

## Teacher Prepared Reading Material

### Silk Road

Silk Road is an extract from the travelogue “Extremes along the Silk Road” written by Nick Middleton, a British Geographer. Nick travels far and wide and has visited nearly 50 countries. He is an environmental consultant and freelance author. He has written more than 300 articles in journals, magazines and newspapers, and 22 books. He is the author of travel books like The Global Casino, Surviving Extremes, Extremes along the Silk Road, Atlas of Countries that do not Exist, etc. He popularises geography, environmental science and travel through his writing, public speaking and as a television presenter. He has filmed a series of television programmes for Channel 4 and National Geographic Channel.

The Silk Road is a terrestrial trade route connecting the East and the West. It has been used since the ancient times by European traders who came in search of Asian silk and other goods. Nick Middleton takes us along this Silk Road and hence the extract has been titled “Silk Road”.

The journey to Mount Kailash started from Ravu in the morning. Lhamo, a Tibetan woman presented Nick Middleton with a long sheepskin coat as she believed that he needed some warmers clothes. Daniel accompanied Nick in his journey while Tsetan drove the car. The weather was perfect. It was a clear blue morning sky.

Tsetan chose to travel south-west, a short cut to Mount Kailash. They had to pass through high mountains. The only problem would be ice on the trail. Tsetan was not certain about road blockages. He clearly took risk. They drove past the rolling hills of Ravu and reached the vast plains. Nick saw gazelles nibbling the arid pastures. At some distance, the plains became more stony than grassy. There they met kyang, a herd of asses. They moved en masse.

On the way they met the drokbas, the Tibetan nomadic shepherds. Men and women were seen tending their flock. They were well-wrapped. They greeted the three as they drove past them. At some distance the dark isolated tents of the nomads became visible. They were guarded by the ferocious Tibetan mastiffs. They became alert as the car approached and

sprang into action. They ran in the direction of the car just like bullets from a gun. As they were ready to take them head-on, Tsetan was forced to take a sharp turn to avoid them. The mastiffs chased them for some distance. Nick understood why these hunting dogs were popular in the Chinese royal courts.

They approached the snow-capped mountains and entered a valley where the river was wide and mostly clogged with ice. The trail drew close to the bank of the river. The river and the path took a winding course. The journey was not comfortable anymore. The turns were sharper and the ride turned bumpier. Tsetan had to drive slowly. They were finally on the track far from the icy river. But the slopes were steeper.

Nick Middleton started experiencing troubles. The pressure was building up in his ears. He had to sneeze to clear his nose. At some point Tsetan stopped the car suddenly and jumped out. They were at 5,210 metres above the sea level. Daniel told Nick that there was snow ahead. They too exited from the car. The path ahead of them was covered by a strip of snow. It stretched some 15 metres. The trail beyond was dirty just like the path behind them. The banks of the trail up were smooth and steep. Tsetan tested the strength by stamping his foot on the encrusted snow. The icy top layer was difficult to grip and it could turn the car over. Tsetan grabbed handfuls of dirt and flung it across the frozen surface.

Daniel and the narrator also assisted him. When the road was covered with enough dirt to give friction to the surface to drive the car along, Tsetan backed up, and drove cautiously along the dirt-spattered snow.

They encountered another blockage after 10 minutes. Tsetan jumped out of the car again and surveyed the scene. This time he went round the snow. The slope is again steep and stony. He negotiated it somehow. They faced more obstacles on the way.

But Tsetan tackled all of them skilfully.

They reached a height of 5,400 metres from the sea level. Nick began to feel uncomfortable. His head throbbed horribly. He took gulps from his water bottle. He felt relieved.

They stopped at the top of the pass which was at 5,500 feet. It was marked by a large cairn of rocks. They moved round the cairn in a clockwise direction. Tsetan checked the tyres. He unscrewed the fuel tank a little and it released a hissing sound. He told Nick it was dangerous

to smoke. Nick knew that fuel expanded in lower atmospheric pressure.

From here the journey was down-slope and smooth.

They stopped for lunch at 2 o'clock at a work camp put up beside a dry salt lake. They had hot noodles inside a long canvas tent. There were salt flats and brackish waters here and there on the plateau. Ages ago Tibet was bordered by the Tethys Ocean. It was lifted upwards as a result of continental collision. These salt flats were a hive of activity. People there worked with pickaxes and shovels. They wore sunglasses to avoid the glare of the sun and long sheepskin coats against the chilly weather. Their boots were encrusted with salt.

There was a steady stream of blue trucks carrying away loads of salt.

Hor was reached by late afternoon. It was a small town and on the main east-west highway.

The highway was connected to the old historical Silk Road from Lhasa to Kashmir.

Daniel bid them goodbye and returned to Lhasa. The car tyres had got punctured while coming down past the salt lake. Tsetan got the problem fixed at a tyre-repair shop. It was important to get them repaired as they had no spares.

The little town Hor was a miserable place. There was no vegetation. It was filthy with years of accumulated waste. Nick felt that it was unfortunate as it lay very close to Lake Manasarovar. Manasarovar is holy to the Tibetans. According to ancient Hindu and Buddhist cosmologists, it was the source of four great Indian rivers namely, the Indus, the Ganges, the Sutlej and the Brahmaputra. But geographically speaking only the Sutlej flows from the lake. The other rivers have their beginnings on the flanks of Mount Kailash.

The fact that he was not far from the great mountain excited Nick to resume the journey.

However, he was not able to resume the journey immediately. Tsetan advised him to have some tea from the cafe there. The little town had just one cafe. It was a badly painted concrete structure. One of its three windows was broken.

The author saw the beautiful Manasarovar through one of them and felt compensated for the ugliness of the hotel. A Chinese boy in military uniform served him tea. He cleaned the table with a filthy piece of cloth and 'spread the grease' evenly. The journey resumed half an hour later. They moved on in the western direction.

The writer had read beautiful accounts of Lake Manasarovar. Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese monk visited it in 1900. The pure beauty of the lake moved him into tears. Steven Hedin, a Swede too was deeply impressed by it though he had no religious sentiments. But Nick's own experience was not that exhilarating. The increasing number of pilgrims and tourists had obviously ruined the beauty of the lake.

At 10.30 p.m. they reached a guest house in Darchen. It was at a height of 4,700 metres. It turned out to be another troubled night again for Nick. At Hor he had caught a cold once again. The herbal tea had failed to give him relief. One of the nostrils was blocked again. This did not allow him to sleep. He was worried that his other nostril would not provide him with sufficient oxygen. He had been having breathing trouble during the nights as Oxygen is thin at high altitudes and getting used to these. But he was not feeling comfortable now. His problem worsened at Darchen. The long journey had exhausted him.

He was hungry too. He tried breathing through his mouth. After a while, he switched to single-nostril. He was falling asleep but, something woke him up. His chest felt heavy. He was forced to sit up and clear his nostril. He experienced some relief as his chest felt light with this. He had the same trouble again and again. He was about to fall asleep but some inner voice was warning him against it. He said some emergency electrical impulse was helping him from falling into permanent sleep. He could not sleep. When he lay, his sinuses filled and his chest became heavy. He was forced to sit up against the wall. The whole night he was unable to relax and fall asleep.

Tsetan took him to the Darchen medical college the next day.

The medical college looked like a Buddhist monastery. A Tibetan doctor examined him in a dark consulting room. The doctor was very simple in looks and demeanour. He did not wear any paraphernalia that is expected of a doctor and was like any other Tibetan. He asked a few questions and felt Nick's pulse and declared his troubles were due to the cold and the altitude. He assured that he would recover and complete the kora. Nick was prescribed a five-day course of Tibetan medicine. He started it immediately. He consumed some brown powder with hot water.

The other medicine consisted of small, spherical brown pellets. They appeared like sheep

dung. That night he slept like a dead man. Obviously the powder and pellets worked!

Tsetan left for Lhasa after ensuring that Nick had recovered from his troubles. He had been a great companion. He made some interesting comments before leaving. Being a Buddhist, he was not worried about death as he knew death was inevitable. But, the death of a tourist would not be good for his business as it would discourage other tourists.

The narrator now has peaceful nights. He turned his attention to Darchen. It was a dusty town. There was refuse and rubble here and there. The Himalayas were to the south. It was a simple place. The supplies are limited to basic things like cigarettes, soap, basic provisions, prayer flags etc and life is quite simple. Men played a game of pool and women washed their long hair in the icy water of a narrow brook. The town appeared relaxed and unhurried. The only problem was Nick did not find any pilgrims. But after a couple of weeks the whole place would bustle with visitors. Many would bring their own accommodations. They would set up tents. Soon the whole plain would be full of them. Unfortunately, Nick had arrived too early.

One afternoon, he was thinking of his choices as he was having a glass of tea. The cafe was the only one there. He realized that his options were limited. He tried to console himself and think positively. But this self-help programme did not seem to work as he was desperate to continue his journey. He observed that the path used by the pilgrims is good enough now to continue his journey. But he was not prepared to go alone. The kora was seasonal. It was not undertaken in the snow. Another problem was Nick did not find anyone to start a conversation. There was nobody to who spoke or understood even as much as basic English.

Fortunately he met Norbu.

Norbu was a Tibetan but his costumes suggested western style. He worked in Beijing at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in the institute of Ethnic literature. Nick thought Norbu might have come there for some fieldwork. Norbu revealed that he had come there to do the kora. He had been writing about the Kailash kora and its importance in various works of Buddhist literature. He had never done the kora. The writer was excited. He shared his purpose for coming there. Norbu was also excited and said that they could travel together.

Nick's excitement got diluted when he learned that Norbu was also not suitably equipped for the pilgrimage. Norbu was worried about his heavy body. He was obese. He knew the kora was going to be hard. He said it would be tiresome to walk up the mountain. He declared that he was not a serious Buddhist, but, being a Tibetan, he was curious. Nick Middleton had decided to make the trek in the company of devout Buddhists but with the pilgrim's season yet a couple of weeks away, he hoped that Norbu might turn out to be a good companion. Norbu said that he had no intention of prostrating himself all round the mountain. His tummy was big. He laughed hysterically as he made this remark.

The article *Silk Road* describes Nick Middleton's remarkable journey to Darchen from Ravu. He faces serious physical challenges but never gives up. He is a keen observer of nature. He gives us a beautiful description of the rose-tinted mountain tops, the nibbling gazelles, the rolling hills, the well-wrapped nomadic shepherds, the kyang, the ice-covered trails, the snow-clogged rivers, the rocks patched with lichen; he paints a picture in words, of cairns of rocks festooned with ribbons, the plateau pockmarked with salt flats, Darchen's café constructed from badly painted concrete, the Chinese youth at the café in military uniform, the heaps of rubble and refuse in the town, the narrow brook babbling down past the guest house, then unhurried life of the town; he goes on to describe the hallowed waters of the Manasarovar, the Tibetan doctor with a thick pullover and a woolly hat, the small spherical brown pellets, the omnipresent Chinese plastic and much more. His love for details is obvious. He is a very warm, lovable, relentless explorer who easily wins the hearts of the people around. The lesson is a beautiful travelogue all in all.