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## The Spiritual Meets the Scientific in the Land of Yaks

In 1999, for newly widowed Manosi Lahiri, just getting through an ordinary day presented difficulties. A geographer by trade, she felt lost, adrift, as if she'd fallen off the map.

Then a chance conversation reignited her longtime interest in visiting far west Tibet. The following year, she and a group of friends began planning a pilgrimage to Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash, revered by four faiths.

“Who could tell?” Lahiri speculated. “Perhaps reaching the mystical lake and mountain would rid my mind of negative thoughts and awaken the positive vibrations within.”

It would take more than good vibrations to make this journey. Far west Tibet is remote, difficult to reach, and poorly documented. Its political troubles are well known, and with the high plateau country comes the risk of high altitude sickness, or HAS, which would come to plague Lahiri and her fellow travelers both on this expedition and a subsequent journey to this isolated land.

Lahiri undertook her initial trip for intensely personal reasons, but her intellectual curiosity got the better of her when she noticed that maps of the region showed two different sources of the river Sutlej. Which was correct? In a time when most of the globe is extensively documented, such puzzles are rare. Intrigued, Lahiri determined to try to resolve this conundrum on a second trip to the region. So when the opportunity presented itself a few years later, she returned to the land of yaks and yetis.

From Lhasa, she and her companions traveled ever upward along the ancient Tasam Highway, once a major stage route but rarely marked on modern maps. The goal of their trip was to perform the sacred *kora*, or circumambulation, of Mount Kailash, revered by Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Bon believers. But Lahiri also persisted in her quest to discover the true source of the Sutlej, querying pilgrims, locals, monks, and fellow explorers along the way. She even convinced a reluctant local guide to take her to Lake Manasarovar's companion lake, Rakas Tal; no easy task, since while Manasarovar is the lake of the gods, legend has it that Rakas Tal is the territory of demons.

The line between the spiritual and the scientific blurred as the group battled exhaustion, altitude sickness, hallucinations, and other perils in their quest to reach the legendary home of the gods. Some of the group turned back when one member experienced HAS so severe that he dared not proceed. Injury and hazardous weather prevented another from undertaking the *kora*. Encounters with AK-47-bearing Chinese soldiers made the Tibetan guides fearful of ending the journey in prison, because some of Lahiri's group carried forbidden photos of the Dalai Lama.

Along the way, Lahiri learned to ride a yak, which, according to some, cancelled out the spiritual benefits of her journey.

“You've come so far from home,” a Nepalese Sherpa told her. “It's sad that you will not get any merit for the *kora*.” When she asked why, he replied, “because a *kora* must be on feet only.”

“So will the yak get the merit for this *kora*?” she inquired. “Of course,” he told her matter-of-factly.

Still, she persevered, completing the *kora*, exploring the long-abandoned kingdom of Guge, and finally identifying the true source of the river Sutlej. In 2006, the story of her adventures was published as *Here Be Yaks* in her native India.

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“In early times, when there were vast expanses left unexplored, cartographers marked uncharted lands and seas with the words, *Here Be Dragons*, to warn travelers of the potential dangers,” Lahiri says, explaining her choice of title. That label still fits far west Tibet.

The Indian edition was warmly received. “Like a good wine, this is a book to be sipped, savoured and enjoyed in quiet reflection. And then returned to for all the nuances you missed in the first reading,” wrote Hugh and Colleen Gantzer, reviewing the book for the *Deccan Herald*.

*Here Be Yaks*, with a foreword by the Dalai Lama, is now available in a new, revised American edition (Branford, CT: The Intrepid Traveler ©2007).

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**Manosi Lahiri** studied at the Universities of Calcutta, Delhi and London and holds a doctorate in Geography from Delhi University. A pioneer in the field of geoinformatics and a consultant of international repute, Dr. Lahiri is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of ML Infomap, a geographic information technology company based in New Delhi. She is passionate about cartography, trekking, and the survey of remote regions. She lives near New Delhi in Gurgaon, India.

The Intrepid Traveler publishes travel narratives, guidebooks, and travel resources for families, budget travelers, and adventurous spirits of all kinds.

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**Here Be Yaks:**

**Travels in Far West Tibet**

by Manosi Lahiri

Foreword by H.H. The Dalai Lama

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