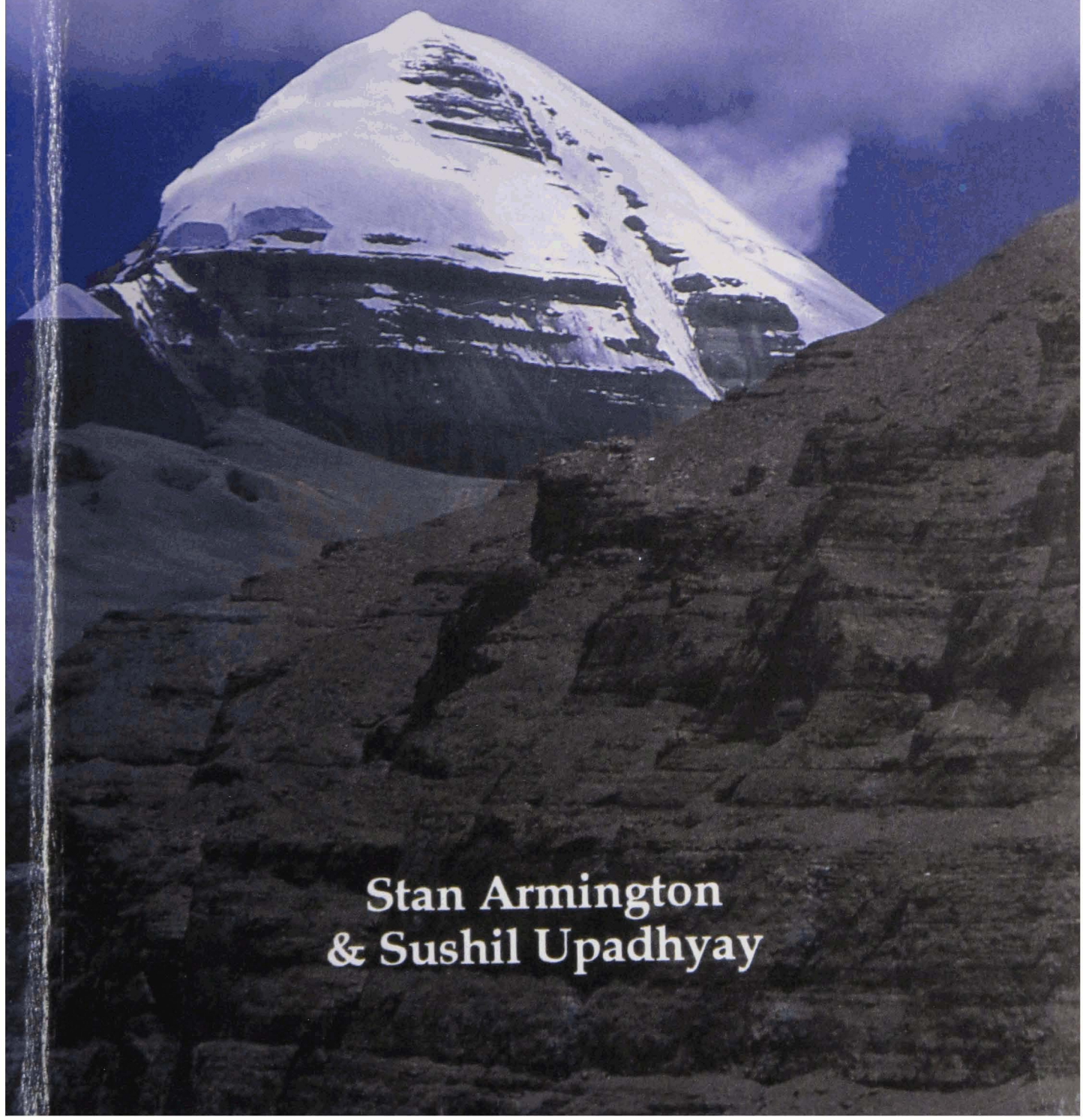


Humla to Mt Kailas

A trek from Nepal into Tibet



**Stan Armington
& Sushil Upadhyay**

Humla to Mt Kailas

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The maps in this book show the relative position of villages and trails. International boundaries and the location of geographical features are approximate.

Corrections or suggestions may be forwarded to the authors at Malla Treks, PO Box 5227, Kathmandu, Nepal; Fax: 977-1-418382.

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Preface

This booklet is the result of a trek to Humla and Taklakot in July, 1993. We were able to make this trek before the area was officially opened thanks to a special permit arranged by the Ministries of Tourism and Home of His Majesty's Government.

The information in this booklet will eventually form a chapter of the next edition of *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*, published by Lonely Planet. Most of the caveats and suggestions in that book apply to this material. Elevations are estimates based on the best available information; maps are hand drawn and show only the places that are mentioned in the text. The route descriptions depict conditions as they were in July, 1993, but you may find discrepancies; trails, rules and facilities continually change.

The maps included in this booklet are more accurate than most maps of Humla. We carried a Global Positioning System (GPS) on this trek. This instrument collects data from satellites and provides reasonably precise readings of position and altitude. The maps were prepared using GPS data combined with existing satellite image maps.

Because the area covered by this booklet encompasses two countries and numerous ethnic groups and religions, most places have two or more names. We have used the most common local name and listed alternate names in parentheses.

A trip to Mt Kailas has always been regarded as a pilgrimage. It satisfies the romantic in us that the pilgrimage to Kailas is a difficult one. Whether you drive for 7 days or walk for 6 days, it is still not possible to make a quick, easy visit to Kailas and Manasarovar. You cannot yet travel all the way to Kailas by helicopter or airplane. This probably is as it should be.

Many people have provided assistance and information during the preparation of this booklet. Thomas Laird accompanied the trek and his determination was responsible for making it happen. The Honourable Minister of Tourism, Ram Hari Joshi, kindly expedited the formalities and made it possible for us to make the trek when we did. Professor Trilok Chandra Majupuria assisted with research and mapmaking. Our sirdar, Bhakta Gurung, managed to keep us moving and our cook, Babu Ram Bhattarai, prepared outstanding meals under some truly appalling conditions. Our Humli guide, Kunga Dorje, provided extraordinary insight and assistance.

Karchung of Ngari Travels and Sangey Tenzing of Purang Guest House kept us moving and fed in Tibet, as did our guide, Kelsang. Choying Dorje, better known as Kailas Dorje, assisted us in Darchan and helped us to be sure the information about the Ngari was correct.



Location of Humla

Introduction

In May 1993 the governments of Nepal and China reached an accord that allowed the first treks across the border between the two countries. While it had been a route for Nepalese pilgrims for years, foreign trekkers were never allowed to trek from Nepal into Tibet. It has always been possible, however, to bend or ignore the rules. Early British explorers visited Kailas in a variety of disguises, and numerous individual trekkers still manage to make their way from Tibet into Nepal each year.

Though the *raison d'être* for this trek is theoretically Mt Kailas in Tibet, the journey through Humla, Nepal's highest, northernmost and most

remote district, is also culturally and scenically rewarding. The people of Limi in northern Humla are Bhotias whose roots are in Tibet and who still enjoy the freedom to graze their animals on the Tibetan plateau. The upper Humla Karnali valley is also populated by Bhotias who trade extensively with Tibet in traditional ways that have totally vanished elsewhere. It is only near Simikot, the district headquarters, that you will encounter people of other ethnic groups, mostly Thakuris and Chhetris.

The Humla District

Humla was once part of the great Malla empire administered from Sinja near Jumla. Until 1787 this empire included Jumla, Purang (Taklakot) and extended as far west as Googay, the 'lost' villages of Toling (Zanda) and Tsaparang located in a remote Tibetan valley to the north of Nanda Devi and Kamet Himal. Taklakot was once part of Nepal; on a map you can see the chunk taken out of the northwest corner of Nepal like a bite. Taklakot is an extraordinary melting pot of Indian tourists, Chinese and Tibetan traders, Muslim traders from Kashgar, Nepalese entrepreneurs trading wool, salt and Indian goods, Chinese government officials and a huge army contingent. Plan on spending at least a day exploring this unusual frontier town.

In Humla the traditional salt grain trade with Tibet continues much as it has for centuries. This trade has virtually ceased in the rest of Nepal

because of the import of Indian salt and because China has eliminated many border trading posts in remote regions. The Chinese village of Purang, better known by its Nepalese name, Taklakot, is an important trading centre that is a short drive from both the Nepal and Indian borders. Trade via Taklakot is an important factor in the economy of Humla, which is about a 15 day walk from Surkhet, the nearest Nepalese road-head.

Logistics & Formalities

The area is subject to the same regulations as other restricted areas. You must trek as part of an organised group with a liaison officer. The trekking permit fee for the trek from Simikot to the border and back is \$90 for the first week and \$15 per day thereafter. The permit becomes complicated because there is a break in the Nepal trek while you are in Tibet. When we trekked here the Immigration Office issued two trekking permits with dates 10 days apart, one for the trip to the border and the other for the return.

There is a shortage of food in Simikot, so you should arrange to send it ahead by plane or porter. You must use kerosene for cooking. Since this is usually not available in Simikot, and cannot be transported by plane, it requires advance planning. There is a reliable supply of kerosene in Taklakot, so you can arrange a porter caravan to bring Chinese kerosene from Taklakot and avoid the long haul from Surkhet.

The Tibetan plateau is harsh, windy and barren. It makes little sense to walk huge distances in such inhospitable country. If you are headed for Kailas, you should arrange in advance for a vehicle to transport you from the Nepal border at Sher to Taklakot where Chinese immigration and customs formalities are centred. You will also want to arrange transport for the 100 km drive to Darchan at the foot of Mt Kailas. A travel agent in Kathmandu that specialises in Tibet should be able to assist you with this at the same time they arrange your Chinese visa.

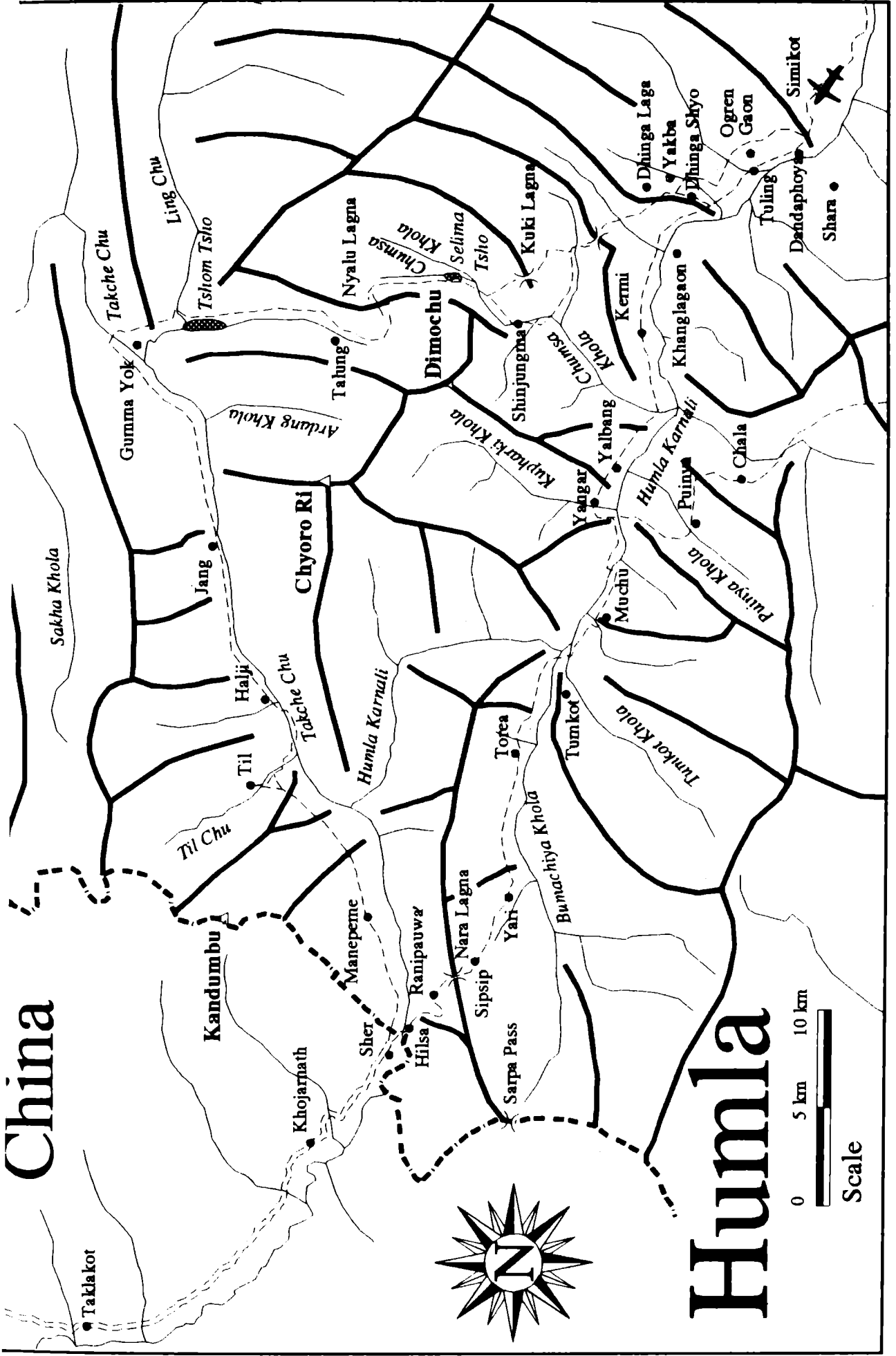
Season

This trek is possible only in the summer monsoon season from May to September. The entire region is snowbound in the winter; passes are closed and Taklakot itself is isolated until the snowplow arrives in late March.

Getting to Simikot

There is no direct air service from Kathmandu to Simikot. You must first fly 1-1/2 hours to Nepalgunj on the southern border of Nepal, spend the night, and take an early morning flight to Simikot. In Nepalgunj you can stay at a rough hotel adjoining the airport or travel 8 km into town to stay in an air cooled room at the comfortable *Sneha Hotel*. Other possibilities are the *Batika* and the *Rapti Hotel*, near the hospital. In the bazaar, at Birendra Chok, the *Shanti Sakya* and *Punjabi* Hotels offer low end accommodation. The *Punjabi* is said to have excellent Indian

China



● Taklakot

Kandumbu

Til Chu

Til

Hajji

Jang

Gurma Yok

Takche Chu

Ling Chu

Tsutom Tsito

Chyoro Ri

Ardang Khola

Humla Karnali

Sher

Manepeme

Hilsa

Ranipaawa

Nara Lagna

Sipsip

Sarspa Pass

Totea

Dimochu

Nyalu Lagna

Chumsa Khola

Selima

Tsito

Shunjungma

Kupharu Khola

Yabang

Yalgar

Chumsa Khola

Tumkot

Muchu

Humla Karnali

Puina

Humla Khola

Chala

Khangaogaon

Kermi

Kuki Lagna

Dhanga Laga

Yakba

Dhanga Shyo

Ogren

Gaon

Tuling

Dandaphoya

Shara

Simikot

0 5 km 10 km

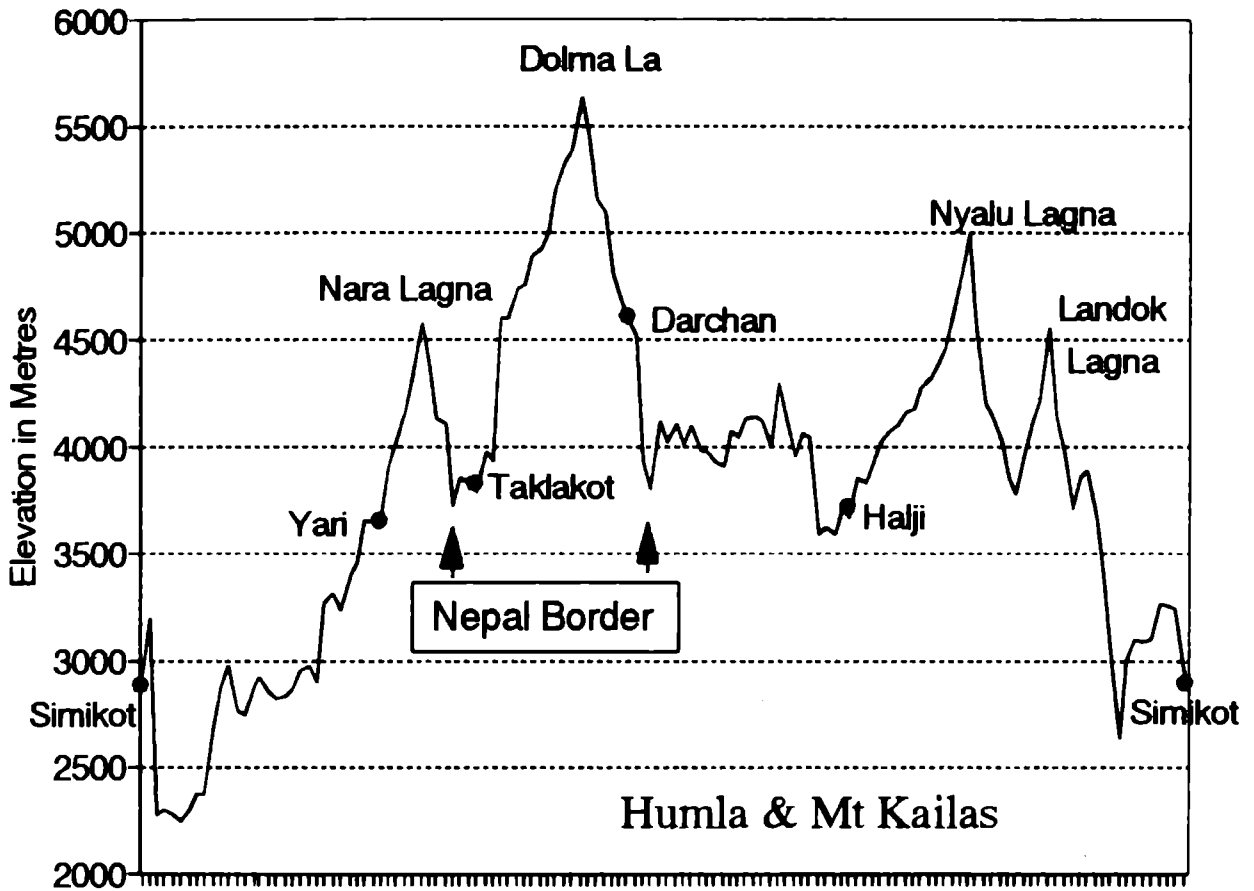
Scale



food. Transport from Nepalgunj airport is difficult. It's a half hour ride in a horse drawn *tonga* or an hour by rickshaw. If you call before you leave Kathmandu, the Sneha Hotel (phone 081-20119) will send their jeep to collect you for Rs 500.

If you want to walk to Simikot, start in Surkhet and walk for about 15 days. When our Sherpa crew embarked on their trek from Surkhet carrying kerosene supplies for our trek, they promptly got themselves lost in the remote district of Kalikot, a good ten days' walk from Simikot. The villagers had never seen a trekking crew before and believed them to be merchants out selling kerosene. Many locals, particularly high caste Thakuris, boarded-up their houses when the Sherpas inquired if they could buy some food. The more helpful ones said it would take a month to reach Simikot. When asked for directions, the reply was, 'follow the waves of the Karnali.' Knowing that we were scheduled to fly to Simikot very soon, the hardy crew decided to stay on the hill trails, instead, and literally walked day and night to reach Simikot after a twelve-day ordeal.

It takes about 50 minutes to fly the 218 km from Nepalgunj to Simikot, almost the entire breadth of Nepal, over a 3800 metre pass. Look for the 7031 metre Saipal Himal off the left side of the plane as you approach Simikot; you may also be able to spot Rara Lake some distance off to the right. Simikot, elevation 2910 metres, is on a ridge high above the Humla Karnali encircled by high snow covered ridges.



Elevation Changes on the Trek

The airstrip dominates the town, which is divided into four parts. South of the airport are government offices, school, police headquarters, government guest house and a few shops. The main bazaar area, consisting of shops, a barber, bank and airline offices is just north of the runway. East and northwest of the bazaar are two large settlements consisting of flat roofed houses, inhabited mostly by Chhetris.

Simikot is the headquarters of Nepal's most remote district, Humla, and the only major village for many days walk. There is a continual

stream of 'Humli' people from surrounding villages trading, buying supplies and dealing with various bureaucracies. To accommodate these travellers, there are several tea shops and restaurants and a few rooms for rent. Facilities are very much local style; there is nothing that even approaches the standard of the poorest trekkers' hotels in the Annapurna or Everest regions. Even though Simikot itself has been open to trekkers for years, in 1993 the only English signboards were those of airlines. Electricity is supplied by a huge bank of solar panels northeast of the airport; this system provides electricity to the town for about four hours a night.

Simikot to the Nepal Border

Day 1: Simikot to Tuling

This is a short day. Hopefully, your flight has arrived in Simikot in the early morning and you are ready for a half day of trekking. Start climbing from the Simikot airstrip past wheat and barley fields on a rocky-trail bordered with cannabis and nettles. Trek past the stone houses of upper Simikot and the community water supply. It does not look far, but it's a long 300 metre pull to the top of a forested ridge overlooking the town. The trek then makes a long steep descent on a rocky switchbacking path, passing above the rooftops of Dandaphoya. The village on the opposite side of the river is Shara. Continue past a single house, then on to Tuling, also known as Majgaon, a compact Thakuri village at 2270 metres. There is a small campsite about a half

hour beyond the village. At these lower elevations among unsanitary villages, flies are a real nuisance.

Day 2: Tuling to Kermi

The trail is reasonably level, and walnut and apricot trees provide welcome shade, as the trek passes through Dharapani. The two parts of this scattered village are separated by the Yakba Khola; there is a police check-post in the upper part. It's a long, rough traverse across a scree slope to a stream. Below the trail a bridge over the Humla Karnali leads to Khanglagaon, a Thakuri village on the opposite side of the river. This is the last Thakuri village in the valley and the upper limit of rice cultivation.

Stay on the north side of the river as the trail snakes up and down to Chachera, a shepherds' camp near a waterfall at 2350 metres. Climb over a ridge past swarms of lizards sunning themselves as you approach Kermi, situated beside a stream at 2690 metres. The route bypasses Kermi village itself; the only camp nearby is below the left side of the trail about 10 minutes beyond the village. There is a hot spring about an hour's climb above Kermi.

Day 3: Kermi to Yangar

Climb over a ridge into a big valley with walled potato and buckwheat fields, then climb through a sparse pine forest to a rock cairn on a ridge at 2990 metres. Make switchbacks down to an extensive growth of wild marijuana and nettles on the bank of the Chumsa Khola. Cross the stream on a huge log, climb a steep rocky ridge

and drop back towards the fast flowing, light grey waters of the Humla Karnali. Climb over another ridge, then descend to Yalbang Chaur, a meadow and goat herders camp beside the river at 2760 metres. In November there is an annual trade fair or *mela* at this site.

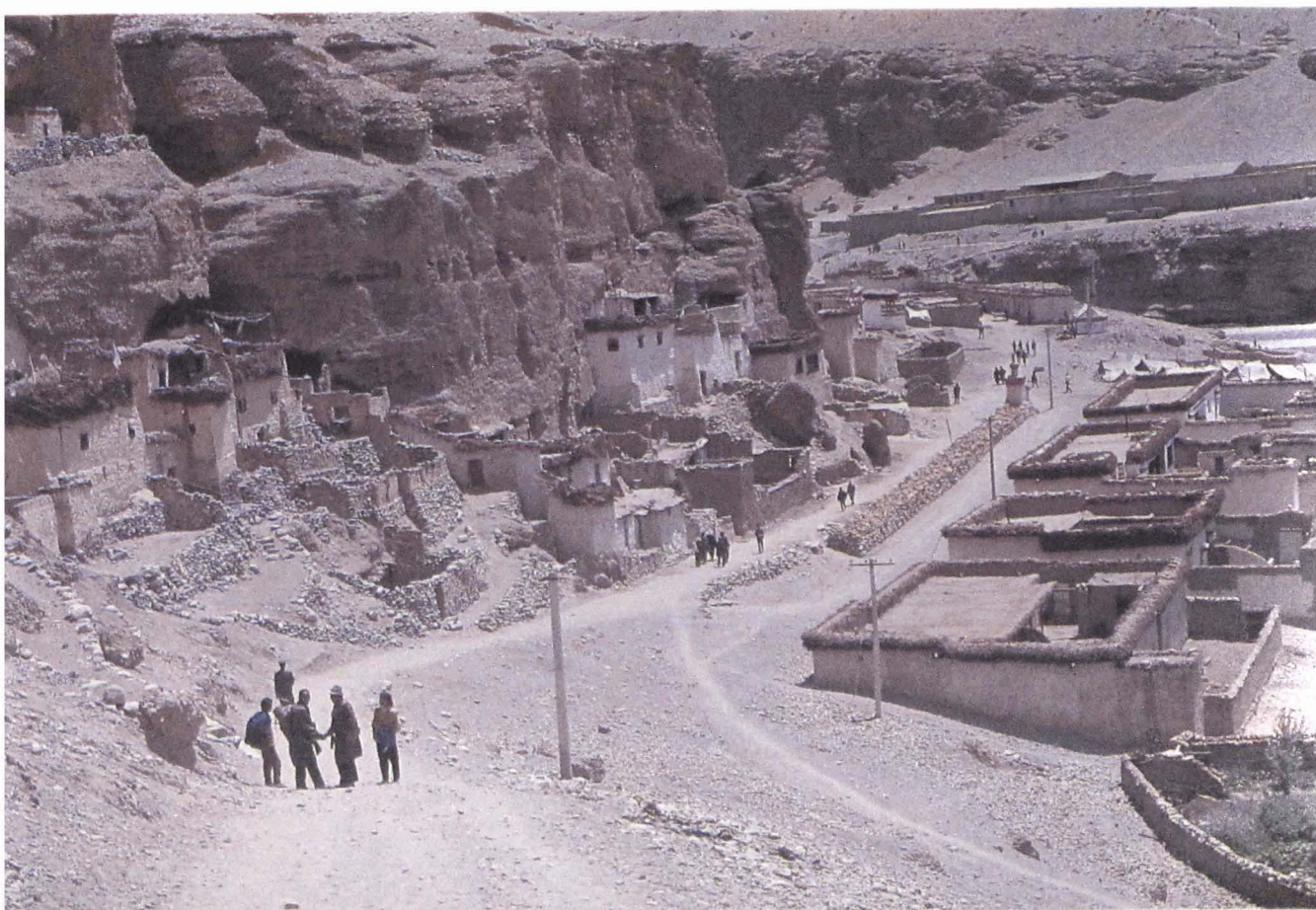
Above this sandy meadow the Humla Karnali valley narrows and the sides become quite steep. Climb over two more ridges to Yalbang village at 2890 metres. The trail follows an irrigation canal to a huge rock just to the north of the village. Yalbang shares a hydroelectric power supply with its neighbour Yangar, a few kilometres away. Take the lower, left-hand fork and contour up and around to a house and horse pasture on the ridge. Below, you can see a bridge over the Humla Karnali and a ridiculously steep trail on the opposite side that leads to Puiya (or Poyun), the village where Yalbang people live during the summer. This is also a trade route to the once important Humli trading centre of Chala and on to Bajura south of Humla. Climb over another ridge at 2930 metres and descend gradually to the extensive fields surrounding the compact village of Yangar at 2850 metres.

Day 4: Yangar to Torea

An old route followed a steep trail over a 3500 metre high ridge, the Illing La, beyond Yangar. Fortunately you can now follow a new, lower path that avoids the climb. The trail passes through the compact settlement of Yangar, in some places in tunnels beneath houses, then climbs behind a rock spur to a fast flowing



Nepal Tibet Border below Sera



Taklakot Village



Ceremony Inside Jang Gompa



Descending towards Selima Tsho



Horseman from Yari



Customs Check for a Yogi



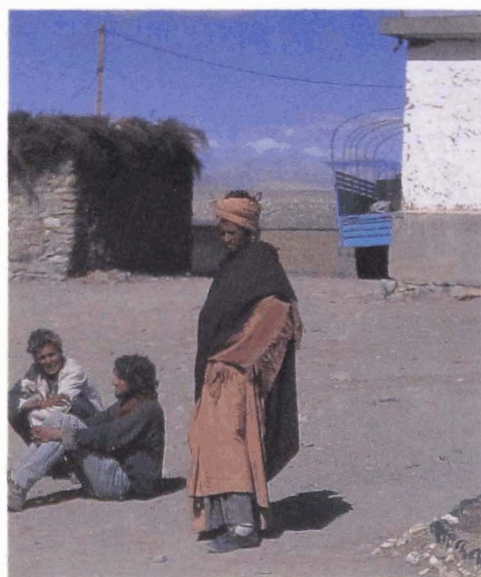
Stream Crossing in Limi



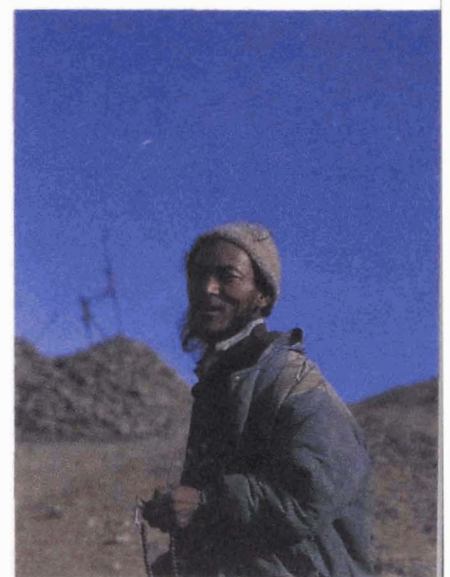
Nepali Jankri (Shaman)



Tibetan Festival Dress in Limi



Indian Yogi



Hotelkeeper from Ranipauwa

Travellers Enroute to Kailas



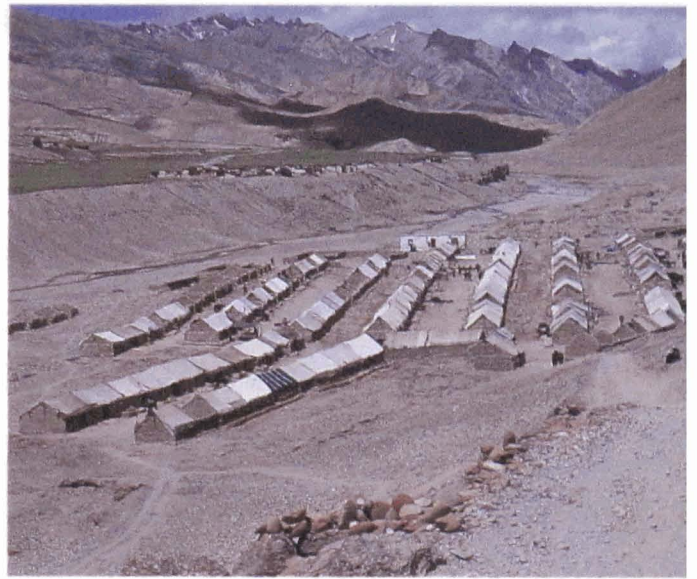
Mustard fields in Yari



Crossing Nara Lagna



Overlooking the Karnali



Darchula Bazaar



Meat Market



Snooker Centre

Scenes in Taklakot



Chorten-kangni and Mt Kailas



Nomad Camp on the Kailas Kora

stream. Decline the old trail and follow the new route across a scree slope and out to the end of the ridge before dropping to the river at 2770 metres. The trail wends its way precariously close to the river on a track built up with rocks and wooden props and a few stretches where the path was blasted out of the cliff. After more than an hour of ups and downs you will reach a new suspension bridge at 2800 metres. Cross to the south bank of the Humla Karnali and a big rocky camp beside the river. Climb to a stream, rock-hop across it and ascend past apricot orchards to a totally defunct *kani* that marks the entrance to Muchu village at 2920 metres.

The trail passes below the gompa and stone houses of Muchu. Climb through the orchards and fields of the village to a ridge, then drop into a ravine and climb to a chorten on the opposite side. There are a few houses on the ridge and a Border Police post hidden just behind it. The ridge near the chorten offers a good view of the upper part of the valley and of Tumkot village (also known as Mota Gompa) and its large white gompa on the next ridge. Enjoy the next easy stretch of trail as it contours down to the Tumkot Khola, follows the rocky stream bed for a short distance, then crosses it on a log bridge. Don't climb the hill towards Tumkot; follow around the foot of the ridge and cross the Bumachiya Khola on a wooden bridge at 2900 metres. The Humla Karnali disappears into a steep cleft to the north behind a high ridge that provides you with the opportunity to climb uphill for the next two days.

The first part of the climb from the Bumachiya Khola is quite steep. About a half hour up is an obvious trail junction. Take the lower, left-hand trail. The upper trail, which eventually rejoins the lower trail, is a short cut for goats. The route enters a steep rock filled gully; it's a long slow slog up to a ridge at 3270 metres. The path levels out as it ascends to a cairn at 3310 metres, then descends gently through juniper trees and climbs again to Palbang, a single tea house at 3380 metres. Palbang has a Nepali name, Torea, after the bright yellow mustard (*tori*) fields that surround it. There is a field above the tea house that may be available for use as a camp.

Day 5: Torea to Sipsip

From Torea the trail ascends to a stream and a campsite deep in goat droppings, then contours up to a small cairn at 3660 metres where a few policemen maintain order from a tent. Rounding a ridge you can see the extensive fields of Yari. The trek follows an irrigation canal into the huge valley of the Jhyakthang Chu, marked by a mani wall at 3640 metres. Climb gently to Yari, a compact settlement of stone houses, a police post, customs office and a schoolhouse just below the trail at 3670 metres. The police post is the last in Nepal and maintains a register of the comings and goings of both locals and foreigners.

In upper Humla they grow two kinds of millet — finger millet (*kodo*) and common millet (*chinu*) — and two kinds of barley — 'naked' or 'beardless' Tibetan barley (*uwa*) and regular barley (*jau*), amarnath (*marcia*), wheat, buckwheat

(*phaphar*), potatoes and radishes.. In the lower portions of Humla they grow winter barley; in higher villages such as Yari, only one crop per year is possible.

To the west of the village a trail leads to Sarpa Pass, a less-frequented route to Tibet. This is the way the Khampa leader Wangdi travelled in 1975 in an attempt to escape into India after the United States removed their support of the Tibetan resistance. He crossed into Tibet at an un-manned and isolated corner and re-crossed into Nepal via Tinkar Pass south of Taklakot where he was ambushed by the waiting Nepal Army.

From Yari the trade route climbs the broad valley to the source of the village's extensive irrigation system that is carried in a series of channels and wooden conduits. There is a flat spot and possible camp at about 4000 metres, but it's better to continue towards the pass to make the following day easier. There is a meadow and stream at 4160 metres and another meadow, Sipsip, near the foot of the pass at 4330 metres. Despite the remoteness of this location, there is a considerable amount of traffic. You will probably be travelling in the company of several contingents of traders, pilgrims and pack animals — goats, sheep and yaks.

Day 6: Sipsip to Taklakot

The trail makes a steep, continuous ascent along the side of the ridge above Sipsip to a huge rock cairn atop the Nara Lagna at 4580 metres. We measured this pass with both a GPS and an

altimeter; it is well below the 4902 metre elevation shown on the Survey of India and US Army maps. In 1979 Dr Harka Gurung correctly identified this discrepancy without the aid of any instruments. Snow usually closes the pass from November to April.

A short distance below the pass you will round a ridge for a view of the Tibetan plateau, the Humla Karnali and the green barley fields of Sher (also called Shera) far below. The descent is tolerable as far as Ranipauwa, a hotel in a tent at 4370 metres. Beyond Ranipauwa the trail consists of steep loose pebbles that either wear the bottoms off your boots or provide a natural ball bearing surface that shoots your feet out from under you. You've done well if you make it down this hill without a few slips and slides. The trail contours around a large canyon before making a final steep, dusty drop to the Humla Karnali at 3720 metres. It is a walk of only a few minutes along the river to Hilsa, a couple of tents and stone houses surrounded by barley fields.

A stone pillar that marks the Nepal Tibet border is just across a rickety wooden bridge, perhaps one of the most informal border crossings in the world. Climb a short distance to a Tibetan salt trading post at 3860 metres where, if you have made prior arrangements and all goes well; you will find a jeep waiting for you to make the 1-1/2 hour drive into Taklakot. All of China is on Beijing time, which is 2-1/4 hours later than Nepal time, so set your watch accordingly. Because the Ngari region of Tibet is so far west of Beijing this means that it's dark when you arise

at 7 am and light until about 10 pm during the season for this trek in July and August.

Sher is where Humli people sell wood and rice from Nepal. The illegal trade in wood beams further helps to deplete Nepal's forest resources. The grain/salt trade is responsible for the thousands of goats you have seen on the trail, each carrying up to 10 kilos. Humli people make as many as six or seven trips a year and traders from throughout western Nepal make a single trip each year exchanging one measure of rice for two measures of salt. Somehow this turns out to be a profitable trip, though it is baffling that it is so.

Return via Limi

This is a longer, harder route than the direct route to Simikot via Yari. Limi is a remote valley in the north of Humla inhabited by Bhotias. The people of Limi are sophisticated and well to do. They trade *pashmina* wool, which retails for about US\$400 per kilo, in India and export wooden utensils to both Tibet and India. Limi is isolated from the rest of Nepal by snow from November to April, so the primary focus of Limi's trade is through Taklakot. For this reason the trails to Tibet are far better maintained than the trails from Limi to Simikot. The last few days of this trek are tough going over high passes on rough trails. Don't attempt this route unless you are fit and well equipped — and have permission (which is not always given readily).

Day 1: Taklakot to Manepeme

The drive from Taklakot to Sher is about 1-1/2 hours, so theoretically you will arrive in Sher in time to do some trekking. What with the time change and customs and immigration formalities, we ended up here at night and had to camp at Sher in a continual upriver wind. Set your watch back 2-1/4 hours to Nepal time and enjoy reasonable time again. The Limi trail starts climbing from the salt trading post where the road ends. If you plan to follow this route, do not descend to the Humla Karnali at Hilsa. By the time you trek here, Nepal may have built an immigration post in Hilsa, so you might have to go down to the river and then climb back into Tibet in order to start walking to Limi. Plan your departure from Sher carefully; it's about 4 hours from Sher to Manepeme and there is no possible camping place in between.

From the end of the road at 3800 metres, the trail starts steeply up across a barren slope, crossing unannounced into Nepalese territory. A pole with tattered prayer flags marks a ridge at 4120 metres and the end of the first steep climb. The trail contours along the side of the ridge high above the Humla Karnali making minor ups and downs to a ridge with a stone chorten at 4110 metres. Follow some switchbacks down, then cut across a slope dotted with scrub juniper. A well maintained trail crosses a rockslide, then climbs above a recent landslide. Take the upper, new trail over the top of the landslide and drop down to meet the original trail on the opposite side.

Manepeme is behind a ridge in a large side canyon near a stream at 3970 metres. It is not an ideal camp because the only flat spaces are deep in goat droppings, as are most campsites on this trek — though Manepeme is perhaps the worst case. Manepeme is named for a huge stone above the campsite that is carved (now rather faint) with the mantra *om mani padme hum*.

Day 2: Manepeme to Til Chu

From Manepeme the trail weaves in and out of draws along the side of the valley, climbing gradually towards the foot of a rock cliff. Ascend along the foot of the cliff, climbing to a ridge at 4070 metres. The Humla Karnali turns south and flows through a steep gorge towards Muchu. The Limi trail now follows a tributary, the Takchi Chu.

The trail then drops into a gully and climbs onto another ridge at 4040 metres. The trail beyond here looks horrific — winding up a steep rock face onto what looks like a pinnacle. It's not as bad as it looks, just a long slow series of switchbacks that climb on a well maintained trail over a ridge at 4120 metres. Look for blue sheep (*naur*) on the cliffs above. The trail descends from the ridge to Lamka, a stream and some tiny camping places (along with the requisite goat droppings) at 4000 metres.

Climb steeply again from Lamka to the Lamka Lagna at 4300 metres where there is a first view of the Limi valley and the green fields of Halji in the distance. The trail descends to a tiny stream, then continues down and across a slope. Climb

over two rocky ridges and make a short descent to two chortens that mark the end of the ridge above the Til Chu. The houses across the valley are Til Gompa; the lowest fields of Til village are also visible below. The main trail descends gently to the stone houses of Til, the first village since Sher, situated about an hour up the Til Chu at about 3700 metres. To avoid Til, follow a steep trail downhill to join a lower trail that crosses the Til Chu and descends to a super campsite at its confluence with the Takchi Chu. Just east of this camp is a large pit lined with stones. This is a snow leopard trap and there is one near each village of Limi. When a cat has killed local livestock, villagers stake a goat in the pit. The theory is that when a snow leopard jumps in, the overhanging rock walls prevent its escape.

Day 3: Til Chu to Jang

Beyond the campsite the trail climbs a stone staircase over a rock spur, then drops back down to the Takchi Chu, crossing it on a wooden bridge at 3590 metres. The trail follows the river along its sandy riverbank to another bridge that leads back to the north side of the river at 3710 metres elevation. It's a short walk past barley fields into Halji at 3670 metres. The trail bypasses the village, staying near the river in a pleasant plantation of willow trees. The unpainted stone houses of Halji are surrounded by extensive barley and wheat fields just behind a ridge in a large valley. The houses surround a white gompa that has a single red wall painted with a white inscription *om mani padme hum* similar to the

gompa at Khojarnath. Inside the gompa are numerous recently made statues and paintings. Photography has been prohibited in the gompa since a recent theft in Khojarnath.

Cross a low ridge that protects Halji from wind, and trek up valley. Climb steeply to a ridge at 3850 metres, then descend gently to a police post at Sunkhani (also known as Tayen), 3830 metres. There is a reasonably good campsite about 5 minutes beyond the police post and another 15 minutes beyond that. The valley has become very rocky as the trail makes ups and downs. A series of irrigated barley fields mark the beginning of Jang, also called Jyanga or Jyangba, an impressive stone village with a white gompa at 3930 metres.

The people of Limi make wooden bowls from pine, birch and maple trees that grow on the south side of the river. You will probably see piles of these bowls drying in the sun. Surprisingly, Limi dominates the entire supply of wooden bowls to Tibet. High quality bowls are made from burls from maple trees. The scarcity of these burls in Limi has required people to find alternate sources of supply from Kumaon in northern India, yet the bowls are still manufactured here.

When we visited Jang they were in the midst of a 6-day long celebration in honour of the birth of a son to one of the families in the village. The parents (in this case represented by the grandfather since the father was off tending his flock of sheep) had to provide food and drink for the entire village — though he made up for it through the ample donations that were offered.

There's a terrific camp 45 minutes up the trail. Climb gently to two small white chortens and a snow leopard trap that mark the east end of Jang. The river cascades through a narrow defile as it makes a steep drop. At the top of this cascade the route enters the upper portion of the Takche Chu valley where the river meanders across broad meadows. Jump across a small stream, pass three more chortens and you will arrive at a small stone edifice beside two more chortens at 4070 metres. The stone wall encloses a small hot spring. You can camp in the meadows nearby and spend the afternoon ridding yourself of the dust of Tibet. The long rows of white stones in the meadow were placed to form a path for an important Rinpoche from Dehra Dun in India who visited Limi a week before us.

Day 4: Jang to Talung

Continue the trek across meadows, hopping across a few side streams. A short climb takes you over a rocky ridge, but the trail is mostly level and pleasant. The trail reaches a point that overlooks the river valley and turns north. The geography here is a bit confusing. What you will do is trek north along the Takche Chu to the only bridge, then turn south again. The trail north leads to the Lapcha La, once an important trade route from Limi into Tibet — and one that offers a short cut to Manasarovar Lake. The Chinese emphasis on Taklakot as a trade centre has left this route generally unused, though there is a Nepali police post nearby that controls access to the pass. Turn right before the police post and

head down to the river and a wooden bridge at 4160 metres. The trail rounds a ridge and turns south through Tibet-like country with marmots and nettles. To the south you can see the white sand of a moraine that forms the lake of Tshom Tsho.

Below this plateau was Gumma Yok, elevation 4170 metres, once the most important village of Limi. The village was abandoned many years ago; you can see the remnants of a few buildings here and there.

Climb onto the fine white sand of the moraine and drop to the other side above a huge lake, Tshom Tsho. The best trail bears left across meadows to a bridge over the Ling Chu, though you can wade the stream near the point where it enters the lake if you get lost — or if your feet are hot. Traverse scree slopes above the east side of the lake. This huge U-shaped valley rises in a series of steps created by ancient glaciers. Ascend the first of these into a flat valley at 4320 metres. Yak and sheep herders from both Humla and Limi have semi-permanent settlements with Tibetan style yak-hair tents at many places in the valley. They are not used to visitors, but stop and see if you can buy a cup of hot milk (*dudh* in Nepali, *oma* in Tibetan), yogurt (*dahi*), fresh cottage cheese (*serkum*) or dried cheese (*churpi*). Climb another short steep slope to the next valley, a pasture and tent camp called Talung, at 4380 metres. You can camp here or a half hour beyond, on the last 'step' in the valley at 4450 metres.

Day 5: Talung to Shinjungma

Climb to the next valley and cross the meadows to the foot of the pass. The last of the shepherds' tents are visible at the foot of the huge glaciated peak Dimoche Lekh that dominates the head of the valley. Now the hard work begins as you head east into a rocky valley at the foot of the climb to the pass. Grind your way up the hill for about two hours to a collection of cairns and upturned rocks. From here, on a clear day, you can see Mt Kailas. Continue to the pass, Nyalu Lagna, at 4990 metres, crossing it in a north-easterly direction.

Below the pass the trail makes a U-turn and heads south, descending along the moraine to an attractive high altitude lake, Selima Tsho at 4570 metres. Make a long, knee cracking descent on the moraine that formed the lake, eventually crossing two streams and reaching the valley floor at 4140 metres. Head east across alpine meadows to a wooden bridge over a large stream that enters from the northwest. When we trekked in this valley the herders in a nearby camp had just made temporary repairs to the bridge, which looked like it was going to be washed away at any moment by the fast flowing muddy waters of the stream.

You are now presented with a choice. There is a steep short cut over a 4900 metre ridge to the east called the Kuki Lagna. Or, you can do as our local guide recommended and trek around the edge of the ridge, avoiding the extra climbing. The lazy person's trail follows a rocky route into

a birch and rhododendron forest starting at about 4050 metres — the first real vegetation since you left the Humla Karnali on the upward trek. Saipal Himal (7025 metres) looms in the distance. Descend through forests on a steep trail to a primitive camp near Shinjungma at about 3600 metres. The Chumsa Khola is fast and muddy in the afternoon because of glacial runoff, so it's a lousy water supply. There are a few clear side streams and springs in the area that a local guide can find for you. On the west side of the valley is a terrific rock face that rivals Yosemite.

Day 6: Shinjungma to Dzinga Laga

Descend further along the wooded Chumsa Khola valley to an inconspicuous trail junction at about 3780 metres elevation. The larger trail (which you do not take) continues down the valley, eventually reaching the Humla Karnali far below near Kermi. It was at the foot of this valley that you probably had lunch in the marijuana fields on the third day out of Simikot.

To go to Simikot, take the smaller, left-hand trail and start uphill. The trail becomes more prominent as it rounds a ridge and ascends through pine, then birch, forests alongside the Takchi Chu. Keep climbing through a rocky meadow at 4110 metres, then further to a bridge at 4220 metres. The trail from Kuki Lagna rejoins the route here. It's another hour of steep climbing to the Landok Lagna, the last major pass on the trek, at 4550 metres elevation. We crossed this

pass in a rainstorm and complete whiteout, so we have no idea what the views are like.

Be careful of the trail as you descend. A few minutes below the pass a cattle trail that looks like the main trail heads down a gully to the left. Don't follow this; stay to the right on an indistinct trail that follows the ridge. The trail moves towards the right side of the ridge, dropping to a tiny stream at 4140 metres. Continue down the ridge, dropping off the end to a larger stream at 3940 metres. The trail gets better as it winds its way through a forest of big juniper trees covered with moss. Follow the wide trail down to a stream and a mill, crossing it on a wooden bridge at 3710 metres.

No camp here, so keep climbing. Trek up hard through oak, birch and rhododendron forest, ferns and wildflowers to a notch in a ridge at 3860 metres. Head north along the east side of the ridge through burned forest, climbing gently to a side ridge at 3890 metres that leads into a high alpine bowl. Trek downhill to a trail junction. The trail straight ahead leads to the upper village of DHINGA — a summer settlement called DHINGA LAGA. The right-hand trail leads steeply downhill to a meadow and small pond surrounded by a forest of blue pines and a good campsite — if the local people agree to allow you to camp in the village grazing land.

Day 7: DHINGA LAGA to SIMIKOT

Lace your boots up tightly in preparation for a rough day. From the meadow camp, trek onto the ridge for a view of the huge valley of the

Yakba Khola. Turn south on a good trail that heads towards Dhinga Shyo, the lower, winter settlement of Dhinga. Most people of Dhinga have houses in both settlements. About a half hour below the ridge, at an elevation of 3400 metres, there is another inconspicuous trail leading off to the left. Local people assured us that this is the part of the 'main' trail to Limi, though this is hard to believe as you plummet down through forests, duck under tree limbs, tear your clothing on thorn bushes and dodge stinging nettles. A tough, hot exercise lands you at the Yakba Khola and a bridge at 2630 metres. You can see the village of Yakba at the foot of the valley some distance upstream.

Follow a narrow, nettle-lined trail downstream, then start uphill. Climb and climb to a few houses at 3010 metres, eventually cresting the ridge at 3100 metres. The going is easier now as you walk around the ridge through groves of walnut trees to a tiny stream — the first available potable water and an opportunity for lunch.

The trail traverses above the scattered settlements of Ogren Gaon, passing several streams as it makes its way along the rocky slope. You can see the Humla Karnali far below as you ascend to the final ridge of the trek at 3270 metres. It's only a few minute's walk to the junction of the Humla Karnali trail, and a few more minutes after that to the top of the ridge overlooking Simikot. Descend on the loose gravel of the trail to the village water supply, then down a clutter of loose rocks to the airport at 2960 metres.

To Taklakot and Mt Kailas

From the Nepal border at Sher the road makes a long descent to a stream and some mills, then follows the Humla Karnali to Khojarnath at 3790 metres. Khojarnath is the first large village in Tibet and boasts an important gompa of the Sakya sect. This gompa escaped most of the excesses of the cultural revolution, though the silver statues and other items described by early travellers have disappeared. The new statues are of *Chenresig* (Avalokiteshvara), *Jambyang* (Manjushree) and *Channadorje* (Vajrapani). The monks, familiar with Indian pilgrims, explain these gods as the Buddhist manifestations of Ram, Laxman and Sita.

Also of interest in the gompa are the stuffed carcasses of a yak, Indian tiger, snow leopard (*chen* in Tibetan) and wolf (*changu*) hanging from the ceiling. These, also, are replacements dating from 1985.

The road climbs over a 4000 metre pass where 13 Humli porters were killed in July, 1993 when a truck carrying two dozen Nepali passengers on top of a load of salt turned over. The route then passes Kangtse which has a gompa on a nearby hill. Ford the Kangtse Chu and the Gejin Chu and drive on to Gejin and Kirang villages before reaching Taklakot at 3930 metres.



North Face of Mt Kailas



Dolma La



Carved Yak Skull



Lake Manasarovar



From Sera looking back to Nara Lagna



Limi Valley



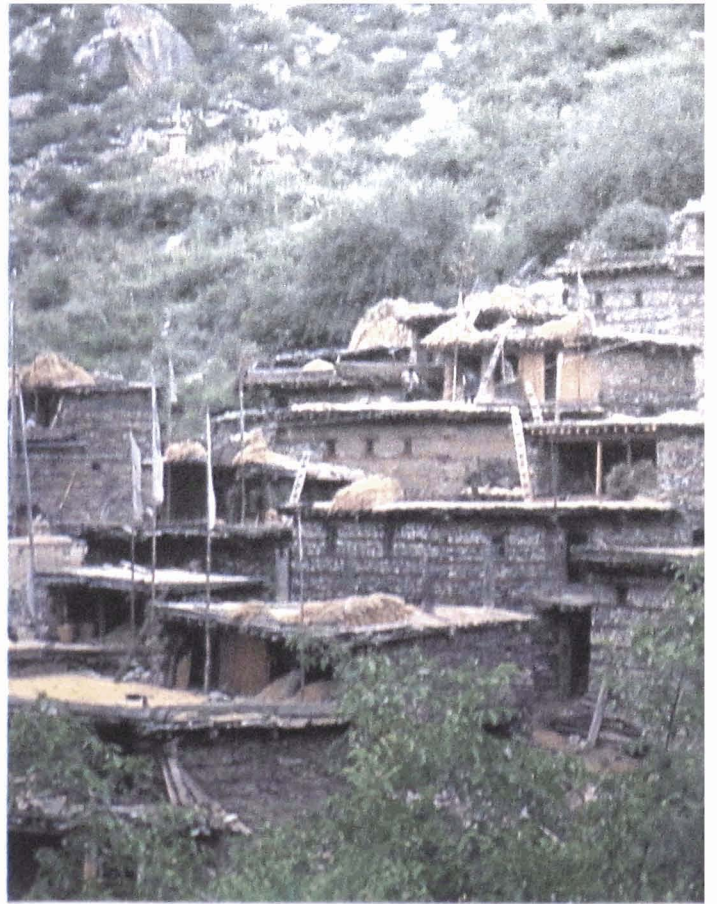
Snow Leopard trap near Jang



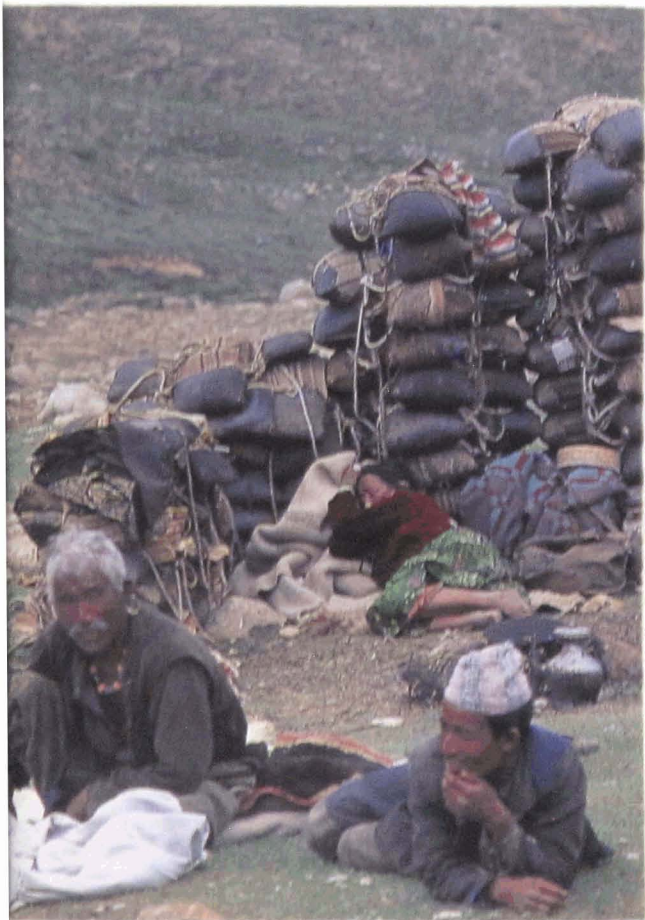
Jang Village



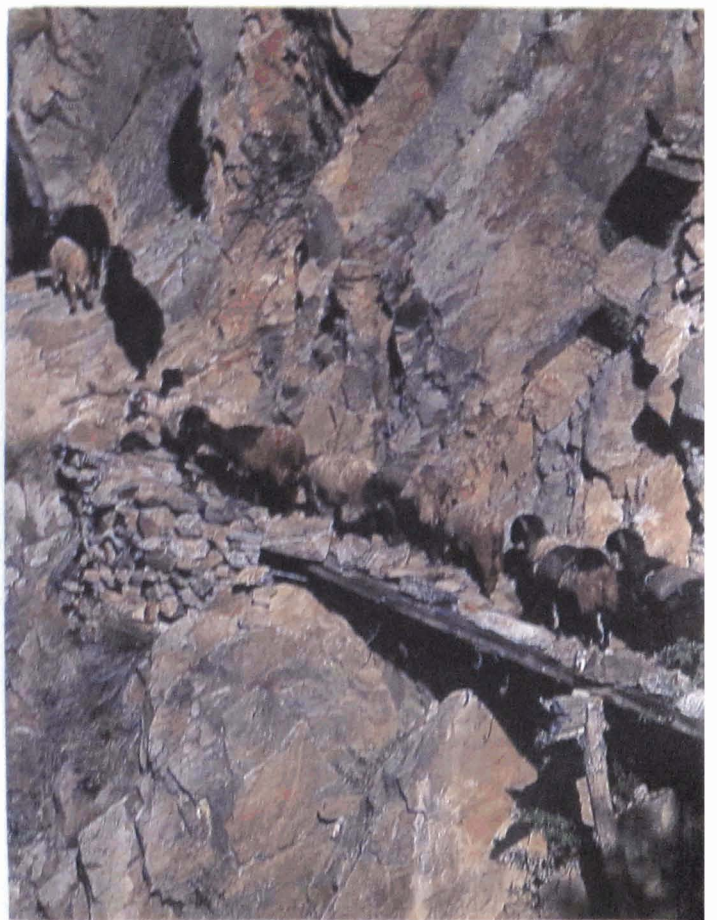
Goat train carrying rice to Tibet



Yangar Village



Goat drivers' camp

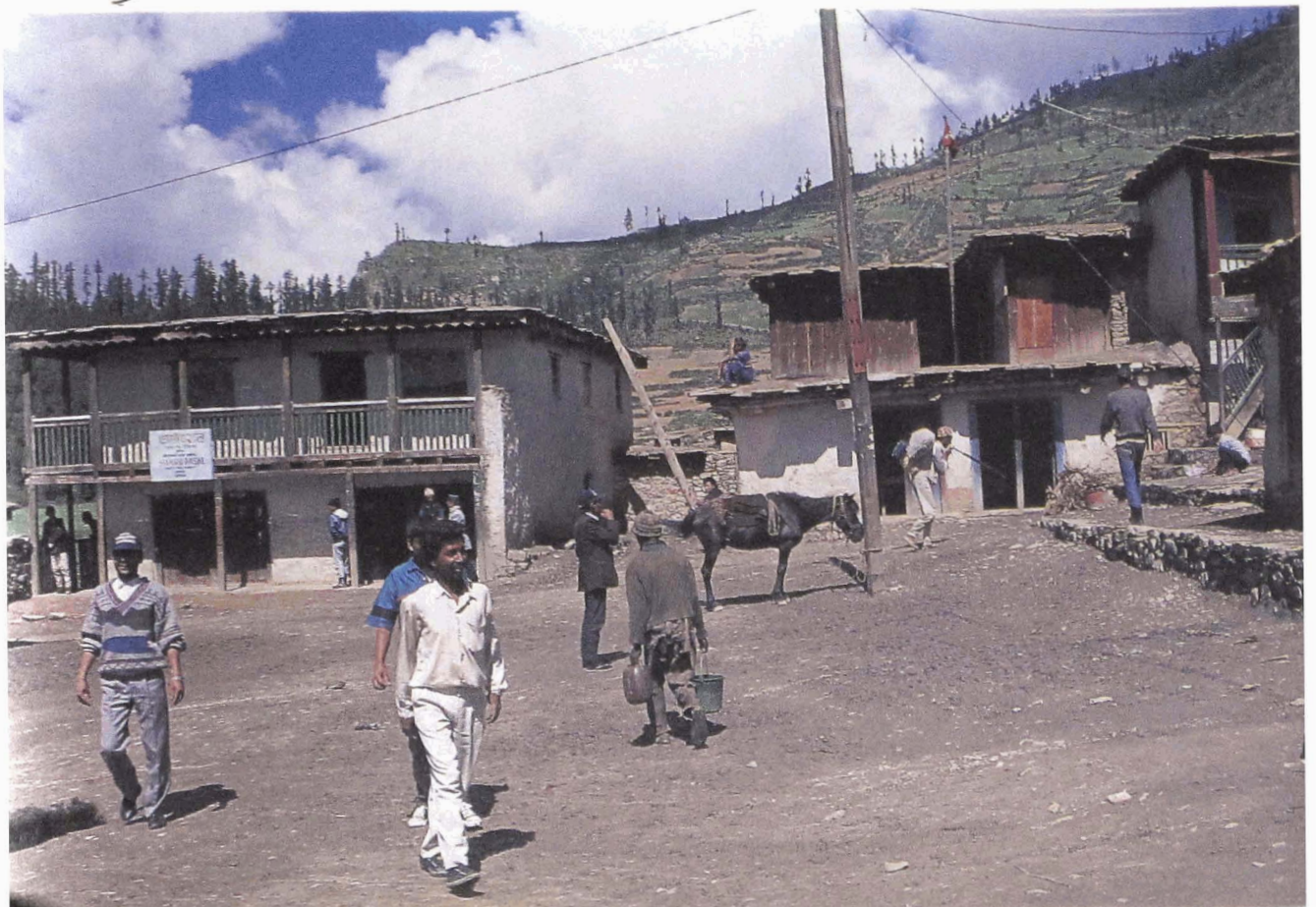


Trail along Humla Karnali



E. Koch

Simikot Airstrip DON'T MISS IT

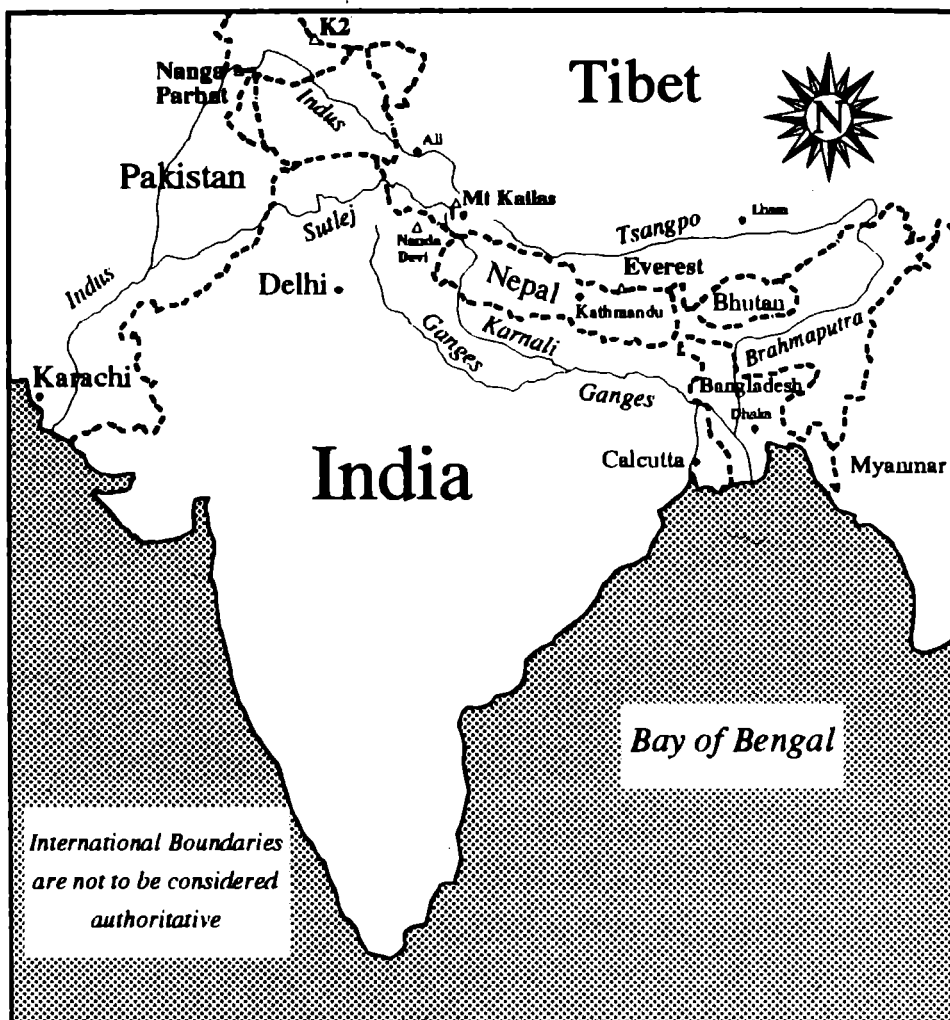


Simikot Bazaar

The Ngari Region

Kailas and Manasarovar are in the Ngari region of Tibet, perhaps the most inaccessible place on earth. Chinese people pronounce 'Ngari' as 'Ali,' so this name has become more-or-less official. The region's administrative centre is Shiquanhe in Chinese and Senge Khabab (Lion Town) in Tibetan. In practice, however, everyone uses the name 'Ali' to refer to the town as well as the district. The town of Ali is a two day drive northwest of Kailas, a dusty five day drive from Lhasa and just as far away from Kashgar in China's Sinkiang province. All of this driving is on roads that are capable of destroying a vehicle in a single trip. Ngari is populated by *Dokpas*, nomads who herd sheep, goats and yaks on these desolate plains. Most Dokpas do not have a house; they wander endlessly across the Tibetan plateau, living in yak hair tents. Ngari is the last frontier of Tibet; even in Taklakot you feel as if you had suddenly been transported back in time. In Ngari, food is either cooked over a yak dung fire or blasted with a petrol-fuelled blowtorch. There are no buses; if you have not arranged for a travel agency to provide you with a Land Cruiser, your only choice is to hitch a ride (and in Tibet, hitchhikers pay for the ride) in the back of a 1950's style Chinese truck, probably atop piles of wool and in the company of several families of dusty Tibetans.

Mount Kailas, 6714 metres, is the most sacred mountain in Asia. It is believed to be the physical embodiment of the mythical Mount Meru, said



Four Rivers from Kailas Manasarovar

to be the centre of the universe or 'navel of the world.' Mount Meru is often depicted as a mandala and its image occurs throughout both Buddhist and Hindu parts of Asia. Images of Mt Meru occur as far away as Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia. Mt Kailas is holy to followers of four religions. To Hindus, Kailas is the abode of Shiva and nearby Lake Manasarovar is the *manas* or soul of Brahma. Tibetans call Kailas *Kang Rimpoche*; Jains worship it as Mt Ashtapada, the peak from which the religion's founder, Rishabanatha achieved spiritual liberation. Followers of *Bon-po*, the an-

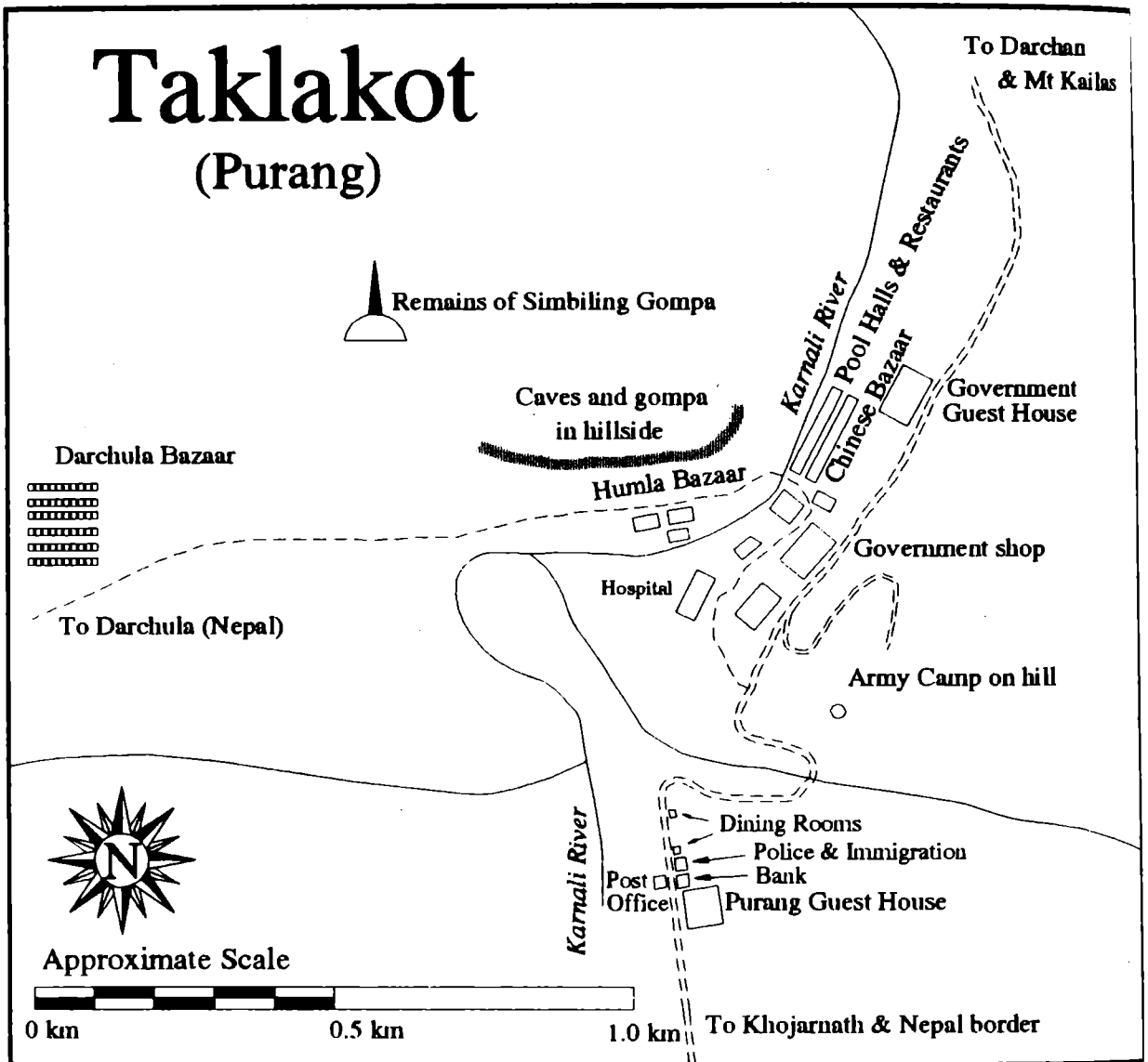
cient pre-Buddhist shamanistic religion of Tibet, revere Kailas as the soul of Tibet.

Lake Manasarovar, elevation 4510 metres, is more important to Hindus than to Buddhists. Hindu pilgrims make a circuit of more than 85 kilometres around Manasarovar that is made longer and more difficult by marshes and complicated stream crossings on the way. Tibetans, being more pragmatic, often make a circuit of the lake in the winter when the streams are frozen and the route is shorter. Near Manasarovar is another large lake, Rakshas Tal, the 'Demon Lake,' that holds far less spiritual significance.

Another geographical factor that contributes to the mystical aspect of Kailas is that nearby are the headwaters of four major rivers of the Indian subcontinent, the Sutlej, Karnali (a major tributary of the Ganges), Brahmaputra and Indus. The mouths of these rivers are more than 2000 km apart, yet they all have their source within 100 km of Mt Kailas.

The Town of Taklakot

Taklakot, which the Chinese and Tibetans call Purang, is a large trading centre and is composed of many distinct settlements. The route from Sher enters from the south along a walled road lined with willow trees. This is the Chinese section of town where the bank, police (including immigration and public security), post office and tourist hotel are located. There are two decent restaurants in this part of Taklakot, both with English signboards saying 'dining room.'

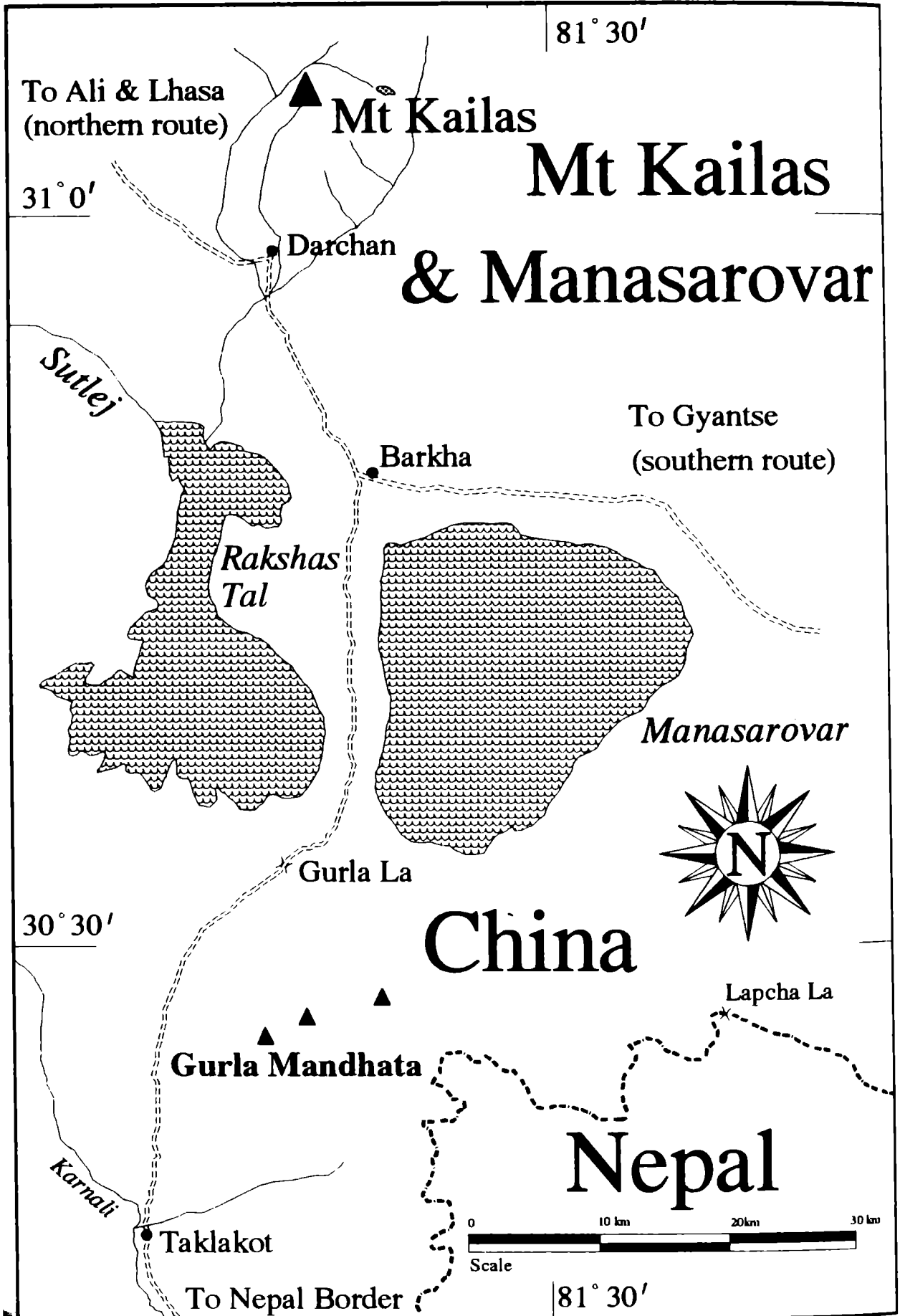


The northernmost one, apparently run by the army, is best. There are a few hole-in-the-wall shops along the road, but for any real purchases you must go to the bazaar near the Karnali River bridge, about a kilometre away. Here you will find more restaurants, an amazing collection of snooker parlours, and Chinese run shops trying to sell polyester clothing to Tibetans, Nepalese traders and Indian pilgrims. Nearer the road are at least two department stores that carry pots, pans, televisions and bolts of cloth.

On the opposite side of the Karnali is 'Humla Bazaar,' a collection of Nepalese hotels, res-

taurants and small shops. For serious purchases of food and supplies, walk 15 minutes over the hill to 'Darchula Bazaar,' an extensive collection of shops with mud walls and white canvas roofs. A large trade in Tibetan wool is conducted here; the wool is rolled into huge balls. There is one street for white wool and another street for black wool, also streets for Indian tinned food, cloth and necessities like rice, sugar and flour. The focus of trade is with the Darchula district of Nepal, several days walk to the south, though many goods from India also appear here. Indians are not allowed the same freedom as Nepalese to trade in Tibet, so Darchula people dominate this market.

As you trek back from Darchula bazaar you will see the remains of Simbiling gompa on the top of the hill overlooking Taklakot. In 1949 Swami Pranavananda described this gompa as the biggest monastery in the region housing 170 monks. There is nothing left of Simbiling after the destruction and shelling of the cultural revolution except a forlorn mud relic. In the hills along the trail there are caves, one housing the Gokung Gompa, and others which are in active use as houses. Many caves have been equipped with doors and windows and are quite substantial dwellings. On the hill to the northwest of Taklakot is a huge army base, said to extend far into the mountain in a series of caves. You will meet hundreds of PLA soldiers in their baggy green uniforms throughout Taklakot in shops, restaurants and snooker parlours.



To the north of the snooker parlour street are Tibetan stalls selling goats, yaks, wool and other items of strictly local interest. Sheep are slaughtered by tying their long snout tightly shut and allowing them to suffocate. This somehow absolves the Tibetans of having taken a life. When our sherpas went shopping for meat, a Tibetan astonished them by grabbing a yak hair rope and lassoing a nearby sheep without rising from his seat. The deal was not consummated, however, since we only wanted a bit of meat, not an entire sheep.

In Taklakot, transactions are conducted in Chinese yuan as well as both Indian and Nepalese rupees. There is an unofficial rate of about 8 Nepalese rupees to the yuan, which the Nepalese call a *sukur*. To our embarrassment, we discovered that the local bank had never heard of travellers checks.

The region around Taklakot is dotted with traditional Tibetan settlements that make up a sizable population. On the full moon day in August, 1993, a festival was held that included lama dancing in front of a huge picture of Chairman Mao. This fair attracted hundreds of people, many dressed in polyester track suits, but also numerous people in traditional Tibetan dress.

Taklakot to Darchan

It is about 100 kilometres from Taklakot to Darchan. From Taklakot the road climbs past many Tibetan style settlements to the Gurla La at 4590 metres and on to Darchan at 4560 metres, 2-1/2

hours from Taklakot. Much of the road is an ad-hoc route made by drivers who created a route where they saw fit, with only the straight line of telephone poles defining the way. At one point more than 15 parallel lines of vehicle tracks scar the plateau. This drive is best done in the morning; by afternoon the melting snows of Gurla Mandhata, 7728 metres, have caused streams to rise so high that fording them may be impossible. Watch for huge jackrabbits and wild asses (*kiang*) along the route.

Only the top of Kailas is visible from Darchan; you must climb a ridge for a better view. Darchan guest house is pretty rough. There is a kitchen where you may be able to get a bowl of noodles, though it takes considerable investigation to find out how and when. There is a shop that opens occasionally that sells beer, sometimes a few canned goods, miscellaneous useless items, souvenir stickers and enamelled Kailas pins. When we were here they had a late evening performance of Chinese and Hindi videos in a tent within the guest house compound. The Dolma Lhaxhang gompa and some primitive Tibetan hotels, shops and camps are above the guest house compound.

The circumambulation of Mt Kailas is an important pilgrimage for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. Hindus perform a *parikama*, Buddhists call it a *kora*. You are welcome to do either of these, or simply make a trek around the peak. Tibetan Buddhists believe that a single *kora* washes away the sins of one life and 108 circuits secure *Nirvana* in this life. Devout Tibetans often make the 52

kilometre circuit in a single day. Indian pilgrims make the circuit in three days, but this also is rushed, particularly since the circuit, though mostly level, involves the crossing of a 5630 metre (18,525 foot) pass. A four day trek is far more enjoyable and rewarding.

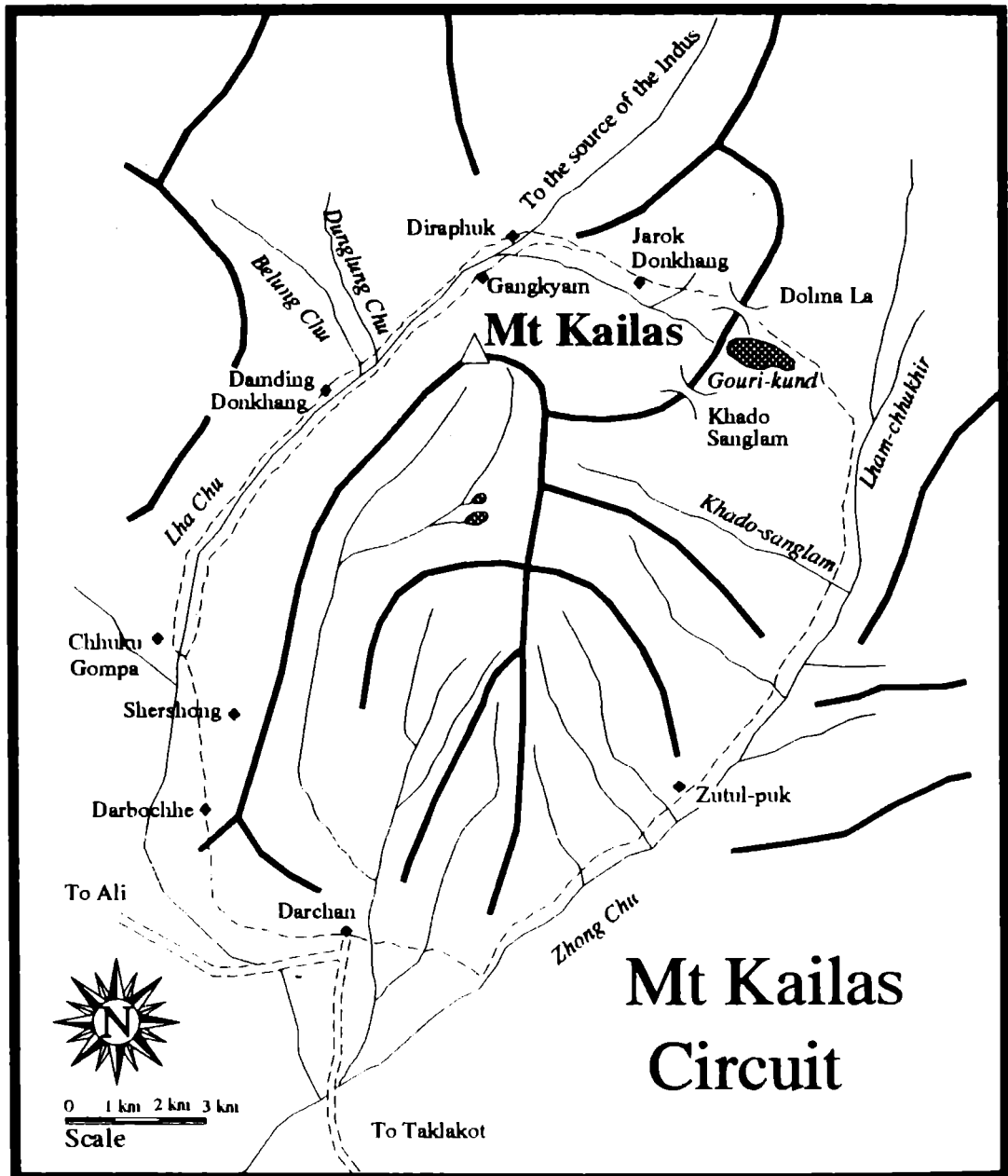
An agreement between China and India allows 350 Indians per year to make the pilgrimage to Manasarovar and Kailas. The trip is so important to Hindus that the trips are oversubscribed and the quota is filled by lottery. They trek for nine days through India in order to reach Taklakot.

Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims make a clockwise circuit of the peak. Bon-po tradition is to circumambulate in the opposite direction. As you circle Kailas via the traditional route, you will meet followers of Bon-po making a *kora* in the opposite direction. When we were at Kailas there was a large contingent of Bon-po pilgrims from faraway Kham and Nakchu. We were astounded at the huge number of adherents to what has been described as an 'ancient pre-Buddhist' religion making the counterclockwise circuit.

The most pious of the pilgrims are those who prostrate themselves around Kailas, lying flat on the ground, then rising, walking to the point that their hands touched and repeating the process. It's an awesome spectacle to meet a group of pilgrims performing this feat.

There is also an 'inner *kora*' that passes two lakes to the south of Kailas. Tradition dictates that only those who have made 13 circumam-

ulations of Kailas may follow this inner route.



This tradition is so important to Tibetans that we were required to assure our hosts that we would not violate the sanctity of this route before they allowed us to proceed to Darchan.

Beware of trekking according to the following itinerary and camping at 5200 metres elevation

unless you have spent at least *two nights* at Darchan to acclimatise.

Mt Kailas Circuit

Day 1: Darchan to Damding Donkhang

Trek west from the guest house compound high above the Barkha plain to a cairn and prayer flags at 4730 metres. This is the first of four *chaktsal-gang*, ('prostration stations') on the *kora* and offers an excellent view of the peak. Turn north up the valley of the Lha Chu, descending to Darbochhe, a tall pole adorned with prayer flags at 4750 metres. The prayer flags are replaced annually during a festival on Buddha's birthday, the full moon day in May. Nearby is *Chorten-kangni*. It is considered an auspicious act to pass through the small archway formed by the two legs of this chorten. The trail continues across the plain to Shershong.

An hour past Shershong is a bridge leading to Chhuku Gompa high on the hillside above. All the monasteries on the Kailas circuit were destroyed during the cultural revolution. Chhuku Gompa was the first to be rebuilt and contains a few treasures that were rescued from the original gompas. The normal pilgrims' route stays on the east bank of the Lha Chu, but for better views of Kailas, and generally better campsites, cross the bridge and follow the west bank. The west bank trail treks across scree slopes to a camp near Damding Donkhang at 4890 metres that offers a good view of the west face of Kailas.

Day 2: Damding Donkhang to Jarok Donkhang

Cross two side streams, the Belung and Dungleung Chu, on log bridges as the north face of Kailas comes into view. On the opposite side of the Lha Chu you can see a stone guest house and camp. Several groups of nomads tend herds of goats and yaks nearby. Pass their tents carefully; like most Tibetans they keep ferocious Tibetan mastiff dogs. As you reach the gompa and frugal guest house at Diraphuk you are rewarded with a fine view of the north face of Kailas. This is the first night stop for Indian pilgrims.

Cross a bridge across the Lha Chu. If you trek up the valley of the Lha Chu you would eventually reach the true source of the Indus. The *kora* route now makes a serious climb onto a moraine, eventually meeting the trail from the east bank. The trail climbs more gently to a meadow full of fat marmots (*phiya*) at about 5210 metres. This is a good camp that will make the pass crossing easier than it would be if you camped at Diraphuk. It's dangerous to camp higher because of acclimatisation problems. The snow covered pass to the right, the Khado Sanglam, is protected by a lion-faced *dakini*. Pilgrims may cross this difficult pass only on their auspicious 13th circuit of the mountain.

Day 3: Jarok Donkhang to Zutul-puk

Climb past piles of clothing at Shiva-tsal, elevation 5330 metres. Tibetans leave an article of clothing or a drop of blood here as part of leaving their past life behind them. Continue

past thousands of small rock cairns to a large cairn at 5630 metres and beyond to a stone hut and camp. The trail leads across a boulder field and up to the Dolma La at 5630 metres. A big boulder on the pass representing the goddess *Dolma*, better known by her Sanskrit name *Tara*, is festooned with prayer flags and streamers. It is traditional to leave, and take, something as part of the collection of coins, prayer flags, teeth and other offerings attached to the rock. This is the physical and spiritual high point of the *kora*. Money is pasted to the rock with butter and pilgrims make the requisite three circumambulations of the rock. This must be the world's largest collection of prayer flags. If you meet Tibetan pilgrims here you will probably be invited to join them for a picnic in celebration of completing the hardest part of the *kora*.

The trail is rocky at first, then begins a series of switchbacks as it passes the lake Gouri-kund at 5450 metres. Devout Hindu pilgrims are supposed to break the ice and bathe in its waters. More switchbacks lead down to the valley and a stone guest house alongside the Lham-chhukhir at 5150 metres. There is a footprint of Buddha, called a *shapje*, nearby. Even though the trail is better and less marshy on the other side, stay on the west side of the river; it becomes too large below to cross back. The trek makes a long, gentle, uninteresting descent of the valley. When crossing the stream of the Khado Sanglam you reach the third prostration station; look upstream for the only view of the east face of Kailas. The Zutul-puk Gompa, a guest house,

and camp are further down the valley at 4790 metres. *Zuthul* means miracle and *puk* means cave. This gumpa is named after a cave in which the saint Milarepa stayed, meditating and eating only nettles. Among the miracles he performed were adjusting the height of this cave to make it more comfortable. His footprint still remains on the roof. Here the river is known as the Zhong Chu.

Day 4: Zutul-puk to Darchan

Cross a bridge over a side stream from Kailas, then contour up as the river descends towards the plain. Make a dramatic exit from the river valley onto the plain at the last prostration station, elevation 4610 metres. Rakshas Tal glistens in the distance as you pass mani walls decorated with carved yak skulls. Trek a further 1-1/2 hours to Darchan along the edge of the plain.

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