

# The Heart of the World

*A Journey to Tibet's Lost Paradise*



IAN BAKER

*Introduction by His Holiness the Dalai Lama*



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## Praise for Ian Baker's *The Heart of the World*

“One of the book’s many delights—and *The Heart of the World* is among the most complex, compelling and satisfying adventure books I have ever read—is to follow Baker’s inner journey as he tries to balance his Buddhist aspirations with an admittedly materialistic desire to find the key into Yangsang. . . . *The Heart of the World*, though not easy to absorb, is one of the most extraordinary tales of adventure and discovery ever told. On the prosaic level, it’s the search for a hidden waterfall that eluded explorers for more than a century. But it is also—perhaps primarily—an exploration into the heart of Tibetan Buddhism, which views the animistic spirits of sacred geography as metaphors for the nature of mind. Both journeys are fascinating, and each is dependent on the other. From harrowing encounters with tribal poisoning cults to a descent into the roaring ‘throat’ of a Buddhist goddess, Baker’s quest is an unforgettable saga. Like his fellow explorers, we find our own inner doors opening along the journey. A century from now, *The Heart of the World* will still ignite the imagination of anyone who loves to explore and seeks the deeper meaning of his explorations. A fearless adventurer in both body and spirit, Baker has written one for the ages.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“*The Heart of the World* is Baker’s blood-pumping account of claiming . . . the world’s last secret place: the heart of the Tsangpo gorge . . . the final prize of earthly exploration. . . . Yet *The Heart of the World* is more than just a gung-ho adventure tale; Ian Baker went hunting the sacred, not the gaudy trappings of geographical fame. Deep in the Tsangpo gorge, he says, the boundaries between inner experience and outer experience break down. And perhaps, he writes, ‘that’s paradise after all.’ ”

—*Men’s Journal*

“*The Heart of the World* is a compelling journey of body and mind. . . . Baker has long been a Buddhist scholar and his heavyweight volume tracks his inner journey as much as his outer journey, elevating beyond the usual thrill-seeker tale so familiar these days. A much-rumored waterfall deep within the Tsangpo gorge may have been Baker’s motivation for his exhaustive search through such forbidding territory. But the inner quest may well be what resonates stronger with many readers searching for meaning in a world of confounding confusions and doubts.”

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“Ian Baker has given us a remarkable record of exploration—both physical and spiritual, as well as a perceptive account of a part of Tibet that still remains rooted in the traditions of that unique culture. . . . *The Heart of the World* is highly recommended and will undoubtedly become a classic of Tibetan exploration.”

—*Asian Affairs*

“Magnificent . . . Baker’s elegant photography and thoughtful storytelling elevate *Heart* far above most travel books published today. The insightful philosophical questions he raises make it a classic of travel literature.”

—*Star Tribune (Minneapolis)*

“*The Heart of the World* is Baker’s memoir of his obsessive, decade-spanning quest to explore the [Tsangpo] gorge’s spiritual and geographic enigmas. . . . It’s hard to imagine a more thorough document—the book explores Pemako’s culture, geography

and spirituality, often rendering the landscape in terms of local deities—and Baker is probably the only man alive who could have written it with this much authority. *The Heart of the World embraces the tension between spirit and flesh . . .* it's extraordinary.”

—[OregonLive.com](http://OregonLive.com)

“A heady mélange of history, wilderness exploration and Tibetan Buddhism study, this true story of the search for the ‘hidden-lands’ of Pemako, Tibet, is scholarly, entertaining and transcendent.”

—*Publishers Weekly (starred review)*

“Ian Baker has written a brilliant account of exploring both the outer domain and inner significance of Tibet’s fabled hidden realm, *Beyul Pemako*—The Hidden Lotus-shaped Land—located in a remote Himalayan valley. His riveting portrait of physical privation during an epic five-year spiritual quest reinvents the art of pilgrimage. *The Heart of the World* gives all of us ways to see even mundane environments as radiantly divine.”

—*John Avedon, author of In Exile from the Land of Snows*

“Western explorers have for over a century sought a legendary waterfall hidden in the depths of the Tsangpo gorge, the world’s deepest and most inaccessible canyon. *The Heart of the World* is an enthralling and eloquent account of how Ian Baker and his companions, after repeated attempts, reached this symbol of the unattainable. More importantly, however, the book is an exploration of the hidden regions of mind and spirit, of the quest for bliss and inspiration, not only by these travelers, but also by the Tibetan lamas and pilgrims who have for centuries considered this a sacred land, as revealed by ancient Buddhist texts. This remarkable and perceptive book makes a genuine literary contribution to a fabled corner of our planet and to our perception of nature and ourselves.”

—*George B. Schaller, Wildlife Conservation Society*

“Ian Baker’s amazing journey through Pemako in Tibet to the ‘hidden’ Falls of the Tsangpo is really a pilgrimage into our own true selves. In the words Baker quotes from Marcel Proust, ‘the real journey of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.’ ”

—*Richard Gere*

“In this remarkable book, Ian Baker narrates an extraordinary journey of spiritual and geographical discovery, and he does so in a manner that is so deeply compelling that no reader will ever forget the experiences he describes.”

—*David Napier, University College, London*

“Ian Baker’s gripping account of his expeditions into Tibet’s fabled Tsangpo region is richly informed by the stories of other seekers—Tibetan monks and visionaries and British explorers alike. This is a marvelous quest that reminds us anew that the real journey has always been the one within.”

—*John Elder, author of Reading the Mountains of Home and The Frog Run*

“Both a remarkable adventure story and a work of real scholarship, Ian Baker’s account of his expeditions in search of the truth behind the myths of a magical waterfall resounds with the echoes of the early Western explorers and Tibetan pilgrims who have preceded him.”—Michael Harner, Ph.D., author of

*The Way of the Shaman and The Jívaro People of Sacred Waterfalls*

“This is an extraordinarily brave and beautiful book, taking us into the last wild refuge on earth. Though many have dreamed of the holy Tsangpo’s misty gorge, few have entered this breathtaking geography and lived to tell the tale. Ian Baker has done the nearly impossible: befriended the wildest place on earth and rendered a luminous text that makes us a friend to this world as well. Wonderfully written, this work is a pilgrim’s classic.”

—*Joan Halifax Roshi, Abbot, Upaya Zen Center*

“Ian Baker has written a classic adventure story, telling the tale of a journey to a legendary waterfall only imagined to exist before he got there. But he has also written something more: a spiritual quest into the human need for mystery, reminding us that some places must remain secret so we still have reason to dream.”

—*David Rothenberg, author of Always the Mountains and Why Birds Sing*

“Ian Baker has written a truly unusual and unique book of travel and exploration that takes us not only into one of the most inaccessible places on earth but, even more importantly, into the minds and worldview of the Tibetan people who revere the remote bend of the Tsangpo River as the mythic realm of a sacred hidden valley. What sets *The Heart of the World* apart is the way Baker weaves his journeys and those of earlier explorers together with accounts and guidebooks by Tibetan lamas who blend the mystical with the matter-of-fact in a haunting manner that calls into question the purely scientific descriptions and aims of Western geography.”

—*Edwin Bernbaum, author of The Way to Shambhala and Sacred Mountains of the World*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Baker has lived in Kathmandu, Nepal, and been a student of Tibetan Buddhism for more than twenty years. He studied fine arts, literature, and comparative religion at Middlebury College, Oxford University, and Columbia University. He has written several books on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, including *The Tibetan Art of Healing*, *Celestial Gallery*, and *The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple: Tantric Wall Paintings from Tibet*. He is also the coauthor of *Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life* and has contributed articles to *Explorers Journal* and *National Geographic* magazine. He currently divides his time among New York, Thailand, and the Himalayas.

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As far as the western world was concerned, [we] were exploring country of which nothing was known, but much was speculated; one of the last remaining secret places of the earth, which might conceal a fall rivaling the Niagra or Victoria Falls in grandeur.

*LIEUTENANT-COLONEL F. M. BAILEY, 1913<sup>1</sup>*







Mountains lie all about, with many difficult turns leading here and there. The trails run up and down; we are martyred with obstructing rocks. No matter how well we keep the path, if we miss one single step, we shall never know safe return. But whoever has the good fortune to penetrate that wilderness, for his labors will gain a beatific reward, for he shall find there his heart's delight. The wilderness abounds in whatsoever the ears desire to hear, whatsoever would please the eye: so that no one could possibly wish to be anywhere else. And this I well know; for I have been there.

*GOTTFRIED VON STRASSBURG, *Tristan and Isolde**

The hagiographic myth of a spiritual journey through material difficulties to the attainment of divine grace would become a paradigm of travel to haunt posterity . . . by promising the ideal as the ultimate goal . . . it served as that purely mythic and always unachievable paradigm located in our historical memory, by contrast with which all human traveling—whatever its achievements and successes—can never transcend the abyss of futility.

*JAS ELSNER AND JOAN-PAU RUBIES,  
*Voyages & Visions**

There have always been two kinds of arcadia: shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic . . . the idyllic as well as the wild.

*SIMON SCHAMA, *Landscape and Memory**



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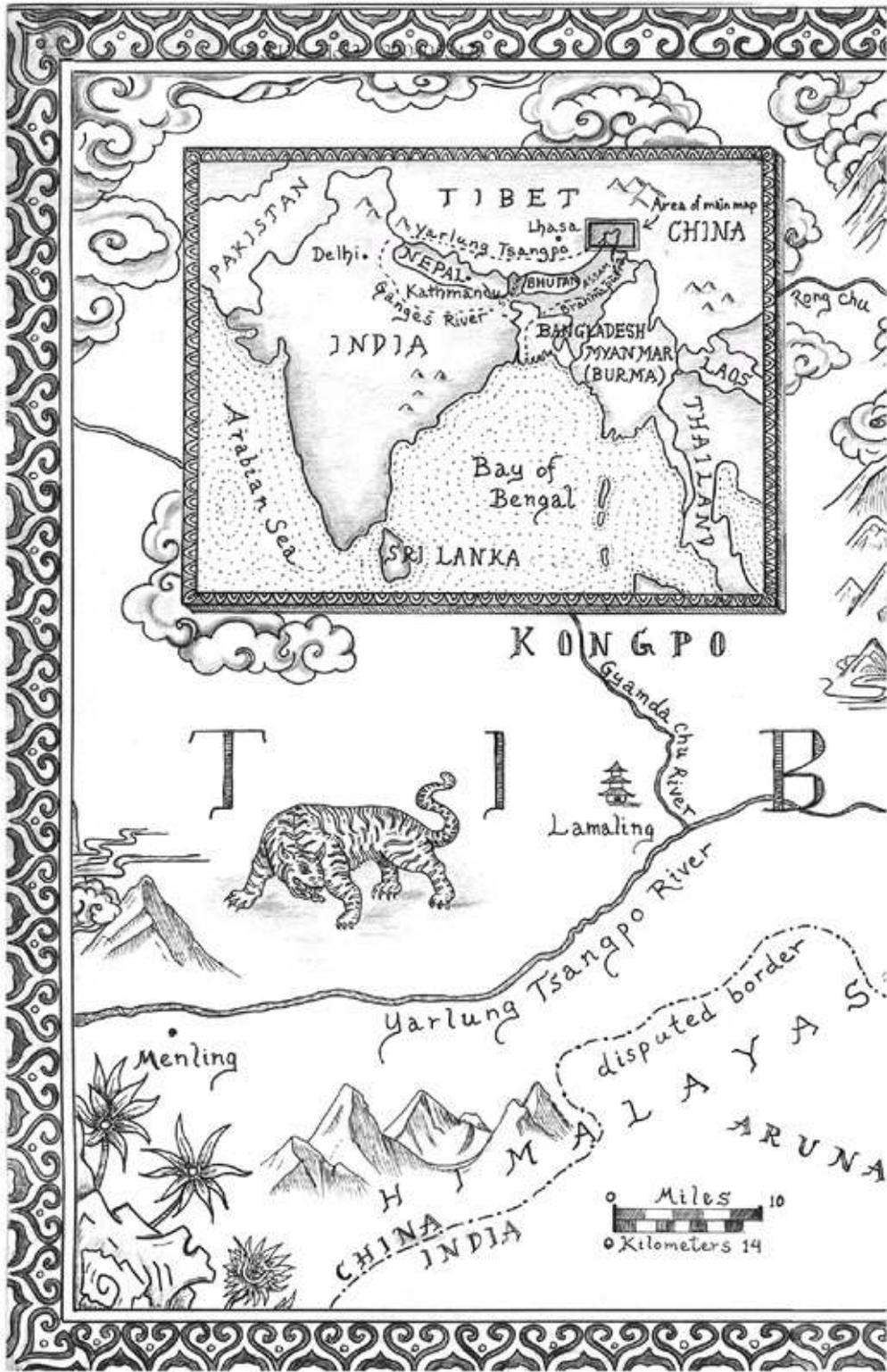
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*Although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact indivisible . . . landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock. SIMON SCHAMA, Landscape and Memory*



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