

WESTERN CHINA EXPEDITION

Cycling the Silk Road: On the Trail of Marco Polo

Tracing Marco Polo's route, Kate Harris and Melissa Yule carried Wings WorldQuest Flag #1 and their video camera through deserts, remote villages, high mountain passes, and rapidly growing cities across western China. For four months, Kate, Mel, and their companions bicycled nearly 4,000 kilometers through the grueling Silk Road regions of Xinjiang Province and across Tibet.

PLANNING A RIDE TO THE EXTREMES

Kate was inspired by a book written by martial artist Pamela Logan, who cycled across the Kham region of western China and later founded Kham Aid, an organization devoted to educational and medical assistance for Tibetans. Kate and Mel planned to use their trip to raise funds for Kham Aid and also to make a video about the region and its cultural and physical extremes. They trained by pedaling gear-laden bikes up and down mountain roads, unaware of how the extremes of their journey would push them to their limits.



Kate Harris and Mel Yule hold Wings WorldQuest Flag #1 in the Taklamakan Desert.

THE EXPEDITION ROUTE

Kate, Mel, and their colleague Ben Rawluk began their journey in Urumqi, Xinjiang Province, and planned to explore Xinjiang's Silk Road routes over the Tian Shan mountain range and near the Taklamakan Desert. In Kashgar, they would meet up with Alisha Blechman and then improvise their route.



Route of the 4,000-kilometer Cycling Silk expedition.



Michele and Karen share information with John Wayne and Dr. Andrew Moutu at Marovo Lagoon, Solomon Islands.

A 14,000-FOOT PASS AND THE BLISTERING DESERT

For three days the team struggled at below-zero temperatures to reach the summit of the 14,000-foot Tian Shan pass. They pitched their tents in ancient mud-walled ruins, on a grassy ledge in a ravine, and beneath a concrete bridge. They anticipated an easy descent from the summit. Instead they encountered icy winds, stones like daggers, and massive ruts, all of which slowed their progress.

Sustained with water and protected with sunscreen, the group rode 600 kilometers through the Taklamakan Desert toward the town of Minfeng. They had not foreseen the blasting heat, stinging 120-kilometer winds, and sandstorms which buffeted them each afternoon. After days in the desert, they reached Minfeng. With tree-lined streets, motorbikes, donkey carts, diesel-engined semis, herds of sheep, and the scent of roasting kebabs and baking bread, Minfeng felt surreal.

"We rode just 50 kilometers out of Urumqi that first day, and despite biking all last summer, I had totally forgotten how heavy and cumbersome a loaded bike is, how impossibly far a kilometer can be, and how grueling a gentle grade can feel on feeble legs."

— Kate Harris

WHO

Kate Harris and Melissa Yule

WHAT

Four-month, 4,000-kilometer cycling journey

WHERE

Tibet and the Xinjiang and Yunnan provinces of western China

WHY

To raise funds for rural education and health and make a documentary to raise awareness of the Kham region



Read Kate's Journal on the Web:

www.cyclingsilk.com



Serenity of the Taklamakan Desert

THE PAMIR MOUNTAINS: FROM KARGILIK TO KASHGAR

The group followed a road from Kargilik along a river running deep into the Pamir Mountains. The road was unpaved and filled with sand traps, landslides, and cobblestones. Although travel was slow, the group treasured their encounters with the local Tajik people who passed by on mules and motorbikes. Many invited the travelers home for chai (tea), food, and a snug place to overnight.

The group rejoiced at the spectacular summit scenery and welcomed the downhill pavement that would speed them toward Kashgar, where they would meet Alisha.



Tibetan monastery at sunrise

ACROSS THE TIBETAN PLATEAU

From Kashgar, the group decided to tackle the Xinjiang-Tibet highway. As a novice bicyclist, Alisha chose instead to join a Kham Aid fund-raising ride and bicycle through easier Silk Road routes.

Kate, Mel, and Ben set out on a 20-day pilgrimage that covered over 1,000 kilometers, nine high mountain passes, and a week of riding at elevations over 16,400 feet. For days, they were surrounded by indigo skies, castle-like clouds, rumped mountains, and turquoise lakes.

Boarding a plane in Lhasa bound for Zhongdian in Yunnan Province, they said good-bye to the challenging roads, stirring wilderness, isolation, religious passion, and the many paradoxes of Tibet, the roof of the world.



Mel cycling on the open road of Xinjiang Province

YUNNAN: THE JOURNEY'S END

Kate and Mel traveled to several villages in the Kham region of Yunnan Province, where Kham Aid is located. On foot, they circumnavigated the sacred Kara Karpo mountain range. With spectacular peaks above and populated green fields below, the area might have been the fabled Shangri-La.

Although the landscape was stunning, Kate and Mel enjoyed, even more, meeting and talking with the people of the Kham region over bowls of tsampa (roasted barley flour porridge) and yak butter tea. Kate and Mel are assembling a documentary to share the wonders of China's rural Tibetan world with the West.

ABOUT KATE HARRIS AND MELISSA YULE

After graduating with a degree in Biology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Kate Harris, a 24-year-old Rhodes Scholar from Canada, is studying the History of Science at the University of Oxford. Kate has experienced environmental extremes in Mongolia, Borneo, and Antarctica.

Melissa Yule is a 24-year-old Canadian, recently graduated from McGill University with a degree in Environmental Sciences and a minor in International Development. Mel has traveled extensively in Asia, Africa, and the wilds of North America.

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Learn About the Kham Region:

Kham Aid Foundation
www.khamaid.org



A yak on a mountain pass in Yunnan Province

EXPEDITION TEAM

Expedition Leaders:

Kate Harris
Melissa Yule

Riders:

Ben Rawluk
Alisha Blechman