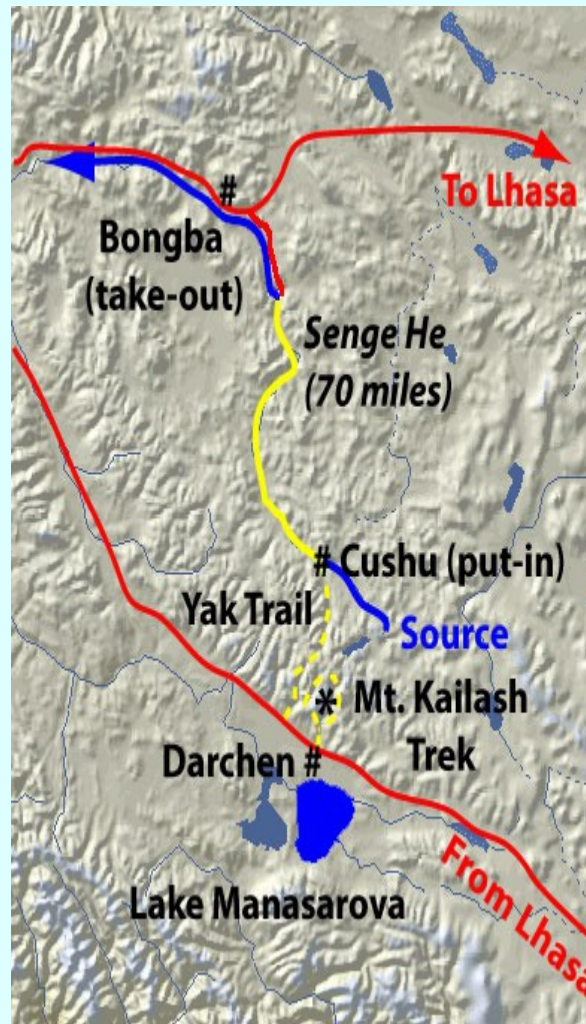


**Trekking Mt. Kailash and  
Kayaking the Indus and Raka River Headwaters  
in western Tibet**

**Pete Winn, most photos by Scott Sanderson  
August, 2005**



**Summary**

Dates: July 31 - August 29

Nearest major airport: Lhasa, Tibet

Round trip driving time: 9 days

Put-in: near Mt Kailash, elevation 16,500', flow about 300 cfs

Take-out: 25 miles upstream from Bongba, elevation 15,400', flow about 1,500 cfs

Total distance: about 70 miles (18 miles per day)

Average gradient: 16 feet/mile

Participants: 9 total using 9 inflatable kayaks

Grade: Class 2



Participants included Scott Sanderson from Oaklyn NJ, Eric Sol and Jared Cruce from Ashland OR, Steve Marston from Willets CA, Pete Winn, Travis Winn, Carmen Winn and Elaine Pilz from Grand Junction CO, and Chong Dak from Lhasa. Everyone paddled their own inflatable kayak and carried their own gear and their share of group gear. Spending a month traveling with Travis and Carmen and getting to know Chong Dak again were among the highlights of the trip for me.

This was the first trip to Tibet for Steve, Eric, Jared, Elaine and Carmen. Scott, a film maker, photographer, writer and computer expert, joined our 1999 expedition to the Mekong headwaters, a wild trip, and our 2002 trip on the Lhasa and Yarlung Tsangpo rivers. This was Travis' fourth river expedition in Tibet and his ninth in China. It was the second river trip for Chong Dak, our Tibetan-English interpreter, and his first trip paddling his own inflatable kayak full of gear. It was my fourth river expedition in Tibet and my eighth in China.

### **Why the Indus River?**

Simple. Scott had such a good time riding Tibetan ponies on our expedition to boat the Mekong headwaters in 1999 that he suggested I plan another first descent where getting to the put-in required a pony ride. More on this later...



Looking north over Lake Manasarova at Mt. Kailash.  
No wonder it's one of Asia's most holy mountains.

The Indus headwaters drain the north side of Mt. Kailash. The headwaters of three other major Asian rivers are also located near Kailash - the Tsangpo (Bramaputra), the Humla Karnali (Ganges) and the Xianquan (Sutlej), adding to the importance of this mountain among Asian religions. The Tsangpo and Sutlej headwaters have been run, but the section of the Humla in Tibet is too small to boat.

Kailash is visited by thousands of Hindu, Buddhist and Bon pilgrims every summer. Hindus and Buddhists walk thirty-two miles clockwise around the peak, while Bon adherents walk counterclockwise. Mahayana Buddhism evolved from Hinduism in India about 700 B.C. and migrated to Tibet about 800 A.D. At that time, Tibetans practiced Bon, a shamanistic religion that involved animal sacrifice - even today one sees dead goats hanging from bridges in Bon areas. The form of Buddhism that eventually took hold over most of Tibet by about 1200 A.D. incorporates many Bon ideas, and Mt. Kailash plays a prominent role in the transition from Hinduism to Tibetan Buddhism. The Buddhist poet-saint Milarepa (Shiva to the Hindus) won a race to the top of the 22,000' peak, beating Naro Bonchung by riding a ray of sunlight.

Well, we couldn't very well drive 20 miles past Mt. Kailash to the trail to the Indus without visiting it, and everyone was up for making the kora, including Chong Dak, who once trained as a Buddhist monk and had not been to Kailash for seven years. So, in addition to driving four days from Lhasa to Kailash and riding ponies for three days over the Gangdise Mountains to boat about 100 miles of the Indus headwaters, we planned a three day trek around Kailash. Plus, since this was the first trip to China for several of the participants, we included a visit to the Great Wall near Beijing in the itinerary, and in the summer of 2004, Scott, Travis, Carmen and I had taken ten Chinese on a fifteen day Grand Canyon trip, so we decided to visit them in Chengdu on our way to Lhasa. The total time away from home was 33 very busy days.

There are probably some other unrun rivers requiring a several day pony ride that I could have chosen, but they certainly weren't as famous as the Indus, and I'd always wanted to visit Lake Manasarova and Mt. Kailash. However, I think I'll wait until the Chinese complete the airport at

Gar (Ali, Senge He) before returning - the four day drive may be spectacular, but it's a back breaker.

## Getting to Lhasa

I won't bore you with Great Wall pics - you can find them in lots of places, but I will tell you not to visit it on a Sunday in the summer. It was so crowded we had to walk a mile to get there from the traffic jam we got stuck in, and there were times when it was almost hard to breathe as we made our way along the top of the wall. On the other hand, it was a classic introduction to an amazing piece of world history in the most populous country on our planet.

I also don't recommend visiting Chengdu in the summer, which is such a sauna that you just have to learn to accept clothes soaked in sweat. We did have a great time with our Chinese friends, however. One of them, Master Xiao, owned a hotel which had great air conditioning. He also runs a Kung Fu school and had some of his students put on a demonstration for us. Scott had made a music DVD of the Grand Canyon trip and gave everyone a copy after showing it to them, then we had a fantastic banquet that ended with a singing contest among Carmen, the Kung Fu students and Master Xiao's son, who had just returned from winning a pop music singing contest in Beijing. The Chinese love to sing.

We originally planned two days in Lhasa, first visiting the Potala - the Dalai Lama's monastery, which is now a tourist trap museum but still very impressive, and then a day buying and packing food and gear for the trip to Kailash and the Indus. By just good fortune, there was a major festival at Drepung, one of the larger monasteries near Lhasa, so we spent the first day there. I had been to one at the Tashilunpo Monastery in Shigatze in 2002, and this was just as amazing. The emotional intensity of the Buddhist crowd, the chanting and horns, the scenery and the juniper smoke brought tears to our eyes:



Giant manis and a huge thangka drew thousands of Buddhists and tourists to Drepung.  
Photo by Travis Winn.

## The Road Trip

We originally planned to use three Land Cruisers to carry all of our gear and food and nine of us to the Kailash area, but when Chong Dak saw the pile of gear he wisely decided to rent a small truck. We had chosen August because it is in the middle of the rainy season, and I was afraid the river would be too low in June or July and too cold in May or September. The road is paved to Shigatze (a six hour drive), then dirt for the next 750 miles to Kailash, and in the rainy season it can get pretty bad. The drive used to take six days, but the Chinese have built bridges over the worst washes. Even so, we drove through creeks and mud holes that were deep enough that we sometimes got stuck and had to be pulled out.

We stayed at the Holy Land Hotel in Shigatze and ate at the Sling Shot Cafe, both managed by a friend of Chong Dak's. The Sling Shot was decorated with weapons from the 1906 invasion of Tibet by the British, who shot hundreds of Tibetans armed only with sling shots. While Travis and I finished buying food and other items, the rest of the group visited Tashilunpo Monastery, the home of the Panchen Lama, who is regarded as the second most prominent lama after the Dalai Lama. Historically, the Panchen Lama was selected by mutual agreement between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese, but since the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 and the escape of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959, the Tibetans and Chinese have selected their own Panchen Lamas. Unfortunately, the Chinese captured the Tibetan's choice and no one has seen him for decades.

We stayed at a Chinese dump in Sangsang the next night and a surprisingly nice Tibetan hostel in Dongpa the third night. Although we weren't able to see Mt. Everest, we did get great view of Anapurna from a pass near Dongpa. The wind was so strong at the campsite near Lake Manasarova that we parked all four vehicles in a semicircle and piled gear between the wheels in order to keep the stoves lit to cook dinner. Travis, Eric, Scott and Steve were the only ones bold enough to take a ceremonial swim in the frigid water.



This jewelry saleswoman in Darchen was so aggressive that she would open your motel room door and just walk in to sell jewelry. We had to push her out and lock the door.

Photo by Travis Winn.

The next morning, when we got to Darchen at the base of Mt. Kailash, we found that the local Tibetan leader had made a deal with the Chinese Public Security Bureau that required all foreigners to stay in his hotel and eat in his restaurant before trekking around Kailash. We also had to rent yaks from him and his cronies. So it goes in a tourist trap.

There's a creek that flows through Darchen, draining the south side of Kailash. The Hindus pilgrims who come by the busload from India to make the Kailash kora camp near the creek and both they and the locals use the creek to do laundry. Since we had most of a day to hang out and Darchen is a pretty trashy town, those of us who weren't too exhausted decided to do our laundry. Travis, Carmen and I walked up the creek and into the canyon, where there was a non-functioning dam about ten feet high, and were in the process of washing clothes above the dam when three young Chinese soldiers climbed up and told us we had to move downstream. Travis, who is getting to be pretty fluent in Chinese, asked them why, and they pointed to a pipe we hadn't noticed and said we were putting soap in the water supply for the town. One of the soldiers then told Travis we would have to pay a fine of about \$10,000, which of course flipped him out. Fortunately, one of the other soldiers admitted they were just joking. We gladly moved our laundry to the creek below the dam!

### The Trek



On the trek.

By the time we reached Darchen, several of us had gotten the usual round of diarrhea and recovered, but Elaine and Jared were still not feeling well. Fortunately, we all felt well enough the next day to start hiking, though Scott didn't have the energy to carry his video camera on the

first day of the trek and I was so tired at the end of the second day that I just went to bed without dinner. Over the course of the expedition, everyone, including Chong Dak, had a couple days where the food, the water or the elevation got to them. Fortunately, we had enough medicine to treat serious gastro or respiratory illnesses and just enough electrolyte replacement to keep us on schedule.

We rented yaks to carry our food and camping gear while we made the three day hike from 16,000' to Drolma Pass (18,500') on the north side of Kailash, then back down to 16,000'. By then we'd been above 15,000' for four nights and were somewhat acclimated. Still, it was a challenging hike for most of us, and Carmen (16 years old) was the first to reach the pass. We saw dozens of people, including Bon coming at us, Buddhists rushing past us on a one day kora (including two of our drivers), a large group of Hindus that leapfrogged us, and perhaps a half dozen Europeans. Montrail donated several pairs of hiking shoes to the group, but Chong Dak found out the hard way that Tibetan feet are shaped a little different than western feet.

At the lake and on the trek we discovered that our idea of caring for sacred places is quite different from that of the Chinese and Tibetans. Both areas had abundant TP flowers and scraps of other trash, but away from the trail the scenery was pristine. I'm glad I made the kora, but I'm not sure I'd do it again. According to tradition, I'd need to make another 107 koras to reach Nirvana. Maybe in another lifetime...

### **The "Pony" Ride**

When we returned from the trek we met with the Darchen yak and pony chief and his minions to negotiate the cost of yaks and ponies for the three day trip over the Gandise Range to the put-in on the Indus. I'd selected the route and the put-in village, Cushu, based on 1:200,000 scale Russian topos from the 1960s. I had been using the Russian maps to plan river expeditions in western China for ten years, with moderate success. Although the Chinese have 1:100,000 scale maps that are more up to date (1980's), Chong Dak couldn't get these for us because the border area southwest of Kailash is being contested by India.

We had problems right from the start. First, they increased the rates for yaks and ponies to 20% more than they had quoted Chong Dak when we created the budget at the end of 2004. The yak herders didn't know the trail I'd selected from the maps, but chose another trail that was further away, went over a much higher pass and was a day longer. Then, they insisted on adding another day to make the total nine days, which is a multiple of three which is the number of days each family is allotted for the Kailash trek. Why rent to us for eight days when they can rent to Indians for nine days? Of course, August is the rainy season and there weren't enough Indians renting yaks or ponies for this to be an issue, but they refused to budge. Then to really piss me off, I found out that we had to rent animals from eight families, and they insisted that at least one member of each family come along to manage their own animals, at additional cost. When they told me 27,000 yuan (nearly \$3400) and I'd budgeted \$1400 based on quotes from 2004, I blew up and told them we'd walk. Big mistake.

I'd been blackmailed by our yakherder in 1999 and had to pay twice as much as budgeted, but in the Mekong headwaters area this meant about \$500 - a tolerable amount. \$2000 was just too much. So we pay for the yaks to carry our camping and river gear and drive off to the new trail head to camp. They're supposed to meet us there that evening. About 10 miles down the road, I decide I can't expect Scott, Elaine, Jared, Steve and Eric to hike another forty miles after hiking 30 around Kailash (and paying for a trip that advertised a ride on Tibetan ponies). So I sent Travis and Chong Dak back to rent the ponies. Well, the families with the ponies had gone home, and there were only two to be had. So Chong Dak rented enough yaks for the rest of us

at an exorbitant rate, crying as he forked over thousands of yuan, and met us in camp. The yaks were supposed to meet us about 10 am the next morning.

Well, they show up about noon, without saddles. Yaks are basically long haired cows, with really broad backs and bony backs. We'd all brought some kind of padding, and I just hoped we could find a way to get comfortable on them. Carmen and Elaine get the horses, which had saddles, and the boys get to do the splits. By the end of the day most of us are walking, and most of us walked the rest of the forty miles to the river, paying good money for yaks that were too painful to ride.



Riding yaks across a creek in flood. Photo by Travis Winn.

In spite of this screwup, the next few days were really amazing. We hit it off with the yak herders, and within a day Carmen, Travis, Eric and Jared were hanging out in their tents, inhaling yak dung smoke, singing and drinking yak butter tea. The scenery was outrageous and the hiking wasn't too strenuous. The second day we met some local yak herders who knew the trail I'd seen on the Russian topos and convinced our yak herders it was a better route than the one they were planning to take. It snowed on us that night, making the scenery even more dramatic during our trek over a 17,500 pass the next day. The last night one of the yak herders, Purple, a twenty year old woman who had hit it off with Carmen, slept in Carmen's tent. What a treat for both of them!

### **The Indus, at last**

The headwater of the Indus is called the Senge He (Lion River) by the Tibetans. In this area, according to the maps it has an average gradient of about twenty-five feet per mile, though we actually measured about sixteen feet per mile with our GPS units. The topo maps show several canyons, and the geology maps suggest the canyons are metavolcanics, which could mean constrictions with some Class 3 or maybe even a Class 4 rapid. No such luck - the river bottom was choked with its own gravels, producing a constant gradient braided stream. It was still eroding them from the last ice age, which ended about 10,000 years ago.



When we arrived at the river, the first thing we noticed was a bridge suitable for vehicles. I didn't expect the Russian maps to be accurate with regard to roads and had gotten the most up-to-date road map of the area that I could find - about ten years old. Well, the Chinese had built the road six years ago, but fortunately there was virtually no traffic - maybe two trucks in the four days we boated, and in most stretches the road wasn't anywhere near the river. We were able to ignore it, so the river felt like it flowed through a Tibetan wilderness. Except there weren't any Tibetans - we were in the rain shadow of the Gangdise Range, and it was so dry the Tibetans were in the high country grazing their yaks. Besides eagles, vultures and marmots, about the only wildlife we saw were kiang, or wild asses, and we saw so many of them in places that we got tired of taking pictures of them.



The Senge He. Photo by Travis Winn.

I'd seen a remote monastery marked on the Russian maps and figured we'd spend half a day there. We did have a great visit to the Dratgye Monastery, but the one shown on the map wasn't there. Scott donated all kinds of toys, notebooks and pencils to the young monks, who really needed the distraction (what kids don't?). The monks did a chant for us, then the Abbot invited us to his personal room where he fed us yak cheese and made yak butter tea for us. Since the road was built, they've had a few foreign visitors per year. We camped in view of the monastery, and in the morning some of the monks came down to visit.



Carmen gives a young monk a ride on her ducky. Kokatat donated several drysuits and life jackets to the group. Photo by Travis Winn.

We were about a day and a half behind on our schedule and I was concerned about making it to the take-out on time, so I encouraged everyone to paddle. By the time we had reached the monastery, we had made up half the lost time, and the next day we made up the rest. We had a strong, consistent downstream wind all day - so strong it was hard to keep your boat pointed down river. Mostly we just let the wind blow us sideways, and paddled enough to stay in the middle of the current. It was such a tough day I fell asleep in my ducky, and woke up when I got blown into the bank. I thought to myself, you can't fall asleep on a first descent! There was something wrong with that picture.

That evening while we were cooking dinner, our drivers showed up in one of the Land Cruisers. The first reaction was "well there goes the feeling of being in a wilderness." Then I remembered a really fun looking rapid on the Raka Tsangpo near Sangsang, got out the road map and figured out that we could float 30 miles of a much larger, faster and more interesting river if we ended the Senge trip the next morning. After discussing this idea with Travis, Chong Dak and the drivers (who were bored stiff waiting for us), we approached the rest of the group and they agreed to do it. Besides, the drivers told us the Chinese were building a dam on the Senge and taking out in a construction zone was not very appealing.

### **The Raka Tsangpo Headwaters - Summary**

Dates: August 2005 (2 river days)

Nearest major airport: Lhasa, Tibet

Round trip driving time: 4 days

Put-in: 30 miles west of Sangsang, elevation 15,500', flow about 3,000 cfs

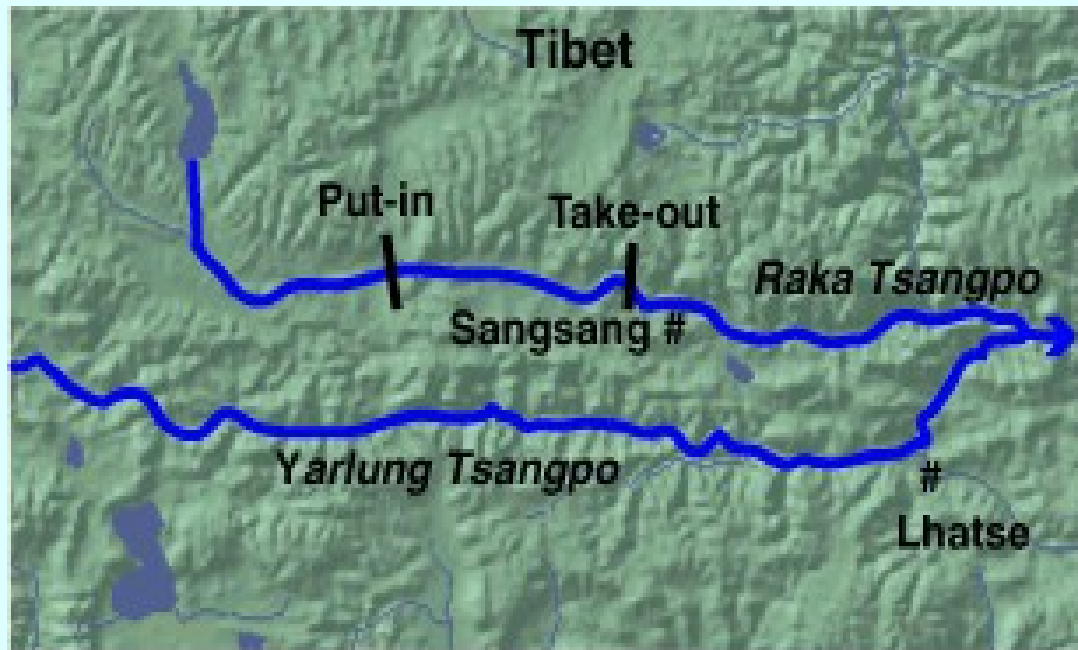
Take-out: near Sangsang, elevation 15,000', flow about 3,000 cfs

Total distance: about 30 miles

Average gradient: 17 feet/mile

Participants: 9 total 9 inflatable kayaks

Grade: Class 2.5



We had originally planned to raft the Raka Tsangpo, a major tributary to the Yarlung Tsangpo about 300 miles west of Lhasa, in June, 2002. However, the water was too low, so we ran Renqingding Canyon of the Yarlung Tsangpo just to the south of the Raka Tsangpo instead. Scott, Travis, Chong Dak and I were on this trip.

It took us three long, hard days to drive from the Senge take-out to Sangsang, over some of the highest road passes on earth. We spent the first night in Gertze, on the southern edge of the Chang Tang, a region of large lakes that has been set aside as a wildlife preserve. The breeding grounds of an endangered antelope called chiru are located along the northern edge of this part of the Tibetan Plateau. There is a National Geographic video, a book (*The Big Open*, Rick Ridgway) and a National Geographic Magazine article (April 2003) about them and the struggle to eliminate illegal poaching - their fur was once prized for its softness for scarves called shatoosh.

We spent the second night at Tsochen, where we visited a Tibetan festival with hundreds of yak herders who came in from the mountains to party, dance, watch movies and eat junk food. The third day, we follow the headwaters of the Raka Tsangpo past the impressive King Tiger hotsprings and in Sangsang we found a Tibetan hostel that was much better than the Chinese dump we'd stayed in on the way to Kailash, except Scott missed the cute waitress at Chinese restaurant.

The next morning we drove back upstream to the Class 3 rapid we'd seen on the Raka Tsangpo and put-in above it. This was the most challenging whitewater Chong Dak had boated and he was very nervous about going for a swim in the three foot waves. We decide to let him watch the rest go first, then Eric and I will guide him through it. Well, Chong Dak goes to the right of the first big hole just fine, but when it's time to cut left of a bunch of large boulders along the right bank, he paddles to shore immediately above them and jumps onto the bank. His boat gets stuck in an eddy behind the first set of boulders, and we nearly loose one of the drivers who jumps out to free the boat. Eventually the boat floats free and Eric and I pull it to shore in a hail storm. It seems like hours before we get everyone back on the river.



Tibetans watch us boat a small rapid under a yak herder's bridge. Photo by Travis Winn

The river is a fast Class 2.5, cutting a canyon that the road has to bypass so we're now in a real wilderness. That night we celebrate Elaine's 59th birthday with a single candle and a bottle of Scotch that Scott has managed to save for our last night on the river. The next day the river enters a wide, still roadless valley and braids among grassy bars until the take-out. It was an amazing day, with impressive thunderstorms illuminated by ever changing rays of Tibetan sunlight.

We still have a couple of days of driving to get back to Lhasa, and in spite of a few vehicle problems (little things like burning brakes, shorted out headlights and a stolen river bag), we make it as scheduled, only to find that the Chinese police and military have taken total control - there was one standing along the road every 100 yards for miles. They were celebrating the 40th year of Chinese government control of Tibet, and the Chinese Premier, Hu Jintao, was planning to visit. I guess they didn't trust the Tibetans to behave themselves.

Scott shot twelve hours of video and is producing a one hour DVD of the expedition. Jared shot about 10,000 digital pictures and is producing an automated slide show. Both of them should have some impressive images of our expedition to western Tibet.

Chong Dak tells me the drivers still tease him about jumping out of his ducky in the rapid on the Raka Tsangpo.