

Mountain Bike Tour – Lhasa to Kathmandu*A route description as a traveler...*

The 1,200-km Highway 318 from Lhasa to Kathmandu has suddenly become one of the most fashionable, grueling and wondrous trails for international mountain bikers.

Originally an artery of the famed Silk Road of the Middle Ages, this windswept and frosty trail once facilitated trade between China and India. But the huge span of barren desert and abominable snowy mountain passes meant that only the most resolute attempted the journey.

The cold lonely plateau was left in relative isolation for centuries until the Chinese invasions of 1951 and 1959. As the tanks rolled into Lhasa, tens of thousands of Tibetans - the Dalai Lama included - fled by foot or by mule across the Himalayas to sanctuary in Nepal and India.

Nowadays the "Chinafication" of Tibet is almost complete: the campaign for independence all but a lost cause. The streets of Lhasa and Shigatse swarm with Chinese consumer goods.

The Chinese colonists - vilified though they may be - have opened the region to tourism, introduced good hotels and restaurants, and invested in road construction. All of which is good news for the traveller. And for those with a passion for mountain-biking, permits are now available to cycle the entire way from Lhasa to Kathmandu.

Fortunately, you don't have to be a super-fit athlete to attempt the expedition, but you will need a deep pool of determination.

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It is wise to take at least three days in Lhasa to acclimatize yourself before setting off. During that time you can cycle around and check out the Potala Palace, formerly the residence of no fewer than 14 Dalai Lamas. Interestingly, Tibet is linked to Beijing time, so sunrise and sunset are rather early. (On my trip, two cyclists from Western Australia were amazed to find that there was no time difference between Perth and Lhasa.)

Day One lulls you into a false sense of security - a smooth, flat, seductively paved road! In fact, the first 70kms are your chance to get into high gear and make sure your bike is running smoothly. Leaving Lhasa behind in your wake, you speed out onto a tree-lined avenue somewhat reminiscent of Vermont or Provence in France. But don't start popping the champagne just yet; not long after lunch you will have to kiss adieu to the smooth tarmac ribbon and start negotiating the bouncy goat trail that is going to be your horizon for the next two weeks.

The first two or three days of the trip are undoubtedly the hardest. You are struggling to adapt to the thin air while facing one of the toughest climbs on the morning of the second day - the Kamba La. Top your tummy-tank with plenty of porridge, wrap yourself in layers and get ready for a three-hour grind to the summit. Take your time, shift down into Granny Gear, remember to cycle in circles (not squares) and stop for a breather regularly.

On the other side of the mountain you'll find yourself transported to . . . can it be? . . . Scotland? Icy lochs, marshy ground peppered with rabbit holes, rolling purple hills of gorse, and a frosty wind. There are few villages and fewer streams. As you cycle deeper into this desolate landscape the only other people you might encounter are young shepherds. Often under 10 years old, these kids will spot you in the distance and beeline to the roadside to accost you for money or a photo. They tend up to 1,000 yaks, goats or sheep at a time, protecting the herd from wild dogs with eagle eyes and lethal slingshots.



Expect to cover 70 to 100 km per day. Be sure you have clothes for all conditions: remember that you are above the clouds and it can be very sunny and bright. It can also snow, rain, hail and become very, very cold at the drop of a hat. On my tour, we were fortunate enough to have great Tibetan and Nepali support staff that even brought cups of tea to our tents to wake us up each frosty dawn. Rudimentary showers and toilet tents were provided, but I pray that I'll never again have to stand in a field and splash lukewarm water over my body while it is snowing.



In fact, it's all character-building stuff and after one week you'll be more resilient to the harsh conditions. In fact, picture the bliss when you arrive in cities like Shigatse or Gyantse which have hotels where you can bathe in the bourgeois luxury of hot running water, with warm sheets and electric lights at your beck and call.



Three or four days from Lhasa, you'll be leaving the Scottish landscape behind. The dusty road stretches out towards an infinite arid wasteland dotted with tiny Tibetan villages. There appears to be no agriculture and no way to eke out a living.

"Are they all rock farmers?" muttered one of the Aussies.

Children carry baskets of yak dung home. The dung will be used as insulation on the walls of their house and, come winter, will be burnt as fuel. Yaks are everything out here: yak skin tents and canoes; yak milk, butter, curd and cheese; yak steak; yak wool sweaters; even yak urine as a medicinal remedy for exposed cuts.



After eight or nine days and 600 km of pedalling, you should find yourself around the town of Pelbar and the entrance to the Everest National Park. It's here that you will probably leave Highway 318 for a few days and head south to Everest Base Camp. By now you are carrying at least 50 per cent of the following ailments: knee ligament damage, saddle rash, backache, a very sore backside, cramps in your feet, a runny nose, diarrhoea, constipation, flatulence, headaches, nausea, dry eyes, a dusty cough, insomnia, lethargy, sunburn, frostbite, altitude sickness - not to mention any injuries you might have incurred from falling off your bike!

Fear not! For all these maladies combined cannot stop you now. Behold the Pang La, the mountain pass which rises before you! You grit your teeth, you meditate, you turn 'Eye of the Tiger' up to 10 on your Walkman; you do whatever you have to do to get into the groove, to get that Lance Armstrong vibe and hunker down for the next four or five hours to tackle this monster.



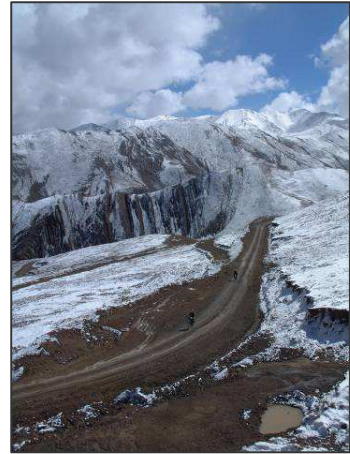
Conquering the Pang La is God's fee for allowing you to witness one of the planet's most stupefying vistas. After no less than 42 switchbacks and a rise of 900m in altitude, with your weary thighs bursting at the seams, you finally reach the cairn at the top of the pass, adorned in colourful Buddhist prayer flags. Suddenly the curtain is pulled back to reveal the row of Himalayan peaks you have been chasing.

The Mount Everest!

You are now feeling physically and mentally ragged. Those last four or five hairpin bends were accomplished on willpower alone. You might well find an emotional tear freezing on your weather-beaten cheek as you finally dismount and gaze in awe at the white bowling pins before you almost close enough to touch: Makalu (8463m); Lhotse (8516m); Jachonggangri (7985m); Cho Oyu (8210m); Shixiapangma (8012m); and the one that Tibetans have for centuries been calling Chomolungma ("Mother Goddess of the World"), at 8850 meters above sea level - Mount Everest.



To reach Everest Base Camp you must maneuver through a bone-shaker of a road. The north face of the world's highest mountain remains agonisingly out of view until you are very close to Rongbuk Monastery (5150m), a popular stopover and only 8km from Base Camp. As you face towards the highest point on the planet, you might just get an inkling of the potential danger in the icy breath of her headwind. Or, as the intrepid British explorer George Mallory - himself a victim of Everest's wrath - described in 1924: "a severity so awful and so fatal that the wiser sort of men do well to think and tremble even on the threshold of their high endeavor"



Rejoining Highway 318 at the town of Tingri you'll be grateful to be back on a simple washboard dirt track. It's only another 100km now and then you'll be freewheeling down the longest descending road on the planet. First you have just two more passes to surmount: the Lalung La and the Thang La, which lie back to back under the shadow of Shixiapangma.

The 142km downhill begins at the top of the Thang Pass. The twisting road itself is corrugated and often endures a swirling Himalayan headwind, but could just be what you've been waiting for all your life. Wave goodbye to the goatherds and the lunar landscape, for you are now about to fall no less than 4000m until you finally level out in the Nepali town of Dolaghat. The world suddenly turns overwhelmingly lush and tropical again. Waterfalls spill overhead from cloudy ravines and you swing deliriously along on the roller-coaster ride of a lifetime.



You will have to brake for border formalities and then you re-emerge into a Hindi fairytale of gorges, rivers, cascades and dinky Nepalese villages.

By the time you reach the chaotic city of Kathmandu, you should be beaming with pride and joy: the satisfying afterglow of an adventure well done.



In a few years Highway 318 will be fully paved. While that might make for easier cycling, it will also allow access to tour groups, buses, trucks and every Tom, Dick and Harry. Now is the time to enjoy the tranquility and the primitive beauty of this trail, one of the planet's last great road trips.

Fact File:

The Highest; the Longest

What makes the Trans-Himalayan highway so special? First of all, it's the highest road in the world, averaging an altitude of 4,500 metres above sea level as it traverses the Tibetan plateau. Secondly, the route boasts the world's longest continuous descent, which of course means that you'll face the world's longest uphill if you are heading in the opposite direction. Apart from the adventure of jousting with so many entries from the "Guinness Book of Records", what makes this journey so special to mountain bikers is the sense of isolation and awe-inspiring scenery. They must also face an onslaught of zigzagging mountain passes and endure a constant battle against breathlessness.



Health and Diet

Unless you're already at your leanest and best, expect to lose around 10 kilograms on this trip. Eat as much as you can as often as you can. With an eight- to 10-hour workout in front of you each day, you need carbohydrates. Don't be vain and think you'll shed your love handles by keeping to a diet of vitamins and supplements. You simply won't have enough in your tank to keep going.



So make sure you have plenty of potato and pasta dishes on the menu. Alcohol, cigarettes and sleeping pills all thin the blood and must be avoided like an enraged yeti while at altitude.

At 5000 metres your lungs are getting 50 per cent of the oxygen they would at sea level. Therefore it's not uncommon to hyperventilate even when you're lying in bed. Altitude sickness, or Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS), affects everyone, especially the young and fit.

"Drink three to four litres of water every day," says Dr Yogendra Man Shakya, who has seen more than his fair share of AMS cases at the Institute of Medicine in Kathmandu. "The Golden Rule in the Himalayas is: if anyone gets sick, the symptoms are due to the altitude until proven otherwise."

The drug Diomox may help with AMS a little, but this prophylactic should only be taken for the first few days. In fact, there's little you can do about altitude sickness except stop, descend and rest.

And one other tip: don't zip your tent all the way down at night. Heat exhaustion can result from lack of air circulation.

What to buy before you go?

Sunglasses: UV increases 4 per cent every 300 metres you climb. With that and the dust, there's no replacement for protective, wrap-round shades.

Facemask: A must for the dust! Buy one with filters so you don't restrict your breathing.

Power bars: Halfway up the Karo Pass and your tank is empty. You've just GOT to stop and crunch on a Black Cherry Almond Bar.

Toilet paper: Keep it close at all times. Altitude = diarrhoea = frequent pit stops.

Further Information –

Feel free to write us at anytime when you need further information, details or any assistance. We are available at –

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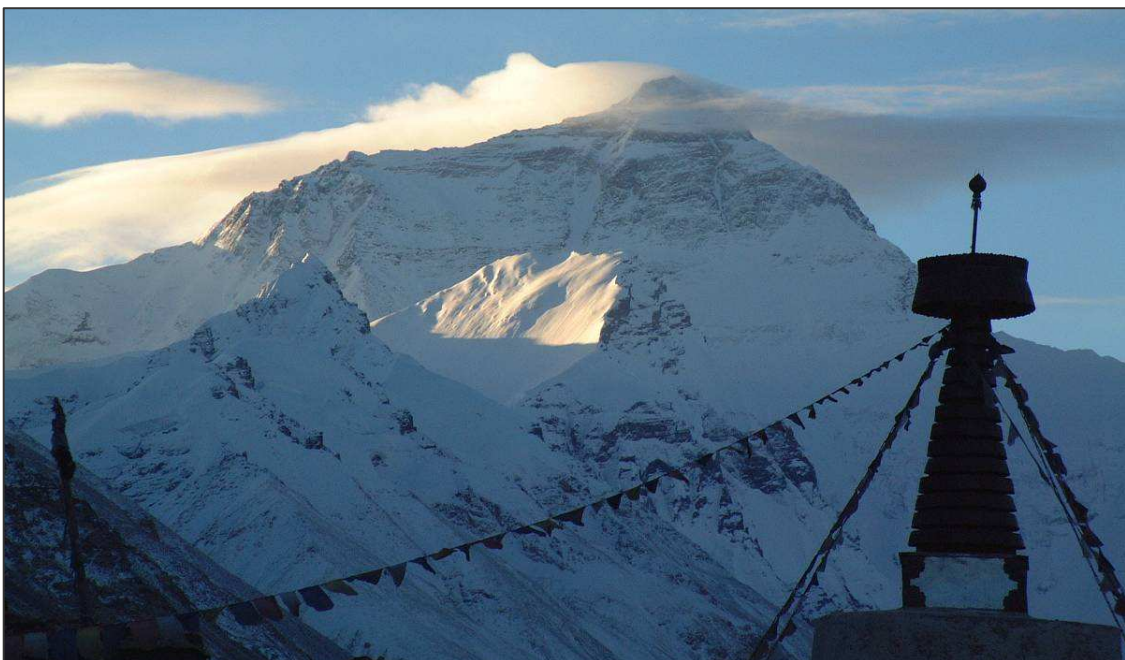
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Mount Everest (8850m / 29,035ft) – the world's highest mountain, as you can see from Rongbuk valley