

“MY JOURNEY TO MOUNT KAILASH”

Jayneal Menon, 15, shares with us how an epic trip to Tibet turned into a journey of a lifetime.

“In July 2017, my brother and I were lucky enough to have an adventure many only dream of – we travelled to Tibet to scale all 18,500ft of Mount Kailash. When I was first told we were going, I must admit that the biggest draw for me was the chance of seeing snow for the first time! Little did I know that there was so much more waiting.

The journey started with us travelling to Kathmandu, Nepal, and then to Lhasa, Tibet. On the flight, we saw the summit of the majestic Mount Everest. It was surreal to see it in real life after seeing it in pictures all this time. Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, stands at 11,000ft. Some people needed to use bottles of oxygen occasionally, and there was a 24-hour centre in the hotel just for those who were having difficulty breathing. We spent a day in Lhasa resting in the hotel and acclimatising. The next day, we went to Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple.

The Potala Palace stands at over 135m high, and has over 1,000 rooms. It is a beautifully-crafted building with a lot of stairs, and where all the Dalai Lamas lived, until the current one went to India. It was really nice and enlightening to see all the historical objects in the palace, such as the thrones of the different Dalai Lamas, the room where they studied, all the old handwritten books, and the holy statues. There were also the tombs of the 5th, 7th, 9th, 11th and 13th Dalai Lamas, each sheeted with more than one metric tonne of gold. The Jokhang Temple is a temple that was built over a lake by the prince of one province for the princess of another province. From there, we could see the whole of Potala Palace.

A Rewarding Challenge

The next day, we flew to Ngari, Tibet, and then drove to Darchen, which is at the foothills of Mount Kailash. We spent two days in Darchen, acclimatising on the first day and going to Lake Mansarovar on the second day. We had to dip our whole bodies in the lake, as it is something most people do before climbing the mountain. The water

was 2 to 3°C, which meant that we couldn't feel our bodies after coming out of the water. A prayer was then done, to ensure our safety and to bless the holy water. The rest of the day was spent acclimatising, which was very necessary as it was starting to get very cold and altitude sickness is a very real thing!

The next day, we drove to a small temple to seek permission to ascend Mount Kailash. We then drove to Tarboche and started the walk, which is called a *kora*. We trekked 14km to Diraphuk – the first lodge, at 17,000ft – where it drops to sub-zero temperatures at night. The trek was much more difficult than I had anticipated and, at this point, I was wondering how I would make it over two more days. However, by mid-day of the second day, we had successfully crossed Dromo La Pass, which is at 18,500ft. This is the highest point trekkers are allowed to go on Mount Kailash (climbers generally do not summit the mountain to respect local religious beliefs), and it was a great sense of accomplishment to know that I had made it. Now, we had to get back down! By the time we reached our lodge at Zutulphuk, we had walked 28km since 7am that morning. We stayed the night and walked to the last checkpoint of the *kora* the next morning, which was a 10km trek. We left while it was still dark, so we had to use our headlights to move around.

When we started this trip, I was hoping to have my first snow experience and I'm happy to report that I can now check that box, but that's not all. I saw scenery too beautiful to describe. I rode a little horse, who helped me when my legs were too tired to take another step, and it even started to hail, which was another first for me. I spoke to a Sherpa (a person from a local ethnic group that's renowned for being expert guides) and gained insight into his life, and saw people who had spent their entire lives saving money to come on this *kora*. Their belief, dedication and will were incredible.

A Test of Nerves

We drove back to Ngari on the same day and stayed there for one night. The next morning, we left for the airport to fly back to Lhasa. And, that's when tragedy struck. The bus we were in got into an accident, with 26 of us inside. It was going faster than it was supposed to be, slid on the wet road, turned 180 degrees, and fell onto its side on the sand. Sadly, one lady passed away, and a lot of people had severe injuries. Very luckily, I only got some scratches on my shoulder and elbow, and my brother was unhurt, so we did our best to help the



others who were. We spent an extra night in Ngari to recuperate and then flew back to Lhasa, where we met with the foreign minister of Tibet. He came to check on our group, which was a lovely gesture by the Tibetan government. We flew back to Kathmandu the next day and to KL that very night.

What an experience it all was! I think my brother will agree when I say that I am so thankful we were taken on this trip, and have come back with minds that think differently and bodies capable of so much more. I believe that this trip required us to draw on the courage, independence and self-belief that had been instilled in us by our parents and our school, and for this we will always be grateful.”

“I spoke to a Sherpa and gained insight into his life, and saw people who had spent their entire lives saving money to come on this *kora*.”