofen
- Medication for an upset stomach, because the food changes three times on this trip

Documents

- Passport valid six months with two blank pages, carrying your Chinese visa
- Four passport photographs
- Insurance certificate showing cover to 6,000 m and evacuation
- Copies of everything, kept separately from the originals

Useful items

- Chinese plug adaptor
- Battery pack, kept warm inside a jacket on the kora
- Cash in small notes for tips, the horse and the guesthouses
- A refillable bottle, since we boil and filter water on the plateau

Altitude profile

Day	Place	Sleep at	Highest point
1	Beijing	44 m	44 m
2	Beijing	44 m	44 m
3	Lhasa	3,656 m	5,072 m
4	Lhasa	3,656 m	3,656 m
5	Lhasa	3,656 m	3,750 m
6	Lhasa	3,656 m	3,800 m
7	Shigatse	3,840 m	5,010 m
8	Saga	4,640 m	5,200 m
9	Mansarovar	4,590 m	4,750 m
10	Darchen	4,575 m	4,600 m
11	Dirapuk	4,900 m	4,900 m
12	Zuthulpuk	4,835 m	5,630 m
13	Hor Qu	4,560 m	4,835 m
14	Hor Qu	4,560 m	4,560 m
15	Saga	4,640 m	5,216 m
16	Shigatse	3,840 m	5,200 m
17	Lhasa	3,656 m	3,840 m
18	Lhasa	3,656 m	3,656 m

Travel and permits

You obtain your Chinese visa at home first, and we apply for the Tibet permits after that.

Getting to Beijing

You fly to Beijing on your own ticket, from wherever suits you, and we meet you there. Most travellers come through Delhi, Kathmandu, Bangkok, Dubai or a European hub. Arrive a day early if the fare allows, because the spare time in the itinerary is at the end rather than the beginning.

Beijing to Lhasa by air or rail

The flight takes about four hours. The Qinghai Tibet railway takes two nights, crosses the Tanggula Pass at 5,072 m, the highest point on any railway in the world, and has carriages with enriched oxygen. It costs no less and saves no time, but it is a gentler introduction to the plateau and a remarkable journey in itself. We book soft sleepers when the group chooses the train.

The drive west

The drive from Lhasa to Mansarovar takes four days by way of Shigatse and Saga, on good tarmac, crossing several passes above 5,000 m by vehicle. The distances are very long and so are the days. This is the same road used on the via-Lhasa trip, and it is the part of any Kailash journey that cannot be shortened.

Visa and permit timeline

You obtain your Chinese tourist visa first, at home, with no mention of Tibet on the application. Only then can we apply for the Tibet Travel Permit, which takes eight or nine working days, and the Ngari permits, which take longer. We need your passport and visa scans six weeks before departure, and we will send reminders.

No helicopter rescue in Ngari

We state this on every Kailash page. Western Tibet has no air ambulance service. Anyone who needs to descend does so in a Land Cruiser on the road they arrived on. This is why the oxygen, the pressure chamber and the spare day are essential rather than optional, and why the guide's decision on descent is final.

Accommodation

Where	Nights	Type	Room	Bathroom
Beijing	2	Four-star hotel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Lhasa	4	Four-star hotel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Shigatse	2	Three-star hotel	Twin	Private, hot water
Saga	2	Simple hotel	Twin	Private, intermittent hot water
Mansarovar and Hor Qu	3	Lakeside guesthouse	Shared, two to four people	Shared, outside
Darchen	1	Simple hotel	Twin	Private, hot water
Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk	2	Kora guesthouse	Shared rooms, mattress and quilt	Outside, no running water

Heating
In all hotels. None at the lake or on the kora

Hot water
Reliable in Beijing, Lhasa, Shigatse and Darchen, sometimes in Saga, none on the kora

Power
Mains power with a Chinese adaptor everywhere except the kora

Wifi
Good in Beijing and Lhasa, slow in Shigatse, none past Darchen

Oxygen
Bottled oxygen and a portable pressure chamber from Lhasa onward

Toilets
Western in the hotels, squat and outside from Mansarovar onward

Laundry
Beijing, Lhasa and Shigatse

Drinking water
Boiled and filtered by our crew once on the plateau

Meals

Meal	Time	What it is like
Breakfast	7.00 to 8.00	Hotel buffet in the cities, eggs and tsampa on the plateau
Lunch	12.30	Restaurants in Beijing and Lhasa, roadhouses or a packed lunch beyond
Dinner	19.00	Chinese and Tibetan food, dal bhat on the plateau, soup first at altitude
On the kora	Early and late	Our cook goes ahead, so hot soup is ready on arrival at Dirapuk

Diet	How we manage it
Vegetarian	The standard from Lhasa onward, following the custom around the mountain
Vegan	Easy in Beijing and manageable beyond it, but butter tea and curd are very common. Please tell us when you book
Jain	Arranged, including no root vegetables, with a month's notice
Gluten free	Straightforward in the cities, harder on the plateau. Bring your own for the kora
Halal	Available in Beijing and Lhasa, but not on the plateau, where vegetarian food is the practical option

A typical day

Time	What happens
6.30	Tea, and oxygen saturation measured and recorded from Lhasa onward
7.30	Breakfast, and bags loaded onto the truck
8.30	Driving or walking
10.30	First stop, at a sheltered spot on the plateau
12.30	Lunch, in a roadhouse or a packed lunch
16.00	Arrival on driving days, and rest before the evening
17.30	Second oxygen saturation check, and a short walk uphill
19.00	Soup, then dinner
20.00	Briefing on the next day, with distances and timings
21.30	Bedtime

Difficulty and preparation

Difficulty 4 of 5

A long trip that is comfortable at the start and end and demanding in the middle. There are three days of walking, one of which is hard.

- Three kora days: 12 km, then 22 km over a 5,630 m pass, then 12 km
- The pass day begins before dawn and runs nine to ten hours
- Seven 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

16 weeks before: Build endurance
Walk for six hours on hills with a daypack. The kora involves walking rather than climbing, and endurance is what it requires.

12 weeks before: Walk on consecutive days
Walk two long days back to back, then a third, because the kora is three days in a row.

12 weeks before: Apply for your Chinese visa
Apply now. Some countries take three weeks, and none of the other paperwork can begin until you have the visa.

8 weeks before: See a doctor
This is particularly important if you are over sixty or have a history of heart, lung or blood pressure problems. Discuss acetazolamide and try it at home.

4 weeks before: Test your boots and layers
Walk in everything you plan to wear on the pass until it is well worn in. Do not buy new boots after this point.

2 weeks before: Rest
Take shorter walks and get more sleep. Arriving rested is more valuable than one more hard training day.

Altitude and safety

This is the most gradual Kailash altitude profile we offer, because of the time spent in Lhasa. You arrive at 3,656 m and stay three nights before going higher, which gives your body time to adjust in a way the shorter routes cannot. From there the ascent west is gradual: Shigatse at 3,840 m, Saga at 4,640 m and the lake at 4,590 m, spread across three driving days. The largest single gain is the flight into Lhasa on day three, which is why day four has no activities planned and why nobody climbs the Potala on their first afternoon. Otherwise the arrangements are the same as on all our Tibet journeys: oxygen saturation measured and recorded twice a day, bottled oxygen and a portable pressure chamber with the group from Lhasa onward, a spare day after the kora, and a guide whose instruction to descend is final. There is no helicopter rescue anywhere in western Tibet, so we act on symptoms earlier than we would in Nepal.

What to watch for

- Headache that does not improve with water, food and paracetamol
- Loss of appetite
- Broken sleep, and waking short of breath
- Dizziness, or feeling drunk without having had alcohol
- A cough that begins dry and becomes wet
- Loss of interest in the journey, which is a common warning sign
- Any loss of balance or coordination, which is an emergency

How to prevent it

- Rest on your first day in Lhasa, as planned
- Drink four litres of water a day, even if you are not thirsty
- Eat at every meal even without appetite
- No alcohol from Lhasa onward, and no sleeping tablets
- Walk up the slope near each stop, then come back down to sleep
- Tell your guide as soon as something feels wrong, rather than waiting until dinner

What we do

1. Three nights in Lhasa
At 3,656 m, with a free arrival day, before going any higher.

2. Gradual ascent west
Shigatse at 3,840 m and Saga at 4,640 m across two days, rather than in one long drive.

3. Daily health checks
Oxygen saturation is measured and recorded twice a day from Lhasa onward, so any trend over three days is clear.

4. Oxygen and a pressure chamber
Carried in the support truck for treatment and descent, never to allow someone who is unwell to continue.

5. The guide decides on descent
The decision is final and made early, because there is no air ambulance in Ngari.

Season

The season on the plateau runs from May to September, when Beijing is at its hottest and most humid.

Month	Day at Darchen	Night 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 shut and the pass is deep in snow.
February	−1°C	−18°C	−26°C	We do not run it	Conditions are 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.

April	8°C	-9°C	-18°C	Hard	Lhasa is pleasant, but the Dolma La is not passable. Snow remains on the pass into May.
May	13°C	-4°C	-13°C	Good	The season opens mid-month. Beijing is warm and the plateau still cold at night.
June	17°C	0°C	-9°C	Best	Settled and busy, with Saga Dawa filling the kora. Beijing is hot and humid.
July	19°C	3°C	-6°C	Best	The warmest month on the plateau. Beijing is very hot, so we keep that part of the trip short.
August	18°C	3°C	-6°C	Best	Similar to July, with a little more cloud in the west. Still an excellent month to walk the kora.
September	14°C	-2°C	-11°C	Best	Clear and cold, with fewer visitors, and Beijing is pleasant again. The best month overall.
October	8°C	-9°C	-19°C	Hard	Early October can be excellent. The pass closes at some point in the month without notice.
November	2°C	-15°C	-24°C	We do not run it	Closed. The kora would require mountaineering skills and equipment.
December	-2°C	-18°C	-27°C	We do not run it	Closed.

Averages for the Ngari prefecture, where the walking happens. Beijing and Lhasa at either end are far milder, and Beijing in July is hot and humid rather than cold.

Guides and porters

Your guide

A national guide accompanies you in Beijing, and a licensed Tibetan guide travels with you from arrival in Lhasa to departure from Lhasa. By law, the Tibetan guide must stay with the group 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

Travellers ride in Land Cruisers, four to a vehicle rather than the common six, and a support truck carries baggage, food, fuel, oxygen and the pressure chamber. The drivers are Tibetan and know the road in every season, and they can also take someone down quickly if needed.

Yaks and horses on the kora

Baggage is carried by yak, arranged through the Darchen yak and horse association, which allocates the work in turn among local households. Your 10 kg travels with them. A riding horse and handler can be booked at Darchen for the first and third days, and the payment goes to the same families.

Tipping

Tipping is customary and not included. About $150 to $220 per traveller covers the Beijing guide, the Tibetan guide, the drivers and the kora crew across eighteen days. We pool the tips at the end and hand them over together, and we will advise you on a fair amount.

Responsible travel

Local customs

Most people on the path are walking it for religious reasons. Walk clockwise unless you are Bon. Ask before photographing anyone, in Lhasa as well as at Darchen, and accept a refusal politely. At Shiva Tsal, where pilgrims leave clothing and hair, leave the ground exactly as you found it.

Photography and politics in Tibet

Your guide's licence and livelihood depend on the group behaving responsibly. Do not photograph police, checkpoints or military vehicles. Do not bring images of the Dalai Lama or books about Tibetan politics, as they will be confiscated. Do not ask your guide political questions in front of other people.

Waste

We carry out everything we bring in. 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 throughout, and take your used batteries home with you.

Bathing in Lake Mansarovar

Do not use soap, shampoo or detergent of any kind, including biodegradable products. Pilgrims bathe briefly as a ritual and wash elsewhere. For the people who live beside it, the lake is a source of drinking water, a shrine and an ecosystem, and we respect their priorities.

Booking and payment

Chinese visa

Nothing else can begin until you have a Chinese tourist visa, obtained at home. Apply for it as an ordinary visit to Beijing. Once you have it, we apply for the Tibet Travel Permit against a paid itinerary, and then for the Ngari permits. This order is fixed and cannot be changed.

Documents we need and when

We need a passport scan and a scan of the Chinese visa at least six weeks before departure, a passport valid for six months beyond the trip with two blank pages, four photographs, your occupation as you would write it on any official form, and details of any medication. Journalists and diplomats should contact us before booking.

Group size

Unlike the Kathmandu routes, this trip has no group visa minimum of five, because each traveller holds their own Chinese visa. We can run it for two people. The price per person falls as the group grows, because the vehicles and the guide cost the same whether there are four or fourteen travellers.

Permit refusal

If the permit is refused, we refund everything you have paid us in full. Refusals are uncommon, are never explained, and are not your fault. We do not keep a deposit when a permit is refused.

Optional extras

Railway instead of the flight
no change in price, 1 extra day
Two nights from Beijing over the Tanggula Pass in an oxygen-enriched soft sleeper. Book early in the season.

Xian and the Terracotta Army
from $540, 2 days
A stop between Beijing and Lhasa, which also helps with acclimatisation.

Everest Base Camp, Tibet side
from $560, 2 days
A detour from Shigatse to Rongbuk and the north face, added on the way west.

Fly out to Kathmandu instead of Beijing
from $420
A simple option, and the natural choice if you want to add time in Nepal.

Single room where available
$460
Available in Beijing, Lhasa, Shigatse, Saga and Darchen. 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 does this trip travel through Beijing?

There are two reasons. The first is the visa: this route uses an ordinary Chinese tourist visa obtained at home, rather than the group visa issued in Kathmandu, which ties five travellers to one document and one border crossing. The second is that you have time to see Beijing and Lhasa properly on the way to the mountain.

How does this trip compare with your other Kailash journeys?

It is the longest, the most comfortable and the most expensive. The overland trip by road from Kathmandu takes sixteen days and is the easiest on the body. The trip via Lhasa takes fourteen days and flies in from Kathmandu. The Express takes eleven days and gains altitude very quickly. This trip takes eighteen days, with three nights in Lhasa before any demanding days begin.

Should I take the train or fly from Beijing?

We recommend the train if you are comfortable with two nights in a sleeper. It crosses the Tanggula Pass at 5,072 m, the highest railway in the world, in carriages with enriched oxygen, and you arrive in Lhasa having gained height over a day and a half. The flight takes four hours and takes you from sea level to 3,656 m in one step.

Which visa do I need, and where do I get it?

You need a standard Chinese tourist visa from the embassy or a visa centre in your own country, obtained before you travel. Do not mention Tibet on the application, because this often leads to a refusal. For the visa application, your itinerary is Beijing. We then apply for your Tibet Travel Permit using that visa.

What permits are needed for Kailash?

Four permits are needed, and we arrange all of them: the Tibet Travel Permit from the Tourism Bureau, an Alien's Travel Permit for the Ngari prefecture, a military area permit because western Tibet is a border zone, and a foreign affairs permit. They are issued against a paid itinerary and take longer for Kailash than for a Lhasa trip.

How far ahead do I need to book?

At least two months ahead, and three months is better. The Tibet Travel Permit takes eight or nine working days once you have your Chinese visa, and the Kailash permits are issued in Ngari on their own timescale. We ask for a scan of your passport and visa at least six weeks before departure, and we will remind you if we have not received it.

Can I do this if I am an Indian national?

Yes. The route through China is often simpler for Indian passport holders than the Kathmandu group visa, which has periodically had its own complications. Please contact us early: the visa process is different, and a trip through Beijing needs more lead time than a trip that starts in Kathmandu.

Is arriving in Lhasa by air dangerous?

It is not dangerous, but it is the fastest altitude gain on the itinerary, and this is why the fourth day is kept free. Going from near sea level to 3,656 m in four hours gives many travellers a headache and a poor night's sleep. We plan for this rather than scheduling a monastery visit on that day.

How do you manage altitude on the plateau?

We spend three nights in Lhasa before going higher, then climb gradually west through Shigatse at 3,840 m and Saga at 4,640 m. Oxygen saturation is measured and recorded twice a day. Oxygen and a portable pressure chamber travel with the group, and there is a spare day after the kora. The guide's decision to send someone down is final.

Is there a rescue helicopter?

No. There is no helicopter evacuation anywhere in western Tibet. Descent means a vehicle on the road you arrived by, and the nearest well-equipped hospital is a long way from Darchen. Your insurance must cover evacuation to 6,000 m, and we check the certificate.

How hard is the kora?

The kora takes three days and covers 53 km on paths rather than steep climbs. The first day is twelve kilometres of gentle walking to Dirapuk. The second is twenty two kilometres over the Dolma La at 5,630 m and takes nine or ten hours. The third is twelve kilometres downhill. The second day is hard for everyone. Arriving after two weeks of gradual altitude gain makes a significant difference.

Can I ride a horse on the kora?

Yes, on the first and third days. Horses are arranged at Darchen for roughly $180 to $260 with a handler. On the pass day the horse can only go as far as the ground allows, and everyone walks the steep section above Shiva Tsal. Book the evening before, as the animals are allocated in turn among local families.

What if I cannot finish the circuit?

You return to Darchen with a crew member and rejoin the group when it completes the circuit, usually after one extra night. The decision is made at Dirapuk in the morning, not halfway up the pass. Nobody is carried over the Dolma La. On a trip of this length there is time to rest for a day without missing the rest of the journey.

When does this trip run?

From May to September. Outside those months the Dolma La holds snow, the kora guesthouses close for the winter, and Tibet usually closes to foreign visitors for the whole of March. June and September are the best months: June for warmth and the Saga Dawa festival, September for clear air and fewer people.

What is Saga Dawa?

Saga Dawa is the full moon of the fourth Tibetan month, when the large flagpole at Tarboche is taken down, re-dressed and raised again, and thousands of pilgrims walk the kora together. It is a remarkable time to be there, but also the busiest, and beds on the circuit are scarce. Consider which of these matters more to you.

Where do we sleep?

Four star hotels in Beijing and Lhasa, three star in Shigatse, a plain hotel in Saga and Darchen, a lakeside guesthouse at Mansarovar, and two nights in kora guesthouses at Dirapuk and Zuthulpuk. Those last two are shared rooms with a mattress and a quilt, no heating and an outside toilet.

What is the food like?

In Beijing the food is Chinese and very good. In Lhasa there is Tibetan, Chinese and Nepali food. From Lhasa onward meals are vegetarian, following the custom around the mountain, and our own cook carries supplies for the plateau. Appetite decreases at altitude, so we serve soup first and often.

Will my phone work?

Yes in Beijing and Lhasa with a Chinese SIM card, but not on the kora. Most western apps and services are blocked throughout China unless you have made arrangements in advance, and we suggest treating the fortnight as time away from them.

How much driving is there?

There are four long days of driving west and three on the return, on good Chinese tarmac roads that cover long distances. The days are long and monotonous rather than physically demanding, unlike the roads in Nepal. Bring something to read, and motion sickness medication if you need it.

What should I pack?

Pack for two climates. Beijing in summer is hot and humid. The plateau is dry, cold at night and very windy. A windproof shell is more important than an extra fleece. A four season sleeping bag is needed only for the kora guesthouses. You will need plenty of sun cream and lip balm.

What happens if the permit is refused?

We refund everything you have paid us in full. Refusals happen and are rarely explained. Journalists, diplomats and people whose passports carry certain stamps are refused more often than others. We do not keep a deposit if the permit is refused.

Can I add extensions before or after the trip?

Yes, and this trip is well suited to it. Options include Xian and the Terracotta Army on the way through, a few extra days in Beijing, Everest Base Camp on the Tibetan side as a detour from Shigatse, or Kathmandu and Chitwan afterwards if you fly out through Nepal. Please tell us when you book.

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