

A BREATHTAKING HORSE TREK IN THE
HIMALAYAS REVEALS A SPIRITUAL MENTOR
IN THE MOST UNLIKELY FORM.
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TIBET

GUIDED BY THE MOUNTAIN

Nora, our younger
guide, coming down
off the 4700m pass.
Mt Yala remains
hidden in the clouds
behind him.



High in the mountains of his homeland, Rata, a Tibetan horseman and nomadic yak herder, lies down on a bed of yak wool blankets and pillows. Weary from the day's riding, he swiftly drifts off to sleep and soon begins to dream. In his dream, he talks with a god whom he and many of his fellow Khampa Tibetans revere as a guiding presence. He discusses lost yaks and sheep, his children, finances and how to be a better person. In return, the god offers advice on leading a positive life and steers him away from negative thinking.

The god of Rata's dreams is actually the eastern Himalayan mountain of Yala, in what is now known as West Sichuan in China. At 5820 metres, it soars above the clouds, draped in snow, and adorned with glaciers around its flanks. One of nine holy mountains in Tibet, Yala looms above the simple yak herder's hut where Rata and his fellow guides are sleeping. Even on this moonless night, Yala dominates the sky. But with its charcoal and dusky white slopes, the mountain feels more like a menacing presence than a benevolent god.

It was earlier that afternoon when my partner Annette and I had arrived on horseback with Rata and our other guide, Nora. The coats of our stocky horses were thick with sweat from the rough and rocky ascent through pine and Rhododendron forest. On reaching the grassy pasture, they'd rolled and kicked their legs, obviously relieved their day's work was done.

We're on the second of a three-day horse riding adventure around the slopes and valleys surrounding Yala, having arrived in the region six days earlier.

DESTINATION KHAMPA COUNTRY

"You might want to watch your step," I say to Annette as we step off the plane at Kangding airport, ready to start our adventure. I'd only discovered that morning, after a little research, that although the city of Kangding is at an altitude of 2560 metres, its airport is above it on the Tibetan Plateau at a lofty 4274



Left: A nun circumambulates Ser Gyergo Monastery in what is called a Kora. This image: Lead guide Rata (front), Nora and Annette.

metres, making it the second highest civilian airport on the planet. I haven't passed this new information onto Annette, thinking she may not notice, but the moment we step out into the alpine air I feel light headed and unsteady on my feet.

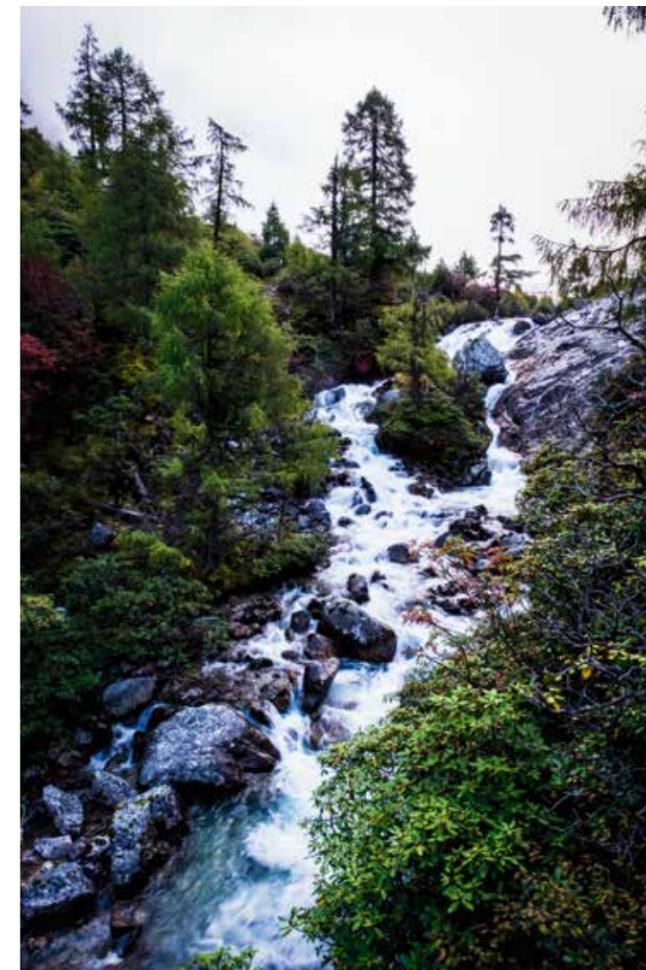
I know I have to tell her and I'm met with raised eyebrows and a half-joking accusation of withholding information.

We spend a couple of nights acclimatising to the altitude in the historic 'Tibet meets China' Kangding city, before heading off to the Tagong Grasslands and the Khampa Nomad Ecolodge at 3700 metres. After the airport incident, my decision-making rights are withdrawn and we agree to stage our ascent up the Himalayas, rather than head straight to the Khampa capital of Litang – one of the world's highest cities at 4100 metres.

Annexed gradually by China in the first half of the 20th Century, Kham was the eastern-most of Tibet's three traditional provinces. At over twice the size of Sweden, it is also Tibet's most diverse area geographically and ethnically. Across its soaring mountains, deep gorges, forests and sprawling grasslands live around two million ethnically diverse peoples, collectively known as the Khampas. Traditionally revered as Tibet's warriors, the Khampas fiercely defended their homeland for centuries



Clockwise from this image: A nun and her child outside their colourful Tibetan home in the nunnery village of Ser Gyergo; A mountain stream tumbles through pine and rhododendron forest below Mt Yala; The huge Mani wall at Ser Gyergo Monastery.



before finally succumbing to the Chinese. Despite decades of often harsh Chinese rule, Kham remains 90 per cent ethnically and culturally Tibetan. And, distinct from visiting Lhasa and the surrounding Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), foreigners require only a Chinese visa and can travel independently.

ACCLIMATISING WITH EASE

A couple of nights enveloped in the homely warmth of the Khampa Nomad Ecolodge slows us down to a yak's pace. We eat momos and yak burgers, sweat in the sauna, play UNO and visit nomads' tents to try yak butter tea and do our best to chat, despite our language limitations. Set amid highland pastures, yaks are herded right past our bedroom window, Khampa cowboys whistling and whooping to keep their herds moving. It's all about yaks up here. At the end of the valley, Mt Yala commands our attention whenever the clouds part.

We learn from our host, Angela, that the Khampas are renowned horsemen and we sign up to a three-hour ride around the grasslands above the lodge. The stocky little horses and our cowboy guide take us up past herds of grazing yaks, down to a monastery village, past fields of mani prayer stones and up to a peak with expansive views across the grasslands and surrounding summits, including the ever-present Yala.

The ride only whets our appetite and when Angela says she can arrange a three day horse-trek around the sacred mountain, we're in quicker than you can say UNO!



Left: Ser Gyergo's ramshackle nuns' cottages cram the hillsides in a valley below Mt Yala. **This image:** The brooding lower slopes of the 5820m Mt Yala in Tibet's Kham province.

Clockwise from right: Mt Yala in full glory showing glaciers running off its flanks; A yak observes our party coming down off the pass; Our horses enjoying an alpine yak pasture after a steep, rocky climb.



PRAYER FLAG PASS

We meet Rata, Nora, and our horses at the nearby Ser Gyergo Nunnery, a sprawling, ramshackle monastic village home to around 500 Buddhist nuns and 100 monks. The atmosphere is heady with prayer as we pass through. Cloaked in traditional maroon and gold robes, nuns shuffle by, reciting mantras, prayer beads in hand.

Rata is a 39-year-old father of five and looks a little like a cowboy Fu Manchu. Nora, on the other hand is only 19, newly married and has dimples of which Annette is rather fond. To enjoy a richer experience, we pay a little extra to have Shetten, an English translator, along.

As an extremely novice horse rider, I'm hoping our guides will take me under their wings, but as soon as we're on our steeds, we trot off, without instruction, towards the cloud-covered mountains. There's a brooding atmosphere of dark escarpments revealing themselves in the mist, then disappearing again as we climb towards the toughest point on our trek – a 4700 metre pass. Dismounting several hundred metres below the pass, the horses are roped together and we scramble, wheeze



and climb higher with them into a scene that feels straight out of *Lord of the Rings*.

My lungs are in a vice, as clouds swirl around the dark crags, and masses of wind-whipped Tibetan prayer flags blow mantras around the mountains. Yala's peak remains hidden, but there's no waiting for a view or ceremony from the guides. Horses in tow, they walk straight over the pass and begin the descent to more favourable altitudes.

VALLEY OF DREAMS

Within an a couple of hours, we've dismounted in a lush glacial valley, embraced by pine forests beside a tumbling mountain stream, complete with grazing deer. It could be Yosemite in the USA except for the prayer flags strung between trees and cliffs, on poles and around a hot spring. Yes, a natural hot spring!



Left to right: Rata leads our group; A senior Khampa pilgrim at Ser Gyergo Monastery; Annette soaking in the warmth of a natural hot spring.



The guides dress us in hilarious long-sleeved yak wool 'zhuba' jackets and send us off to soak in the hot spring while they set up camp. We feel pretty pampered lying back in the soothing warm water.

It's around the campfire after dinner, however, when our perception of the mountains is changed completely as our guides explain their relationship with Yala. Passing small shrines and the ever-present prayer flags has left no doubt about the sacred importance of our surroundings, but being told we're camping literally in the realm of gods really is something else.

They explain to us that Mt Yala is the most important god and his wife and children are its surrounding valleys and peaks.

"In my heart I have no fear coming to these mountains," says Rata. "There won't be any obstacles or problems because I believe Yala will protect me."

We drink multiple cups of tea as we discuss Yala as god. Rata explains that he prays to the mountain during the day, asking for his guidance and protection, but it's when he is asleep that he really learns. "When I dream, Yala appears and I follow his teachings," he says.

Revering mountains as gods can be traced back to ancient, pre-Buddhist Tibet and was a form of nature worship fundamental to their entire belief system. Ongoing belief in mountain gods and nature worship alongside Buddhism demonstrates the layers of spiritual complexity still strong in contemporary Tibet.

Annette and I sit out under the stars before heading to our tent behind the yak herder's hut. The clouds have now retreated and as we take in Mt Yala's peak reaching high above us, we marvel at the hugely different world view we've just learnt about.

In the largely secular and rationalised West, revering a mountain as a god and a mentor might be considered a bit new age or even a little 'out there', but maybe we could learn something from the Tibetans? Or perhaps we're a little too disconnected from nature to be able to see and believe what they do? I ponder these questions staring face to face with Yala, as snow is just beginning to fall and the cold air is seeping into my skin. Snapping out of my reflections, I realise I'm being watched by half a dozen woolly yaks. Must be time for bed.

Halfway through our snowy final day aboard our beautiful little mountain horses we encounter a husband and wife and their dogs herding around 100 yaks off the high mountains down to lower pastures ahead of winter. It's an arresting scene, and just as I'm thinking how dangerous it must be for the locals up here in the high Himalayas, I look back over my shoulder at Mt Yala and remember they are safe.