

## Road threatens holy mountain

**PRICE OF DEVELOPMENT:** Tibetans welcome increased tourism and the money it brings, but they do not want to sacrifice their unique cultural and religious heritage

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For centuries, millions of Tibetans have made the arduous pilgrimage to the holy mountain of Kailash, walking 56km around its base in a single day to wash away the sins of the world in a symbolic re-enactment of the wheel of life.

Reaching altitudes of 5,486m, pilgrims prostrate themselves on the rough terrain for extra merit. Every step of the way, rocks and lakes hold legends of gods and demons. No landscape on Earth is more venerated.

Now, in an attempt to boost tourism, the Chinese authorities are planning a ring road allowing vehicles to be driven around the mountain.

*The Observer* has learnt that survey work for the road is already complete. Western trekkers say they have seen wooden marker posts and stones outlining the route. Tibetan pilgrims and yak herders who have complained to officials have been told not to talk to foreigners about the plans.

Local authorities want construction to start as early as next spring, but it is unclear whether Chinese authorities will commit funds to the project.

Although Kailash is in a region of high security, experts believe the road is a purely commercial venture.

Kate Saunders, a Tibet researcher, said: "Plans for the road are very much in keeping with the rapid fast-track economic development being pushed through in Tibet by the Chinese. Building up both tourism and the infrastructure are key priorities of this strategy.

"Tibetans want development -- but not at the price of the loss of their cultural and religious heritage."

Authorities in the regional capital of Nyari, 249km from Kailash, are also planning a civilian airport that would allow tourists fast access from Lhasa. Last year more than 850,000 tourists travelled to Tibet, 720,000 of them "internal" visitors from other parts of China, a 30 percent increase on 2001.

That figure is set to rise to millions over the next few years as comparatively wealthy tourists from economically progressive parts of China flock to see what parts of Tibetan culture have survived 50 years of religious intolerance.

"Tibetan chic" has become popular in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, while rural Tibet remains the poorest region in the PRC.

Despite travel restrictions brought in to control the SARS virus, tourism growth has continued this year and the Lhasa authorities have pledged to bring 100 tour guides to Tibet from other parts of China every year for the next decade.

The first group arrived last April. By contrast, more than 160 Tibetan guides, preferred by Western tourists, had their operating permits withdrawn.

Kailash is sacred not just to Tibetan Buddhists. More than a billion Hindus worship the peak as the home of Shiva. Followers of the Jain religion also worship Kailash, and Bon, Tibet's earlier religion, has its focus here.

Tibetans believe that Buddhism prevailed in a series of magical contests on the slopes of Kailash a thousand years ago. They believe that one circuit, or khora, will free them from the sins of a lifetime. Those who manage 108 circuits achieve enlightenment.

The mountain is also the target of Western trekkers. Tour operators fear that the new road might undermine the region's appeal.

One European-based trek leader, speaking anonymously, said inappropriate development could put his clients off. "Travellers are already disappointed that Lhasa is not how they imagined but effectively a Chinese city. More importantly, it is clear that Tibetans have a deep reverence for Kailash and find the idea of the road offensive.

"I hope the Chinese think about this before they build rather than afterwards. Kailash is one of the last unspoilt places left in this region, a last sanctuary," the trek leader said.

Tibet's extreme altitude may, however, save Kailash. Tourists who rush too quickly to visit the mountain, which is significantly higher than Lhasa, risk life-threatening conditions such as cerebral oedema.

And for those hoping to drive around the peak 108 times for instant enlightenment -- it will not work. Tibetans believe that heaven can only be reached the hard way -- on foot.

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