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Kosmos Journeys

A Sacred Journey to Mount Kalaish

with Tara Stuart and Rinzin Sherpa

In far western Tibet there is a solitary mountain that has been considered sacred for over a thousand years. Ancient texts describe it as the spiritual center of the universe. Mount Kailas is a revered pilgrimage site for Hindus, Bon, Jains and Buddhists. They may travel for weeks or months to celebrate the Saga Dawa Festival. At that time more than a thousand pilgrims will gather in a well known valley to celebrate the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha.

In May-June 2012 an international group of fifteen will travel close to a thousand miles from Lhasa, Tibet across the great Tibetan plateau, through the Himalayas to Mount Kailas. Rinzin Sherpa, a respected Himalaya trek leader, and Tara Stuart, Kosmos Associate, will co-lead the trip that is timed to be present at Mount Kailas for the Saga Dawa Festival on June 4th.

A few years ago Metzger, the renown mountaineer who climbed Mt. Everest without oxygen, obtained official permission to climb the 22,028 foot Mount Kailas. He reached within a few hundred feet of the summit, turned around and descended. He believed that the mountain summit was too sacred for anyone to step on.

Every year at the time of the Saga Dawa Festival, the gigantic Tarboche flagpole, tied with hundreds of Tibetan prayer flags and kata scarfs of blessing, is raised. People from Tibet add their personal prayer flags to the great flagpole. The flagpole must stand upright if things are to be good for Tibet in the following year.

The kora or sacred circumperambulation of Mount Kailas is an act of reverence linking the natural and spiritual worlds. The 32-mile trek is considered a ritualistic and symbolic experience of death, life and transformation. Every step becomes a tangible progression toward liberation. There are no lodgings or teahouses on the way. The people themselves or hired yaks carry their supplies for the three day kora. Babies are carried on the backs of their parents, families keep older children walking, while very old men and women trudge the ancient way.

Some members of the Kosmos group will walk this revered kora. Ceremony and symbolism mark every step of the way. We will pass the large boulder known as Shapje Datak that bears the

footprint of the Buddha. Part way up the trail there is an area with discarded clothes and strips of cloth, called Shiwa Tsal, the place of death. One must first die to be reborn. Here pilgrims may assume a position of dying before rising and leaving some personal offering, even a few drops of blood. This ritual is meant to aid with the individual's spirit journey after their physical death. Through this symbolic dying, one's sins are forgiven and one is purified for the new life.

For many, the Dolma La or Tara Pass at 18,300 feet is reached by a labored climb said to invest the pilgrim with the power to achieve a higher goal. Each trudges up the 'Hill of Salvation.' Prayer flags and the gigantic boulder in honor of the Dolma, the Goddess of Mercy and Compassion, welcome each arrival. This is the high goal of the entire kora. Joyous celebration and ritual are combined with the spiritual purification of the Dolma. New prayer flags are tied to the ropes strung from the Dolma rock. Each flag brings merit to the giver as well as sending prayers heavenward and over the earth as it blows in the wind.

The way down the Dolma La leads to the Tukje Chenpo Tso, the 'Lake of Mercy.' This is one of the highest lakes in the world. Its icy waters offer a freezing blessing for some of the brave ones.

Mount Kailas seems to energize the surrounding region with power. Four of Asia's great rivers originate here. Mirroring Mount Kailas is Lake Manasarova, the healing lake of light, bordered by ancient monasteries marking the Buddhist wheel of Darma. The value of the Mount Kailas experience lies within, beyond the realm of the visible. Throughout the centuries this solitary mountain area continues to be the epicenter of unfolding awareness and openness to a higher dimension of being.

Photography: *above*. Mount Kailash images taken by Tara Stuart on an earlier trip. *Bottom*. Tara Stuart (on horse) leading a Kosmos group to Mustang in 2010

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