

# The Konka Cavalry

By Shamus Sillar

With one team member succumbing to altitude sickness and the clock rapidly ticking down on our adventures in western Sichuan, it was time to act quickly. We had no chance of hiking the rest of the way to our planned destination – a 5000-metre mountain pass with stunning views of gigantic Minya Konka. Too far, too steep.



Steep is the word. Minya Konka (its Tibetan name – in Chinese it's known as Gongga Shan) is the easternmost 7000m peak in the world, and the third highest on the planet outside of the Himalaya/Karakoram range. It's three-and-a-half times taller than the highest mountain in my homeland Australia. And it's dangerous. One Tibetan local who shared yak tea with us described a disastrous Japanese expedition to the summit where more than a handful of climbers died. But if you confine yourself to the lower reaches of the mountain, Konka, with its stunning views and fascinating history, is an absolute highlight of any visit to the province.



Which is why my group was so keen to cover the remaining 20 kilometres to the pass, so we could actually lay our eyes on this beast of a peak. But how to get there?

Salvation arrived in the form of a rumbling dust cloud looming over the crest of a nearby hill. It was a cavalry of leather-clad locals approaching on motorbikes, sending yaks and piglets scrambling into the fields.

These guys were gungho cowboys. Think "Sichuan" and you'll possibly think spicy food and pandas, but on the slopes of Konka there's scarcely a hint of traditional China. Certainly the misty bamboo mountains surrounding the provincial capital Chengdu are nowhere to be seen. For one thing, this is essentially Tibet: maybe not in name, but in culture. It's also kind of like the set from *Mad Max II*: an unruly wasteland of parched dirt paths, where people eke out a living, and where a full tank of gas in a souped-up motorbike is a godsend.

The bikers had heard through the village network that we were looking for an alternative way up the mountain, and they'd done their best Valentino Rossi impressions to find us.

After haggling over a price, each member of our twelve-person team was assigned to a rider, and we shuffled over to our individual motorbikes. They were uniquely decorated with everything from Buddhist charms dangling from side mirrors, to magazine pictures of pretty ladies sticky-taped to the mud flap.

I jumped on the back of my bike and before I could say "guess who forgot travel insurance," the tyres spun violently in the



dirt and we were off.

This was a sublime travel moment, churning up the side of a towering peak clutching on to a dusty Tibetan cowboy, his jacket reeking of wet yak fur and smoke, my ears assaulted by a lethal pink box – a makeshift stereo – which had been roped to the back of the bike and was blasting out distorted techno – doof doof doof doof – all the way up to the mountain pass. During the one-hour ascent I was treated to a 160-beat-per-minute version of Auld Lang Syne, among other clubbing favourites.

So how was the mountain? Meh. Mountains are mountains. Okay, it looked spectacular from the snowy pass where we stood, particularly when the clouds cleared and we got

an unobstructed view of the summit (very rare, according to our local Hell's Angels team).

But to be honest, I was just as happy to get back on the bike for the descent.

And as the valleys echoed with the buzzing of bikes and a doof doof rendition of the soundtrack to *Beverly Hills Cop*, I thought: how on earth will I put this in words for the magazine?

Trips to Gongga Shan and other remote regions of Chinese provinces are offered by Shanghai travel club, YANA. Tel: (021) 6384 1771. Web: [www.withyana.com](http://www.withyana.com) Tel: 6384 1771; 13061759149.