

Globe



**A wing and a
prayer – Helen
Barnhill does
Tibet the hard way**



Journey to the centre of the Earth

Legacy winner Helen Barnhill's describes her eventful trip to the far west of Tibet

AS MANY of you will already know, I was awarded the William Wood Travel Legacy for 2006 to help me make “the journey to the centre of the earth” – to Mt Kailas and Lake Manasarovar in the far west of Tibet.

This was a trip I'd long dreamed of after an abortive (but thought-provoking) month or so in Lhasa in the winter of 1988/89, which ended badly owing to freak weather conditions – I was unable to return to Kathmandu overland as planned, and by now I'd caught the Kailas bug too. I don't remember meeting anyone that winter in Lhasa who had actually “done” the Kailas Kora (i.e. the pilgrim circuit) but every Tibetan café-cum-backpacker's hostel seemed to be called Kailas, Kang Tise, Kang Rimpoche (Tibetan names for Mt Kailas) or Mt Meru, and the going rate for foreigners then was \$3,000 from Lhasa – an impossibly exorbitant sum.

But I did not return to Tibet or even Nepal in the years which followed and had shelved the idea indefinitely, or at least until my next lifetime perhaps!

When the William Wood legacy was thrown open to members of Globetrotters of any age, I seized the chance, put in an application and began actively planning a new expedition for the spring of 2006. Being awarded the legacy of £1,000 was a real boost to my morale, but it came too late for 2006 and my “pilgrimage” had to be postponed till April-May 2007. The delay did, however, give me plenty of time to plan my campaign.

I arrived in Kathmandu on April 10, 2007 and set up camp in Thamel. I could find no trace of Sudarshan and my old trekking agency so I had to start again virtually from scratch. It quickly became clear that I must sign up with an agency in Thamel for the ten-day overland trip, ending with two

days' sightseeing in Lhasa. Then I must find new accommodation and another agency in Lhasa to drive overland to Mt Kailas/Manasarovar, Everest base camp and back to the border. I figured I would deal with that when I got there.

Ten days passed in a whirl; I requested and got a 30-day visa for China, stocked up with equipment and food and signed up to leave on April 24. This first leg of my journey cost £230 on a six and six basis.

We left early, arriving at Kodari (the border crossing) at 1pm. No sooner did we step out on to the bridge than it started to rain in torrents. And it continued to rain in torrents for hours as we ground slowly uphill, by now jam-packed into land-cruisers, the road repeatedly blocked by landslides. The first night was dire – we slept in Tibetan road workers' accommodation with no lighting, no heating and no hot water, but I didn't care too much – we'd been warned and anyway, I was on my way.

Day two took us up on to the Tibetan plateau proper. Cho Oyu (8,200 m) and Shishapangma (8,000 m) were clearly visible but dwarfed by the sheer vastness of the plateau itself and the huge sweep of the Himalayan massif. Another hard night and my first experience of real altitude sickness.

Next day, we drove on through a parched and arid landscape, with the occasional sparse settlement here and there – a harsh land and a harsher lifestyle. Fields hoed by hand, primitive irrigation, women and children begging. At Shigatse we toured the huge Tashilhunpo Monastery, the ancient seat of the Panchen Lamas – very impressive (and the hot shower was welcome too).

On the next day to Gyantse over atrocious (unsealed) roads to another major monastery, the fabled Kumbum and a

dzong – a medieval fortress on a hilltop. On day five, seven to eight hours' hard driving brings us up and over the high Karo La (5,000 m) festooned with prayer flags and pilgrim cairns, past the beautiful turquoise-blue waters of Yamdruk Tso, over the Kamba La (4,800 m), down to cross the mighty Brahmaputra and on along its tributary, the Kyu Chu. We've made it to Lhasa! I'm here! But so much has changed, I scarcely recognise it.

Two hectic days of sightseeing follow – the Jokhang, the Potala Palace, Sera Monastery and a charming little nunnery (with cats). Fascinating and mostly familiar to me but there have been many small changes here too. I move into a three-bed dorm with Kati and Teija (my Finnish friends) for £2 p.n. and I set about planning the next stage of my journey.

I start putting up notices, making enquiries and “doing” what's left of Lhasa. I love the Norbulingka (the summer palace of the Dalai Lama), the Lingkor and the market stalls in the Barkor, but there's an unexpected snag. There's a China-wide, week-long public holiday for all civil servants. (Thank God for my 30-day visa.) We also have an unexpected (and very unwelcome) visit from the police.

By degrees, a new plan crystallizes out of the mist. An Australian man (who has been to Kailas before), Derek (a young Irishman) and Sharon (his English girlfriend) have signed up with me to Phase 2: we drive overland to Mt Kailas/Lake Manasarovar, walk the Kora (the pilgrim circuit), drive east to Everest base camp and down to the border – two weeks in all. I've brought several detailed maps from Kathmandu and laid up a store of provisions; the others have cooking gear and oxygen bottles. We'll find porters when we get there.

We set off in the dark at 6am on Thursday, May 10. Our driver (Tsering) doesn't speak English but we pick up our guide (Lobsang) in Shigatse. There's trouble over the water bottles – Tsering wants half the water offloaded, the others refuse. I think this is a bad way to begin but I'm outvoted.

A long, hard 12-hour day as we push westward to Saga. We travel slowly for hours without seeing a soul except the odd land-cruiser overtaking us or coming the other way. Every three or four hours we encounter a flock of sheep and goats and the odd shepherd girl and tent. Sometimes there is no tent.

We even discover a new concrete bridge in the middle of nowhere: no road, no ramps, nothing – just the river.

The roads are unsealed and simply frightful. There are road works everywhere – the scale of reconstruction is extraordinary. They can't be doing this for the tourists, there aren't enough of us – it must be for the army. We pass a long military convoy (just to make my point) and now I see – I think they're creating a two-lane sealed highway right to the border with India, probably for a rapid-reaction force. For the moment it's dirt tracks, monstrous potholes and endless problems and delays – the road gangs work on through the night. We arrive very, very late – not good.

We leave early next morning – but there's



A woman begs on the road to Lhasa – note landcruisers parked in the background

more aggro over the water and growing tension between the other three – I am cast uneasily in the role of peacemaker. Another long, exhausting, 12-hour day punctuated by a frightful showdown. Derek insists on axing Guge and Tsaparang (the remains of an ancient Tibetan kingdom with magnificent art) because the schedule's too tight. He wants (and I do too) more stops for photos, brewing tea etc, and a rest day here and there. He wins the day, but the divisions are growing deeper by the minute.

We arrive at the shores of Lake Manasarovar just in time to watch the sun go down. We're here!

Next morning we all climb up to explore the small monastery by the lake and I look up to see a full circular rainbow above our heads. Is this "two worlds merging" or a rare optical phenomenon? It's certainly a surprise – I didn't know a rainbow-circle was possible. We drive up high above Lake Manasarovar – today it's a brilliant turquoise blue with scarcely a ripple. There are wildfowl everywhere. We stop to "chat" to nomads on the way to Darchen but the baby doesn't like strange men and starts to scream, so that's the end of my photos.

A cold night at Darchen motor camp, a brilliant, cloudless blue day to follow and we're off on our kora with high hopes, four porters (mine's a woman) and my trusty walking stick. The path climbs gently up to our first "sky burial" site – a little unnerving, but the view is fabulous. From this point on, the shining, snow-capped dome of Kailas is clearly visible and enchantingly beautiful. It is known in Tibetan as Kang Tise or Kang Rimpoche, "Precious Jewel of the Snow", and it's easy to see why. Though only 6,714 m high and completely dwarfed from a distance by the Gurlamandhata massif, it stands alone like "a great white sentinel," guardian of the old trading routes into

Tibet and a lodestone to devout pilgrims from all over Asia.

We stop at a large tea tent and I ponder my options uneasily. The trail is rising rapidly, my legs are getting tired and I want to conserve my strength for the pass tomorrow, which is bound to be bad news. Suddenly I spy four or five yaks, all saddled up and waiting outside, a small pony (ditto) and a brand new, bright and shiny motorbike. A deal is soon struck and I'm on my way again! (I had a Honda 90 once, so this feels good.)

The trail is very rough, but we often stop for photos and to stretch our legs. I am enchanted by the curious sight of plump little marmosets popping up out of their burrows to stare at us. All wildlife here is sacred, so they have no fear of humans. My heart sinks when we drive up to a deep, fast-flowing alpine stream, but my knight in shining armour rides the bike across, gets off and wades back to my side and carries me over piggyback to keep my boots dry – my hero! (his own are very wet.) We can't communicate in words but it hardly matters – that's real chivalry. A little further, a Tibetan pilgrim with disturbing signs of frostbite on his toes. (They are a very dark shade of purple shot through with livid pink and he can't feel anything when I try to massage them.) But what to do? There's no doctor or hospital anywhere here.

Finally, we judder our way across a



High alpine pass on route to Lhasa – the clothes in the foreground have been discarded by pilgrims

massive sweep of ice and snow (there's a river underneath) and grind on up a very steep slope to the monastery where we're to stay the night. It's very cold, very damp, and two ravens peck dementedly at the corner of a window pane right by my head. (Are they trying to tell me something?) I'm glad to see the others when they come – and there's a beautiful sunset.

We leave early next morning for the steep climb up to the dreaded Drolma La (5,630m). It's a long and arduous four-hour ascent for me, and this time I reach for the oxygen bottles. Kailas is steadily lost to sight (the best views were all on the first day) and there's heavy snow at the top, which hardly helps. A large rock at the top, festooned with fluttering prayer flags, and an equally steep two-hour descent to a welcome tea tent. I cannot walk another step – but what do I see? Another small pony, already saddled and walking! It's another three or four hours' walk to the next monastery and I've had enough. Another deal and the day is saved.

The second monastery is quite different – small, sunny and run by a family. Next morning they proudly show us the small cave at the back where Milarepa is said to have meditated. An easy three to four-hour walk out next morning and we're back in Darchen. It was hard going – especially for me – but I've done the Kailas Kora! Fantastic.

Next day we drive back to the shores of Lake Manasarovar. We go for a long walk around the lake and turn for home when the shepherd girls bring their flocks in. Sharon and Derek play with little Pema for hours but I prefer to rest – there is much to think about. We leave early the next morning for another long, 12-hour haul back to Saga – our only hope of a hot shower and then only from 9pm-11pm. From Saga we head south by a different route to Tingri. I will never forget the vast, desolate immensity of the Tibetan plateau. More nomads, more flocks of goats and sheep. What hard, hard lives these people lead. The others sleep or read in the back when they're not squabbling. How can they do that? I can't bear to miss

such magnificent scenery.

A dog steals my bread at lunchtime but it's so old and hard, I don't care. (At least, he didn't sneak away with my salami.) This time we also drive through a "desertified" region – the growing swathe of high sand dunes – a grim reminder of global warming. Tingri is fun and full of people and I climb up to a wonderful lookout point to watch the sun set over Everest. The Tibetans call it Chomolungma – 'Mother of Snows'.

We pass Rongbuk Monastery and arrive at the tented village at the foot of Mt Everest late next morning in time for a lazy lunch. I love the black yak-hair tents and the crisp, clean smell of burning juniper. Our tent has a "missing" panel and is the only one that is light and smoke-free inside. Next day I take a pony trap up to Base Camp proper and scramble about amongst the rocks and prayer flags. There are several expeditions camped below the peak, but there are no staff at the government office in charge of conservation – a disappointment for me. There is a terrible row (again) between the two men, which comes dangerously close to a punch-up. I cannot stand all this tension and unpleasantness.

We leave at 5am the next morning for the longest, hardest and most gruelling day of all. We drop off Derek and Sharon at Tingri (the Tibetans will return to Tingri later to take them back to Lhasa) and head south to the border. The pace is fast and furious – and frequently *off-piste*. But by lunchtime we're stuck (frustratingly) behind endless landslides and road works again. Why did they not use tunnels, I wonder for the hundredth time.

At 6pm I discover a delightful little guesthouse in Zangmu with TV and en suite shower – wow. Next morning I set off early for the customs depot and the border, but there are constant delays – first a traffic jam, then a long wait for the minivan to fill. I'm suddenly unutterably weary – but what does it matter? I've done what I set out to do. "Lha gyalo!" The gods are victorious!

Don't miss Helen's talk on March 1, 2008.