I. Introduction

This expedition carried Flag 186 in September, October, and November 2007 to China and Tibet. Attached to this report and made a part of it are the Expedition reports to the 59 expedition advisors. They provide a general description of the Expedition. While pictures and video are not included in this report, they are available for the purposes of publication of an article in the Journal or presentation of a show at the Explorers Club in New York or elsewhere.

Expedition Members: Alan Nichols, Leader; Rebecca Rygh; Avinash Kholi.

The Application for the Flag is attached.

II. Itinerary

The Expedition flew to Beijing on September 30, 2007. After obtaining necessary PRC permits, we rode the newly built railroad from Beijing to Lhasa on October 4 and 5, 2007; and, again after obtaining permits from the foreign ministry, the Peoples Liberation Army, and the regional and local governments involved, we left Lhasa by vehicle (a four-wheel drive Toyota 4500, generally recommended as the most reliable vehicle for the rugged terrain and long trip involved) to travel first to Chongye in the Yarlong Valley of the Kings, about 70 air miles from the Tawang, India border, then 950 miles to Mt. Kailas, Lake Manasarovar, and the Beranga trailheads. And finally back to Lhasa via Paiku Tso, the Friendship Highway (Lhasa to Katmandu), and the Everest north face base camp and trailhead about 850 miles.

We investigated the pilgrim routes to Mt. Kailas and scouted various trail heads and routes over the Himalayas for pilgrims’ access to Tibet and Mt. Kailas including:
1. The routes from all over Tibet (both the north and south routes) and especially Lhasa by vehicle, horse, walking, prostrations. The roads are in various stages of construction, paved, unpaved, gravel, dirt, and none.

2. Indians, Nepalese, and foreigners can drive the Friendship Highway over the Tong La Pass and then to Kailas via Paiku Tso, Saga, and the south road.

3. By trekking and vehicle to Mt. Kailas; across the roads from Ladak and the Valley of the Flowers suggested and scouted by Avinash Kholi.

4. The route to Asam, India (Tawang) used by the Dali Lama to flee Tibet in 1959. We explored the exact location of his escape route including and beginning inside his home at the Norbulinkha, along the Lhasa River, over the river at the Ramagan Ferry and then over the Chela La (Pass) to the Yarlung River. I hiked and rode by horseback over the pass, and we explored along and across the Yarlung Tsangpo (which later becomes the Brahmaputra in India), and up the Yarlung Valley until we were stopped by the police at Chonye Royal Tombs about 72 air miles from Tawang, India (now claimed to be part of China).

5. The Mt. Everest vicinity routes to Nepal.

6. The Baranga routes to Nepal and Almora, India.

7. At Mt. Kailas we completed the Kora, investigated the middle Kora, and completed an unfinished part of the inner Kora.

III. Findings

The expedition findings related to the purposes are:

(1) Difficulty of Interviews: Interviews with Tibetan pilgrims were at best difficult (usually impossible). Few Tibetan pilgrims were circumambulating Mt. Kailas because of the snow storms and bad weather while we were there. But we visited with scores of them at monasteries in Lhasa, Xigatse, and other towns and villages. But Tibet is now a police state. (You can’t tell the cops from the lamas.) We were required to have a guide and driver, both responsible to Chinese government officials. Tibetans also know that, and are unwilling to talk freely since adverse comments on China’s occupation, when reported, would likely result in a jail sentence. For the same reason, they generally refused to talk about any limitations or restrictions on their lives, religious freedoms, and civil rights. The ubiquitous police, in and out of uniform, interrogate anyone seen talking with a foreigner.

(2) Rebuilt Temples: Several temples have been rebuilt since my last visit (over 6,000 monasteries and temples were razed by the PLA in the aftermath of the invasion in 1949 and in the cultural revolution, mostly in 1966). Many have been rebuilt since my last visits in the 1970s and 1984.

At Mt. Kailas and Lake Manasarovar, for example, there were no temples or Gompas on my first visit in the 1970s; in 1984 Zatulpuk Gompa at Mt. Kailas was recently rebuilt and similarly Truago Gompa at Lake Manasarovar. Now either rebuilt or being rebuilt are Dirapuk Gompa, Chuktu Gompa, and Gyenglak Gompa along the Kora around Mt. Kailas and at Lake Manasarovar, Seralung Gompa, Gossul Gompa, Chiu Gompa, and Langdana Gompa plus Tsepgye Gompa on Raksas Tal (an adjoining lake). China is not allowing new monasteries for the religion unless you consider tourist dollars holy, a la PRE; its no surprise all the Gompas have places for tourists to stay.
(3) **Religious Policy:** There is no change in China’s standard Communist policy as to religion in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular. As Mao Tse Tung told the Dalai Lama in their meeting in the 1950s in Beijing, “Religion is poison to the people.” Uprooting Tibetan Buddhism is being more vigorously administered since my first two previous visits in Tibet.

(4) **Rituals Continue Under Surveillance.** Tibetan Buddhism is a hollow shell in Tibet. While individual pilgrimages, prostrations, rituals continue, Tibetan Buddhism as a religion is not practiced in Tibet.

There seems to be no diminution of religious devotion among Tibetans over the last 30 years. Large numbers visit temples, complete prostrations around the central temple in Lhasa (the Jokhang), visit the Dalai Lama’s summer palace at Norbulingka, visit and worship at whatever rebuilt temples are set up or have been constructed in Lhasa and elsewhere, and thousands circumambulate the Potala daily. At Mt. Kailas Tibet pilgrims still prostrate themselves on the Kora and visit the newly rebuilt Gompas.

Few Tibetans visit the inside of the Potala, the home of the Dalai Lama, a massive temple, and former headquarters of the Tibetan government and Tibet’s religion. Inside Buddhist rituals are prohibited by the Chinese and surveillance by camera and uniformed guards is constant. Tibetans, especially non-locals, are suspicious of Lamas, since they don’t know which are true monks, which are part of the governing Communist cadres in each monastery and which are actually undercover police. While we were in Lhasa, a German woman was arrested and deported for giving a picture of the Dalai Lama to a man dressed as a Lama who, unbeknownst to her, was an undercover policeman. It is a serious crime in Tibet to distribute or have in your possession a picture of the Dalai Lama.

(5) **The essentials of Tibetan Buddhism cannot be practiced in Tibet today.**

(a) As we observed, it is impossible to obtain a Buddhist education in Tibet. “Those with even a cursory idea of Tibetan Buddhism would know that the Tibetan monasteries are more than mere places of worship; they are more importantly the centers of Buddhist scholarship and meditation. For centuries, monasteries have been the schools and universities of Tibet. However, because of the systematic destruction of the traditional systems of monastic academia in the past over half a century of Chinese rule, it has become virtually impossible to get a Buddhist education in Tibet today.” Dhundup Gyalpo, Tibetan “World” (August 30, 2007), Volume IV, Issue 2.

(b) The Communist government controls the curriculum in the monasteries.

(c) The authorities suppress the teaching of scriptures and even discussing Buddhism. Thus, it is losing its philosophical and reasoned basis. The rituals and practices become only a superficial and superstitious formality to the masses...The temples seem full of worshipers but are in reality not much different from exhibition halls. This does perform a function, however, to fool foreign tourists. Wang Lixiong, Chinese Tibetologist.
(d) The lifeline of Tibetan Buddhism—the Buddha, his teachings, the community of monks who preserve and hand down his teachings, the succession of religious leadership through reincarnation—are prohibited, controlled, restrained, and undermined by Chinese authorities.

(e) Tibet’s ancient method of selecting spiritual leadership through ritual and practices of reincarnation is now prohibited by the PRC. The government reserves the selection of these leaders to itself by its formal published regulations. For example, the PRC selected its own Panchen Lama, Tibet’s second highest leader, after the actual reincarnated Panchen Lama was kidnapped by the Chinese police. When we tried to visit the PRC Panchen Lama in the Tashilumpo Monastery in Xigatse, we found that he lives in Beijing.

(f) The PRC administers religion, religious institutions, and religious personnel—for example, all places of religious activity must be registered with the police, the government fixes limits on the number of monks and nuns allowed, no one under 18 is allowed to receive a monastic education, monasteries as well as all schools must teach Communist State policy and law, and criticism (implied or actual) of the State is forbidden.

(g) The head of the Tibetan religion, the Dalai Lama, is vilified by the PRC as an enemy of the State and all monks and citizens are required to denounce him in writing. Speaking up about him, carrying a picture of him, or otherwise demonstrating a positive attitude towards the Dalai Lama is a major crime punishable with long jail sentences.

While we were in Lhasa, the Dalai Lama received the United States Congressional Medal of Honor. The Drepung Monastery just outside Lhasa displayed extra Tibetan flags allegedly in celebration and were promptly surrounded by the army and the police and no deliveries nor any persons, tourists or otherwise, were allowed to come to or go from the monastery. I know. I tried.

As Zhang Qingli, the Chinese Party Secretary in Tibet who lives in Lhasa and is the most powerful man in Tibet, put it, “The Central Party Committee is the real Buddha for Tibetans”!

(6) Pilgrim Border Crossings.

It was impossible to investigate from the Tibet side the various actual border crossings for Indian and Nepalese pilgrims to Mt. Kailas and Lake Manasarovar. These areas are strictly controlled by the People’s Liberation Army and no foreigners are allowed except Indian pilgrims on quota, local traders and travelers on the Katmandu/Lhasa Highway. China and India are reportedly negotiating increased access and routes to Mt. Kailas for Indian pilgrims. China has no interest in pilgrims (Hindu, Buddhist, or any other religion), but China does whatever it can to increase its income from tourism in Tibet. Historically, India will give up more to China than it gets so the negotiations may well be successful. The possible pilgrim’s routes to Mt. Kailas and Lake Manasarovar include:

1. The Valley of the Flowers route and other routes from west Tibet and particularly from Ladak “Little Tibet” under India’s control.
2. The Lipu Len La is about 60 miles from India’s Almora (probably the shortest and easiest for hikers and one of the very important historical routes) but not open to tourists at this
time. Similarly the Unta-Dhura Pass and Darma Pass from Almora are closed. Both passes are about 238 and 227 miles respectively from Almora to Mt. Kailas.

3. The Similotor route from India and Nepal involves both trekking and vehicles and is currently in use especially by Indians able to afford it and not part of the 200 Indian quota allowed by China.

4. Other historic passes not open to tourism or pilgrims at this point include Joshimath, India, via Gunla-Nitt, Damianiti, and Hotinit passes; Badrinath, India over the Mana Pass; Gangtori over the Jeluk-Haga Pass; Simla via Gartok and Thhuling; Srinagar, Kashmir via Ladak, and Gar, Tibet.

5. By vehicle: on the Friendship Highway (between Lhasa and Katmandu and then either the southern or northern route to Mt. Kailas the southern route can be shortened by taking the cutoff that we explored between the Friendship Highway and Saga via Paiku Tso) or from, Sikkim, over the Nathu La to Gangtok, Tibet.

6. Several routes in the Mt. Everest area. We talked to a young man who was jailed for 6 months for taking his yak for pasturage over one of these passes.

7. The Sikkim, Kalimpong, Yadong/Gyantse route into Tibet, particularly the one used by Britain to invade Tibet under the Younghusband in 1906 (reopened to local trade in 2006).

8. The Tawang route much of which we did explore and which was used by the Dalai Lama to escape to India in 1959.

9. There are, of course, known and unknown except to locals, scores of other passes over the Himalayas between Tibet and India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Ladak. Many of the lesser traveled passes specially to Nepal are constantly used by Tibetans trying to escape, usually without winter clothing or boots and in the winter to avoid Chinese border troops who shoot on sight.