

Voyage to the Inner Kingdom

CASEY FLYNN

A pilgrimage around a sacred mountain in Tibet turns into a test of survival when an early season storm rolls in with the vengeance of an angry deity.

by CASEY FLYNN

Another avalanche rumbles down unseen slopes. Fat, wet flakes fill the air and cut visibility down to fifty feet. My fogged-up sunglasses hang from my neck, useless. The wind eases briefly and I can see other pilgrims through the white haze on the slope above me, blazing onward through three feet of fresh snow. Any semblance of a trail is buried.

Our objective is Duge La, a 13,000-foot pass that crests the spine of the Kawagarbo Range, crossing from Yunnan Province, China into the eastern reaches of Tibet. My fellow spiritual seekers and I are treading the outer pilgrimage route around the sacred Tibetan mountain Kawagarbo, a 21,770-foot monolith to our north. The two-week trek circles clockwise around the holy peak, across high passes, along steep gorges and through narrow valleys lined with waterfalls. Every year, 15,000 Tibetans walk the path around Kawagarbo, believed to be the home of a powerful protective deity.

But doubt gnaws at me. I'm throwing away years of snow safety training for the idea of completing the pilgrimage. It's still snowing. Conditions are deteriorating. I have no idea what terrain lies ahead. But my stubborn attachment to making it around the mountain prevails. I forge upward.

Player flags appear out of the swirling, featureless landscape. The pass. Suddenly, the line of people stops moving. Wind whips the wet snow sideways through the rocky gap. A few pilgrims turn and start walking back toward me, but others grab hold and reassure them. When we start forward again, the cause of the panic becomes clear: a two-foot deep slab avalanche has ripped out and raked 3,000 feet down our descent route. Unconsolidated powder and scree make the going slow and slippery. Intermittent spatters of blood paint the snow surface, remnants of falling pilgrims.

In the safety of the valley meadows below, I sit on my pack to rest and eat peanuts. A Chinese man and his Tibetan guides catch up with me. He's shivering violently. "I'm hungry," he stammers in English.

I hand him a fruit bar. His guides don't seem very concerned about his condition, but I am. "Do you have any dry clothes in your bag?" I ask.

He nods.

"You should change into them," I say.

He stares at me blankly. He doesn't seem capable of changing on his own so two of his guides and a friend began peeling his wet clothing off. I'm not much drier—with the temperature hovering around freezing, the snow is falling damp and soggy. A chill creeps up my legs. They find dry pants and a shirt and pull them over the man's damp skin. He starts to improve immediately. The color comes back into his face.

"Thank you! Thank you!" He takes my hand in both of his and shakes hard before moving on.

I feel ill. I'm not drinking enough water. The cold and wet have discouraged me from stopping and taking off my pack to get my bottle. Now, the effects of dehydration are clenching my stomach and fogging up my head. I'm having trouble seeing clearly. Is it snow blindness from forgetting to wear sunglasses?

Darkness comes and I put on my headlamp. The trail blurs. My head and eyes ache. I want to take

my contact lenses out, thinking it might help, but my fingers just scrape against my face, unwilling to do what I want. I extract the right lens but the pain from my clumsy attempts forces me to give up on the left. I stumble on half-blind in the night.

Later, I hear voices. Behind a large boulder, pilgrims huddle over a damp, smoke-spewing fire. They welcome me to stand with them around the crackling kindling, but the smoke sears my eyes. I stagger to a nearby boulder to rest. A father and son make space for me to join them under the boulder's low overhang. I crawl into the cramped but dry space with them and wait for sleep to take me.

According to the Dalai Lama, "The goal of pilgrimage is not so much to reach a particular destination as to awaken within oneself the qualities and energies of the sacred site, which ultimately lie within our own minds." Circumambulation is how Tibetans awaken these qualities in themselves, walking clockwise around the holy object with concentrated awareness. Pilgrimage sites have outer and inner routes. The outer path prepares pilgrims for the spiritual treasures that lie closer to the center.

Accomplished practitioners are said to have found hidden lands in sacred centers. I'm unsure whether these places are in one's mind or whether they actually exist in geographic space but I was drawn to Kawagarbo and its secrets. I didn't know what I would encounter along either path, but I needed to find out.

I can't sleep. I can only fit into the tiny space with the father and son by curling up into a tight ball, but muscle cramps force me to stretch my dehydrated legs out until the cold forces me back into a ball. My repositioning is periodically interrupted by mice scuttling across my bag and my face, but I'm too weak to swat at them.

Day becomes night.
The forest grows quiet
and the cold sharper.
Hallucinations and vivid
dreams take over.

The father and son stir. Morning must have come but I can't see it. My eyes are swollen shut. I listen to them roll up their bedding. The tarp that lies beneath their blanket crinkles as they fold it, stiff from the night's cold. I hear the father walking toward me "Come, you must come," he tells me in Chinese.

"I can't," I say.

"You must come!" He gently pulls me up.

"I can't! I can't see."

He says something I can't understand, but I can sense the concern in his voice.

"I can't go. I have food, I have water, I am warm. I will stay," I say. I'm not warm, but without sight, staying is the only choice. He keeps insisting I come but I keep shaking my head. At last, he hands me a plastic bottle full of hot yak butter tea and leaves.

I stretch out under the boulder's overhang. I have food and water, but I'm close to hypothermic. Wet clumps of snow melt and flow down the boulder and through the zippers and cracks in my bivy sack. Day becomes night. The forest grows quiet and the cold sharper. Hallucinations and vivid dreams take over.

Late in the night, I crawl out of my bag, convinced that friends and a warm cabin are close by. There is no longer a separation between the inner and outer worlds. Shocked back to the present by the cold, I realize what I am doing and retreat back into my bag, back into delusion. Am I still on the pilgrimage?

The forest awakens around me. Birds chirp and a breeze rustles the leaves. I crack open my right eye and see light. My left eye is still swollen and a crust has formed across the lid. I can't open it. Damp and aching, I stand up for the first time

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THE SOURCE OF POWER: "Every year, 15,000 Tibetans walk the path around Kawagarbo, believed to be the home of a powerful protective deity."

in 40 hours.

The snowstorm has blocked Duge La pass behind me. The only way is forward. At first, walking is slow and clumsy due to my altered depth perception, but over three days of solitary travel, I adapt to my partial blindness, aided by a walking stick. I gradually tell myself that my vision might be permanently damaged. Acceptance is easier and more practical than despair.

The early-season storm has ravaged the forest. Tangled masses of downed timber choke the trail and streams of snowmelt flood the path. I skirt cliff bands to navigate around blocked sections of trail. Several steep switchbacks demand that I climb down through the branches of fallen trees to reach the lower trail.

I follow footbridges lined with prayer flags and

piles of mana stones, flat pieces of rock with prayers etched into them, to the village of Tsawalong. While resting in the dusty street, a man emerges out of a crowd of Tibetans and pulls me to my feet. I recognize him as the Chinese man from Duge La. Beaming, he shakes my hand, introduces himself as Zeng Yuan and thanks me for saving his life.

I hadn't saved his life. I had only observed his condition, something he wasn't able to see at that time. And then I realize what we share. The circumambulation is carrying us both forward. While lying under that boulder and walking solitary through the forest, I had begun to see my own condition more clearly. Though it almost cost me an eye, the pilgrimage gave me sight. •

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