

# Kailash-Mansarovar yatra resumes after five years: history of a storied pilgrimage

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Mansarovar lake with Mount Kailash in the background. (Wikimedia Commons)

After a five-year hiatus triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic and extended due to tensions between India and China, the Kailash-Mansarovar yatra has resumed in 2025.

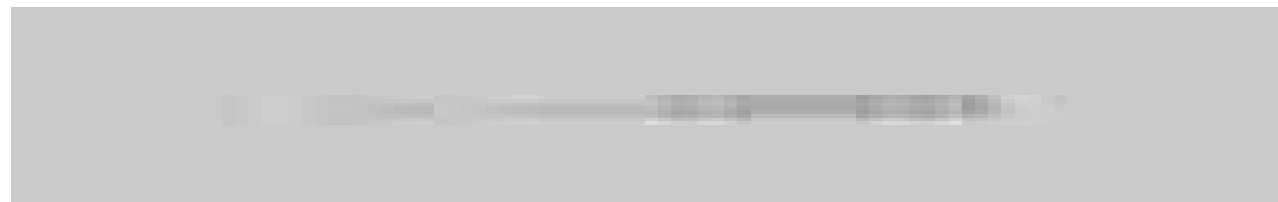
This year, the Ministry of External Affairs chose 750 pilgrims who would be making the storied pilgrimage: five batches of 50 yatris will cross into Tibet through the Lipulekh pass in Uttarakhand, and 10 batches of 50 pilgrims will make the longer but relatively easier journey through the Nathu La pass in Sikkim. The first batches of pilgrims on both routes are currently on their way.

## The mountain & the lakes

With an elevation of 6,638 metres, Mount Kailash (Gang Rinpoche in Tibetan) is located in the Ngari Prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region, near the tri-junction of India, Tibet and Nepal. To its south on the Tibetan plateau are two lakes: the freshwater Mansarovar (Mapam Yumtso) and saltwater Rakshastal (Lhanag Tso).

Both lakes and the towering mountain in their background are significant in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Tibetan Bon traditions.

“For Hindus, [Kailash] is the home of the Hindu god Shiva... for Jains it is where their first leader was enlightened; for Buddhists, the navel of the universe; and for adherents of Bon, the abode of the sky goddess Sipaimen,” Alice Albinia wrote in her award-winning book *Empires of the Indus: The Story of a River* (2008).



Four major rivers — the Yarlung Tsangpo (which later becomes the Brahmaputra), the Indus, the Sutlej, and the Karnali (later known as Ghaghra, a major tributary of the Ganga) — trace their to origins “the watershed of this iconic mass of rock,” Albinia wrote.

## Mainstreaming a pilgrimage

Despite its age-old sacredness, however, the Kailash-Mansarovar complex was not a popular pilgrimage site till “as recently as the early 1900s...,” wrote Tibetologist Alex McKay in his book *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography* (2015).

“The actual mountain was visited only by the occasional renunciate and not by ordinary Indian pilgrims. Indeed early Hindu and Buddhist texts clearly stated that Kailas was a heavenly place that could only be visited by advanced spiritual practitioners,” he wrote.

This changed after 1904, when Tibet officially opened up to British subjects (including Indians), and courtesy the efforts of a certain Charles Sherring, then the district collector of Almora. Sherring in 1905 undertook an inspection of the Kailash-Mansarovar complex, and in his report recommended improving the pilgrimage route.

In 1906, he would go on to publish a book, *Western Tibet and the British Borderlands*, about the sacred mountain which had a stunning photograph of Kailash on its cover.

According to McKay, this book was an attempt to mainstream the beliefs of a small sect of Shaivite renunciates among the larger Hindu population, which Sherring hoped would drive pilgrim traffic and bring revenue and employment opportunities to his district. This is also why Sherring recommended the Lipulekh route, which passes through Almora, as the easiest path from the plains to the Kailash.

Over the years, the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage grew in popularity: in 1930, some 730 Indian pilgrims had reportedly made the journey to the holy mountain. The numbers would remain in the hundreds till the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950, following which Kailash was first closed to Europeans in 1951, and then to Indians in 1959.

The pilgrimage opened up once again in 1981, in no small part due to the efforts of Subramanian Swamy, then an MP from the Janata Party. “In April 1981, Swamy discussed the issue with Deng Xiaoping, and arrangements were finalised during the visit to

India by the Chinese Foreign Minister in July of that year. Two months later, the first batch of a total of 60 Indian pilgrims set off for Kailas via Almora and the Lipulekh pass; Subramanian Swamy was among them,” McKay wrote.

### **The pilgrimage, then and now**

Pilgrims typically travel to and circumambulate Mansarovar, a 90-km walk that takes between three to five days to complete. Some then circumambulate Mount Kailash, a much more arduous 52-km trek that takes around three days to complete.

C M Bhandari in his book *A Journey to Heaven, Kailash-Mansarovar* (1998) described his pilgrimage in 1997. The Tseti camp, on the western shore of Mansarovar, was the starting point for the circumambulation of the lake, after which pilgrims travelled to Huore, some 30 km to the north. Then they reached the Seralung monastery to the south of Huore, before travelling to Trugo Gompa, on the southern shore of the lake, and returning to Tseti.

The Kailash trek began on the southern side of the mountain, at Tarchen. Pilgrims typically travel clockwise around the mountain, always keeping Kailash to their right. The trek passes through Dirapuk, Dolma La, Zutul Puk, and finally culminates in Tarchen.

According to Bhandari, pilgrims must acclimatise to the high altitude before reaching Tibet. “The arrangement via the Indian route allows almost 10 days of gradual climb from about 3,000 feet at Dharchula to 14,000 feet at Navidhang. This helps the body to get used to trekking in mountains at high altitudes,” he wrote.

This year, yatris will stay at Dharchula for one night, then acclimatise at the village of Gunji for two nights, spend two more nights at Navidhang, before journeying through Lipulekh. In Tibet, pilgrims will be spending around a week before returning to Lipulekh.

Due to the construction of motorable roads, the amount of trekking on the Lipulekh route has reduced considerably, down from 27 km in 2019 to only one km this year on the Indian side, Pooja Garbyal, additional secretary of tourism at Uttarakhand, told [The](#)

[Indian Express.](#)

On the Nathu La pass route, which first opened in 2015, the journey is even easier: pilgrims travel the entire 1,500 km from Nathu La to Mansarovar by car or bus.



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