

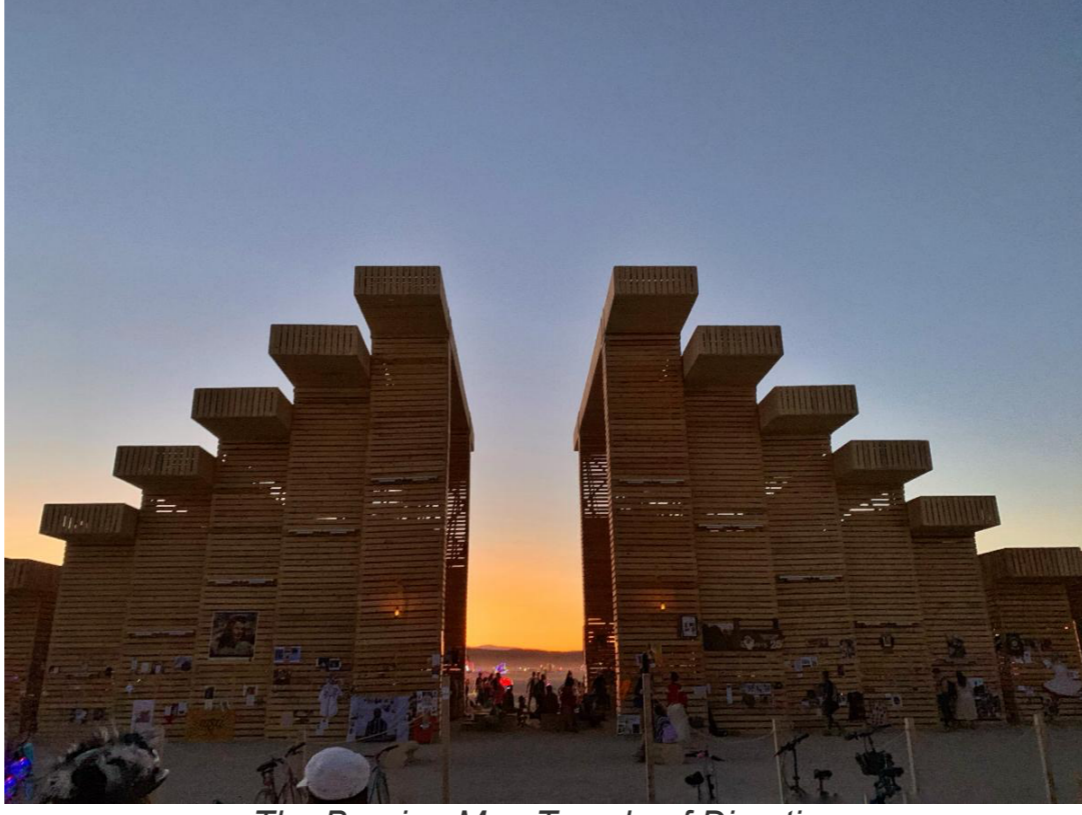
Mikkel Aaland



"It's All an Adventure"

Honoring the Dead: From Burning Man to Mt. Kailash

Death rituals vary from culture to culture but they all attempt to make sense of loss and give meaning to the living.

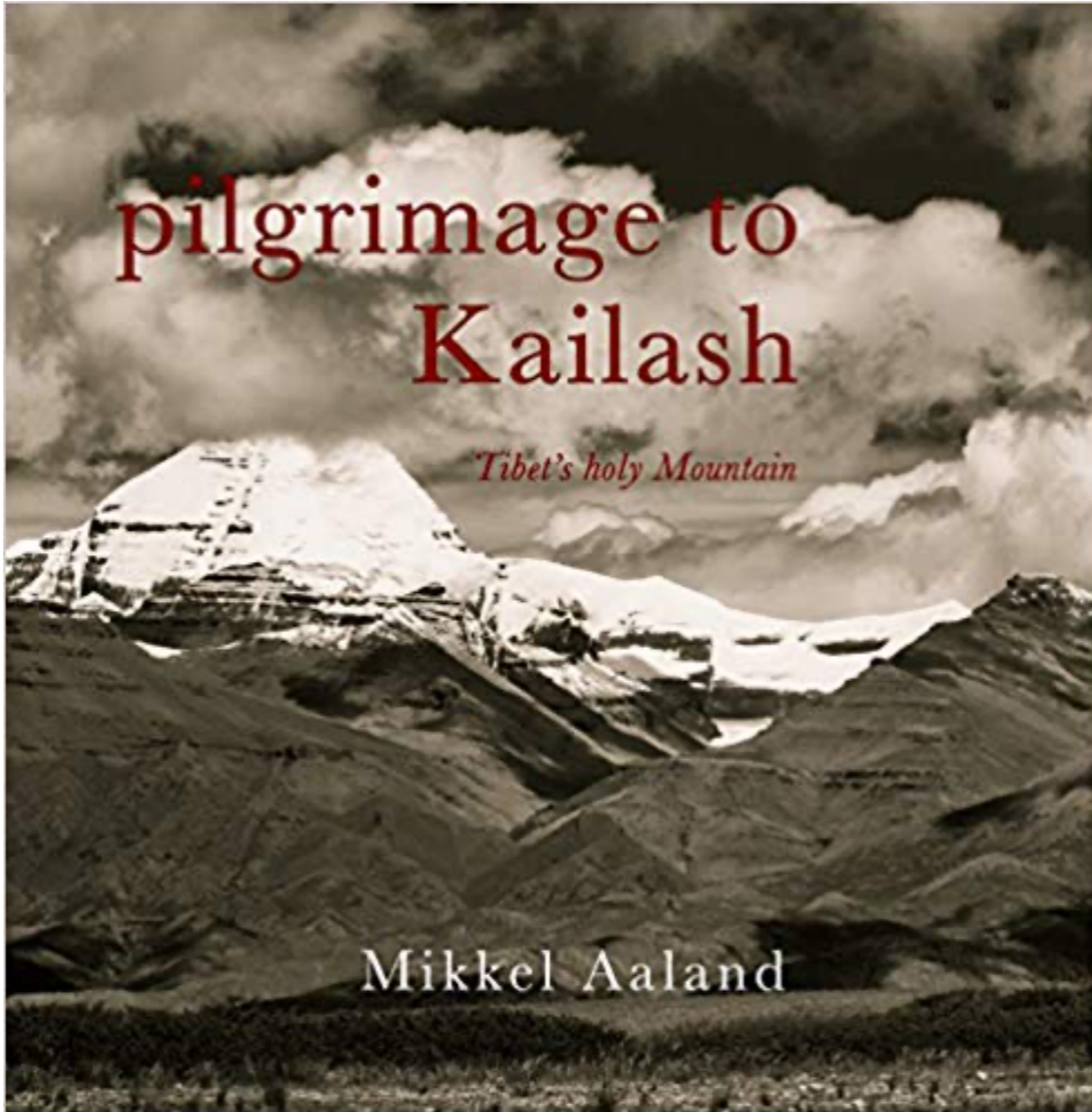


The Burning Man Temple of Direction

This summer Michael Taggart, my wife's father, passed away. He lived 89 full and fruitful years and though we mourned his passing we celebrated a life well lived. At this year's Burning Man Rebecca positioned a collection of photos and text representing his life inside the Temple of Direction. Like the iconic Burning Man structure itself, the lesser-known Temple also hovers over the Nevada high desert floor and is burned every year at the conclusion of the week-long event. Joining my wife's homage to her father were hundreds of other similar offerings, representing love, loss, grief, and forgiveness. Sparks and ash sent the structure-which was architecturally inspired by a Japanese temple-and its holy contents high into the star-filled night sky in a cathartic release, a promise of renewal.

My wife's act, and the ritualistic burning of the temple, inspired me to rework a book I wrote and photographed a few years ago, a book in which I honor my own parents with another type of ritual. *Pilgrimage to Kailash* is a beautifully printed, coffee table book that I just made available for the first time on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). The book is also available for free in electronic form at apple.com.

Here is a small sampling of photos from the book and an excerpt.



[Available on Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)

My pilgrimage to Kailash

The mountain in Tibet is calling.

It's 5:02 in the morning and I am on my way, on a train heading to the Oslo airport. My compartment is full of sleeping passengers many of who boarded in Stavanger and have been on the train all night. Plastic bottles of Coke and crumpled bags of chips litter the isle. The few passengers who are awake stare blankly at brightly-lit laptop screens.

The summer sun has already been up a long time, and I gaze through the large window at a steady blur of evergreens, frequently punctuated by flashes of a lake or river, or sparking masses of granite. Unlike the messy train, the Norwegian landscape is as beautiful and unspoiled as ever. I know very well what I am leaving, but where I am going?



The Dzong-chu river flowing from Mt. Kailash.

Earlier, at the Lunde station, my wife Rebecca and I parted with a hurried kiss. As I tossed my heavy, waterproof duffle bag onto a rack I suddenly remembered my breakfast and tape recorder sitting in the back of our car, now driving back to our house in Ulefoss. No worries, I tell myself with partial success. The girls will eat the sandwiches and I can buy another recorder at the airport duty-free shop. I am trying to practice non-attachment, but I am mad at myself for being so careless. I'm obviously a long way from enlightenment.

An electronic display over the train compartment door announces our distance above sea level, 100 meters (300 feet). I pull out my iPhone and Google Mt. Kailash, my ultimate destination. Its peak is 6638 meters (21,778 feet) above sea level. It is over 10,000 kilometers (6,213 miles) away, in a remote western corner of Tibet near the borders of India and Nepal.



Hanging out in Kathmandu with my friend Kazz, waiting for the Chinese to issue travel permits for Tibet.

Kailash is a holy mountain, sacred to 1 out of 5 people on the planet yet I suspect few people on this train - or in the West generally - have ever heard of the mountain. I only know about it from a Japanese friend, who will join me soon in Kathmandu for our pilgrimage.



I photographed these two Tibetan boys just outside of Nyalam on our way to Mt. Kailash.

Buddhist, Hindu, Jan, and Bon pilgrims believe that walking around Mount Kailash on foot is a holy ritual that brings good fortune and absolves all sins. My friend from Japan is a Shintoist and shares this belief. Not an adherent of any religion, I have my own personal reasons to make the pilgrimage around Mt. Kailash. The path around the mountain is a tough 52 km (32 mi) and it typically takes three days. Dozens of pilgrims die every year from altitude sickness. I am in good shape but at 61 I still worry how my body will react.



Stumbling down the steep path from Drolma-la pass I photographed this woman kneeling, then stretching her body to the ground, crawling a few inches the raising back to her knees and standing.

Even though my wife and daughters are not traveling with me, I am not alone. I carry with me the dead, literally and figuratively. In my bag are some of my parents' ashes, as well as proxies for my long dead grandparents. A fishing lure represents my Norwegian grandfather and a golf ball my American grandfather. Bath salts for my American grandmother, and flowers for my Norwegian grandmother. I hope to build a cultural bridge in our family, but more importantly, I am on a mission to confront something bad that happened. My ancestors hold the key and I hope they will help me.

I lean back in my seat. I scribble thoughts in my notebook. Tears fill my eyes. It's hard for me to believe, but this is really happening. I am no longer planning. I'm doing.

Find Out More

To read about the rest of my journey, and see more pictures I took along the way, take a look at my book: [Pilgrimage to Kailash](https://www.amazon.com). Thanks for your interest! Best, Mikkel

PS. If you are interested in a book plus a signed print of your choice write [directly](mailto:mikkel@pilgrimagebook.com) to me for more information and pricing.