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Khawakarpo Kora – a pilgrimage trek into the heart of the Salween and Mekong watershed (22 days)



At the center of this journey is a 14-day Kora around the snow-capped peak of Mt. Khawakarpo (6,740m), revered throughout the Tibetan realm as far east as Ladakh in India. Associated with Tibetan Buddhism's saint-magician Padmasambhava, the mountain stands at the watershed region of the Mekong, Salween and Yangtze rivers in the southern tip of the Tibetan plateau in an area with the highest biodiversity in the world. This trip provides a rare insight into the life and culture of the Tibetans in southern Kham and surprises the visitor how green and fertile the highlands can be.

Our journey begins in Kunming (Yunnan) from where we fly to Gyalthang, southern-most Tibetan town and historical caravan port. Acclimatizing to the altitude, we spend a few days exploring the town and its surroundings. Highlights include the picturesque chalet-style adobe houses of Dokar Dzong, Gyalthang's old town, impressive Sumtsenling monastery built in the 17th century at the orders of the 5th Dalai Lama, and the revered Ringanè temple in the Gyalthang countryside.

Landcruising northwards towards Mt. Khawakarpo, we cross the upper reaches of

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the Yangtse. We reach Pongtsera and its monastery Dondupling where we stop for exploration and encounters with monks and villagers. Continuing over several high mountain passes on a narrow, meandering mountain road flanked by immense forests of the Baimang Nature Reserve we reach the town of Jol on the foothills of the Khawakarpo range.



Our first view of the magnificent peaks arising in the midst of lush semi-tropical and old growth forests, wild orchids and blooming azaleas are spectacular and memorable. In the next few days we tread the old pilgrim's trail in one of the richest tracts of biodiversity in the world. Many visitors are baffled that the plateau sustains such fertile green tracts. We meet herders grazing cattle on hillsides dotted with holy sites and rampant prayer flags with the mighty Mekong thundering below us.

On our way back to Gyalthang we get a first hand experience of Kham's craftsmen and the vibrant village production in the area. We visit the well-known wooden carvers in Pongtsera as well as the skilled potters of Nyishar in the Rongyül area who produce teapots and many other items for daily use. There will be an opportunity to buy some really unique souvenirs. Back in Gyalthang, we will have a few more days to recover from the trek and get to know the town and the surroundings before we leave for Kunming.

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14-day trekking:

Day 1, Dechen - trailhead, Lamtsa 1900 m - Lungdre 2480 m

Today we drive along to the trailhead about 2 and half hours at Lamtsa along the bank of the Mekong. We begin the trek crossing a bridge to visit the sacred stupa in Dreshing Thang 1950 m by the Mekong where traditionally pilgrims believe the key to Khawakarpo pilgrimage is hidden. For the more adventurous, an option would be to cross over the Mekong by swinging across by the ancient ropeway still used by Khampas along the Mekong. We then trek westwards along the Salween-Mekong range on the divide. Overnight at Lungdre village, camp or homestay, 2.5 hrs drive and 4.5 hrs trek.



Day 2, Lungdre 2480 m - Lungnak 3300 m

Continue trek along the tributaries and streams of the Mekong which make up the watershed region. Trek thru Chushag 2900 m, where we head west and then ascend to Asel Gyalam 3100 m. We will trek thru some of the most untouched and pristine alpine forests and get an opportunity to meet with Tibetan pilgrims traveling from every corner of Tibet, camp at Lungnak 7 hrs trek

Day 3, Lungnak 3300 m - Dokhela base 3500 m

Before we take on the Dokarla pass, we trek thru Langshi Thang 3340 m and

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Mendrel Thang or Mandala Plains. Beautiful streams of the Mekong, and wooded mountains. Camp and 5-6 hrs trek.



Day 4, Dokhela base 3500 m – Tsasokthang 3630 m

Today, we climb one of the highest and most challenging passes of this trek. The steep and zigzag trail is legendary among Tibetan pilgrims and the Khampa traders of ancient times. The area after the pass is a botanical paradise in summer and many botanists have been here come to sample rare flowers and plants. Camp, 6-7 hrs trek.

Day 5, Tsasokthang 3630 m - Chunathang 2460 m

On this day we first pass thru Trangche 3440 m and then climb a medium high pass Lho Oesel where one can view the majestic Khawakarpo then thru Lho Du-be. Camp Trekking thru about 7 hrs.

Day 6, Chunathang 2460 m - Aben 2290 m

Trekking in a westerly direction for 7-8 hrs thru Shingkhang la pass 3740 m before we reach the village of Aben, with the Khawakarpo still in view. We come across a rocky terrain where we come across miniature stone piles created by pilgrims resembling Sangdo Pelri considered the palace of the Padmasambhava. We are now closing in on the Salween. camp and 8 hrs trek.

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Day 7, Aben 2290 m – Chudrol Hot springs 1770 m

We then reach the hot-springs near Chudrol also called Khandroma Tsokshong which has become a watering hole for the thousands of pilgrims who come to Khawakarpo. The trek is a pleasant walk and we get to see many new things. The Salween, hot springs, beautiful stone engravings of Buddhist deities and scriptures. Some very old which were partly destroyed during the cultural revolution. Along the trek, we visit the Aben Caves, which is believed to familiarize pilgrims or make it easier for Buddhists to overcome “intermediary state” after death. We then camp at the hot springs of Chudrol. Camp, 6 hrs trek



Day 8, Chudrol 1770 m – Zinak 2300 m

Trekking along the Salween passing thru Drana we reach Zinak village where a Mani Temple draws many pilgrims. We overnight at the temple and get a chance to meet, chat, and sing with fellow pilgrims and villagers. Homestay and 7/8 hrs trek.

Day 9, Zinak 2300 m - Gebu 2340m

Today, we depart from the Salween westwards towards the Mekong north thru Thangthoe la pass at 3552m, then thru Radha 2320 m. We walk thru a looping trail along one of the biggest tributaries of the Salween – the Tsa Yuchu. Folks consider the Tsa Yuchu’s zigzag course legendary –therefore making the day a long and

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difficult one. When we arrive Gebu, we have completed half the Kora. Camp or home stay at village 7-8 hrs trek. If we have a day to spare, one option would be an extra rest day at Gebu!

Day 10, Gebu 2340 m - Thakor Chonyi 4100 m

Another difficult and steep pass where we climb the Thakor Chonyi pass 4100 m and then camp at a lower altitude on a plateau where we get a breathtaking view of the mountains and valleys particularly at sunset and dawn.

Day 11, Thakor Chonyi - Gaptsa Chukha 3090 m

We then continue trek and have to climb the Gaptsa la 4300 m and then arrive at the village of Gaptsa Chukha, by the Tsa Yuchu, where we camp and mingle with pilgrims congregating at the Mani Temple. The views of the river and hills is noteworthy so we camping here, 6/7 hrs trek

Day 12, Gaptsa Chukha 3090 - Mechok Panggang 4200 m

We then trek through the village of Ladho, where we have lunch. a major stop for the pilgrims and the Khampa caravans of the past. Beautiful picturesque Tibetan villages. After lunch we continue to Mechok Panggang 4200 m at the foot of Shola. If we are lucky with ideal weather, we get the best view of the entire Khawakarpo range. This is one of the most beautiful spots in the entire Kora and the old caravans also fittingly gathered themselves here prior to completing the final leg over the dreaded Shola pass ahead. Camp and 7 hrs trek

Day 13, Mechok Panggang 4200 m - Shola 4815 m - Duglung Thang 4250 m - Chuzom 3460m



We then tread along the notorious Shola pass 4815 m, which sometimes blocked caravans of old for months during snowbound winters. For pilgrims, it is believed, crossing Shola is a major victory to rid oneself of all the mental and emotional baggage. We then descend to Duglung Thang 4250 m and then reach Chuzom 3460 m, where we camp near a tributary of the Mekong. Camp, 7-8 hrs trek

Day 14, Chuzom 3460 - Menri Shoe 2060 m

This is our last day of trekking. We first meet up with the Mekong near Shachu ka and then continue to Menri Shoe where we are picked-up by our vehicle and driven to Dechen (4 and half hrs trek, 3 hrs drive), Hotel in Dechen.

Request itinerary pricing info:

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