



Buddhist Trail in Ladakh

Travel Guide

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

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Travel Guide

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Eicher Goodearth Private Limited

New Delhi



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Government of Jammu & Kashmir

AN EICHER GOODEARTH PUBLICATION

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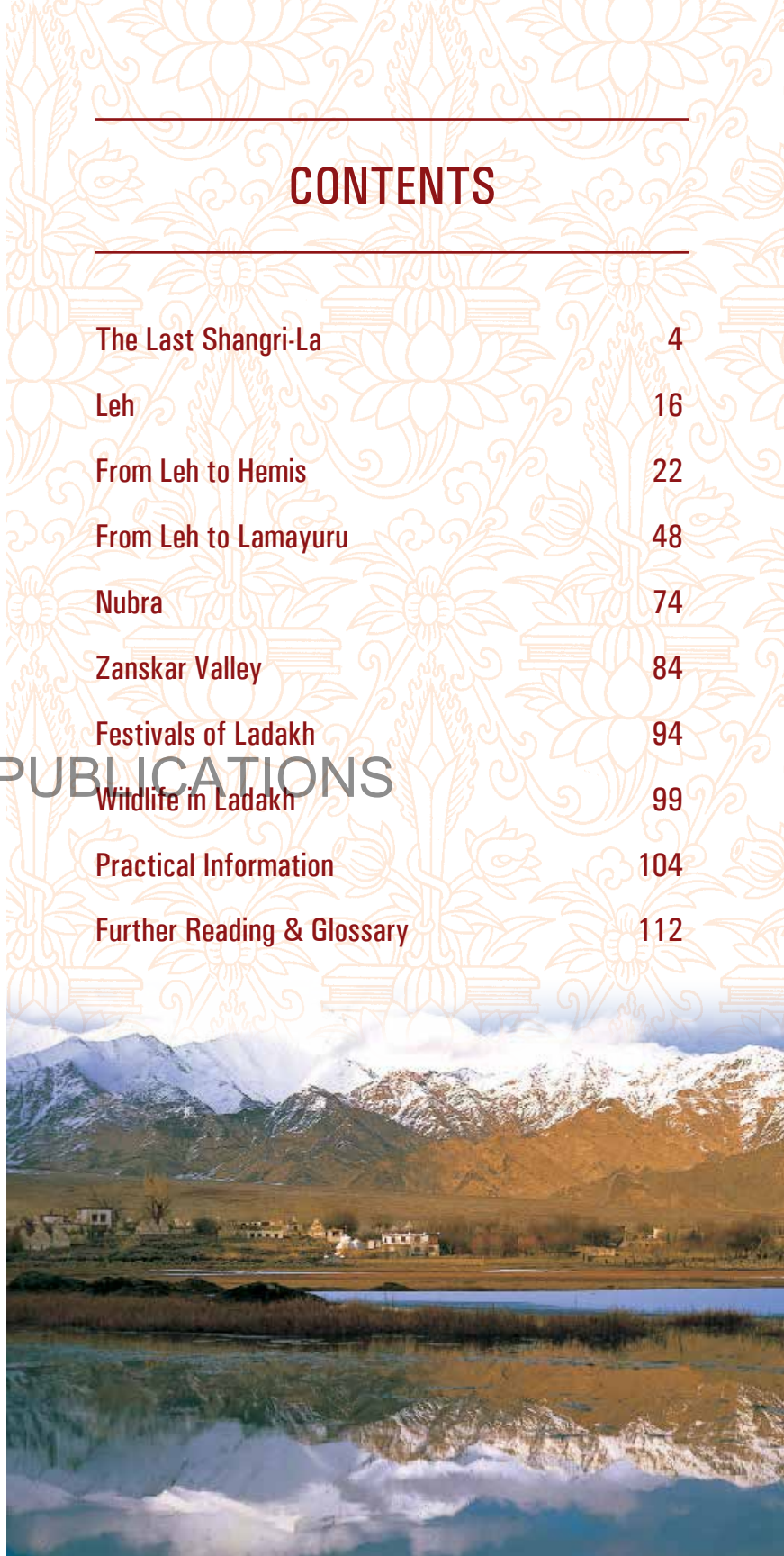
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CONTENTS

The Last Shangri-La	4
Leh	16
From Leh to Hemis	22
From Leh to Lamayuru	48
Nubra	74
Zaskar Valley	84
Festivals of Ladakh	94
Wildlife in Ladakh	99
Practical Information	104
Further Reading & Glossary	112



THE LAST SHANGRI-LA

*'Ladakh, this valley seemed like a stuff of dreams.
It smites deep into the soul,
an unforgettable diamond in the heart of the lotus'.*

(Bill Aitken, Touching Upon the Himalaya)



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❖ THE LAND

Ladakh is a kaleidoscope of nature's extremes – high mountain peaks to cold desert sand dunes, sub-zero temperatures to scorching sun – all interspersed with barren mountains in myriad shades of brown. The beauty of this remote land is so overwhelming that many a traveller is at a loss for words when asked to describe what is often-called the 'Last Shangri-La'.

Also affectionately dubbed 'Little Tibet' because of its cultural and geographical proximity to Tibet, Buddhist-tinged Ladakh is India's most remote and sparsely populated region. Indeed, wedged between Tibet and Kashmir, this austere beautiful land, with Leh and Kargil as its district headquarters, is unique - in India, and in the world.

Ladakh is also daunting, no doubt. Its minimum elevation is 2,900 m and its highest regions ascend up to 7,500 m,

higher even than Mount Everest's base camp. This ethereal, humbling moonscape is bounded by the Kunlun mountain range on the north and the Great Himalayas to the south. It is often said that here, 'the earth meets the sky'. Spread across 86,904 sq kms, Ladakh is flanked by Xinjiang to the north, Tibet to the east, the Kashmir valley to the west and Lahaul-Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh to the south.

Ladakh's icy lifeline is the Indus river, described as 'the central thread in the Ladakhi mosaic' (Michael Gebicki). The Indus, 3,180 kms long, originates in the Tibetan plateau, flows north west through Ladakh (where it separates the Ladakh and Zaskar ranges before turning south to flow through Pakistan). The other major river here is a tributary of the Indus called Zaskar, which nourishes the arid, inhospitable Zaskar valley. In winters, a 105-km stretch of the frozen Zaskar river becomes a challenging and beautiful adventure called the Chadar Trek (*see p 91*).



❖ THE HISTORY AND PEOPLE

Ruined walls, silhouetted against the sky, look down from cliffs and crags onto the cultivated valleys below...

[and] hint at a forgotten history of local wars...

[though] there is little documentary evidence or folk memory to explain the function of these buildings.

*(John Harrison,
'Traditional Building in Buddhist Ladakh',
Marg)*



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The history of Ladakh is shrouded in myth. Indeed, there is no 'written' history of the region until after the 8th century; and yet, Ladakh was known across continents from the most ancient times. The Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484-425 BC), for example, called this land of sun-kissed mountains and sparkling rivers a 'country of gold-digging ants' – perhaps a reference to the Tibetan marmots that were known for digging gold out of the earth.

Historical sources suggest that, besides the Dards of Drass (Kargil district) the earliest inhabitants of Ladakh were Changpas, nomadic yak herders. Other important and ancient tribes include the Brokpas (of Kargil) and the Mons, said to be descendants



of early settlers from Himachal Pradesh. Interestingly, the Brokpas continue to follow Bon, the original, animist religion of the land while most other tribes are Buddhist.

Several historians suggest that Ladakh was part of the Kushan Empire in the 2nd century AD.

In the 9th century, the local Buddhist kings, predecessors of the well-known Namgyals, established a kingdom extending all the way from Kashmir to Tibet, guarded by fortresses and vast gompas. During this period, Ladakhi culture and traditions were heavily influenced by their Tibetan neighbours. In 1470, King Lhachen Bhagan of Basgo, a distant cousin of the then ruling king of Ladakh, founded the powerful Namgyal dynasty,

whose descendants live even today in Stok Palace (*see pp 29-31*). In the 16th century, Namgyal rule was interrupted by Ali Mir of Baltistan, who invaded Ladakh but never ruled the region, until Singge Namgyal (1570-1642) regained the throne and built his capital in Leh. In 1846, Ladakh was invaded once again by the Dogra Rajas of Jammu.

Today, Ladakh remains within the state of Jammu & Kashmir. In 1993, Ladakh was granted the status of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council.



LAKES OF LADAKH

The best known lake in Ladakh is **Pangong Tso** ('tso' means lake in the local language). Between 2-10 kms wide and 150 kms long, Pangong is about 150 kms east of Leh, at an elevation of 4,300 m. Its salty waters caress the shores of both India and China – in fact, two-thirds of the lake's waters are in Chinese territory.

The blue skies reflect off the lake with a brilliance that will take your breath away. Though this is more than enough reason to visit the lake, its popularity across India owes a great deal to the 2009 Bollywood blockbuster *3 Idiots*. Three *chhatra-like* structures on the lake's border mark where the film's last scene was shot.

Many visitors drive to Pangong on a day trip, but it is also possible to camp here, or spend the night nearby in Tanksey (32 kms before Pangong). The road to Pangong goes through the spectacular Chang-la pass.

The other great lake in Ladakh is **Tso Moriri**. Even higher than Pangong, Tso Moriri is perched at over 4,500 m, about 240 kms southeast of Leh. The lake is just under 20 kms long and 3 kms wide, and its water is brackish. In fact, until quite recently, local villages extracted salt from it. Now, the lake is part of a Wetland Conservation Reserve (see pp102-103), and visitors may spot rare birds and animals, included the famed Tibetan *kiang*, bar-headed geese, black-necked cranes and perhaps even a snow leopard or Tibetan wolf. On the way to Tso Moriri, visitors can stop at **Tso Kar**, a small, freshwater lake that may once have been connected to Tso Moriri.

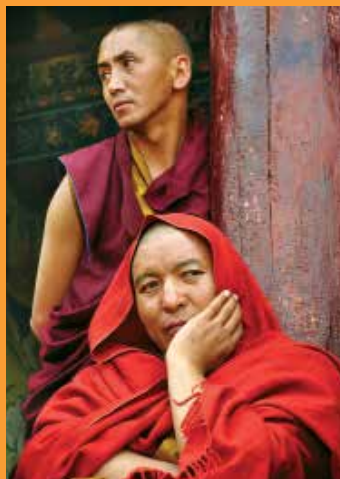
Pangong lake, sky-blue in summer, ice-white in winter



THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Monasteries cleave to the sheer rock face and ragged prayer flags flutter from roof-tops, scattering their blessings through the wind on its people

(Wendy Driver, Daily Mail)



Remote and isolated Ladakh is one of the last enclaves of Tantric Buddhism. From ancient gompas clinging to cliff faces, red-robed monks and synchronous chanting of hymns, Buddhism permeates the land. Walls of stone are etched with the sacred syllables *Om Mani Padme Hum*, reflecting the submission of the devout in a land so bare and barren that almost the only offering is stone. Indeed, religion is the inspiring force behind people's



lives, a deep and abiding faith that imbues the everyday with sanctity.

Before Buddhism arrived here, the people of Ladakh followed the Bon religion, an animistic, faith primarily centred on spirit worship. Buddhism came to Tibet in the 7th century AD though it truly spread through the land in the 8th, thanks to the efforts of Guru Padmasambhava (see Box). Also known as Guru Rinpoche, and venerated in the western Himalayas as second only to Sakyamuni Buddha himself, Padmasambhava travelled widely through the region, laying the foundations of Tantric Buddhism here.

The story goes that soon after his accession, King Thi Sung began building Tibet's first



Guru Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoche, came to Tibet at the invitation of King Thi Sung Dewtson (740-786), whose mother, a Chinese princess, greatly influenced him in favour of Buddhism. Seeking to spread the word of Buddha, the king sent to India for teachers and books and initiated the translation of Sanskrit and Chinese texts into Tibetan.

monastery at Samye. However, his efforts were constantly thwarted by earthquakes, believed to be the work of pre-Buddhist deities angered by this attempt to bring Buddhism here. So, on the advice of the Indian monk, Shantarakshita, the king sent to Nalanda for the great monk, Padmasambhava, who arrived in Tibet in 747 AD with two *Dakinis* and a host of disciples.

Guru Padmasambhava pacified the deities at Samye and also created a sacred Buddhist space by drawing a *mandala*. On this *mandala* were laid the foundations of the Samye monastery.

Today, Nyingmapa is the only school of Tibetan Buddhism that traces its origin directly to Guru Padmasambhava.



in the region. It was Zangpo who travelled through the Himalayas, accompanied, it is said, by 32 Kashmiri craftsmen, to built 108 *stupas* and monasteries, of which many stand even today, including Alchi (Ladakh) and Tabo (Himachal Pradesh). In the centuries that followed, many Buddhist sects struggled for prominence – including Druk-pa, Nyingma and Geluk-pa. Today, the Geluk-pa (Yellow Hat) order, introduced by the Tibetan pilgrim Tsong-kha-pa in the 14th century, is the most popular in Ladakh.

Left: Prayer wheels and chortens are part of Ladakh's Buddhist landscape

It was in the 8th century that Guru Padmasambhava popularised Buddhism in these high mountains, but the religion had come to Tibet a century earlier, when King Strongsten Gampo married Chinese and Nepali princesses, both of whom came from Buddhist families. Strongsten Gampo's wives converted the king to Buddhism, which then received ample patronage and began to spread across the kingdom. This is known as the 'First Advancement of Buddhism', which culminated in Padmasambhava's teachings, and witnessed the construction of many monasteries, forts and temples in the region.

Buddhism received a severe jolt with the advent of Tibetan apostate king Langdarma (r 838-841 AD), who mercilessly persecuted Buddhists and closed all monasteries. He was assassinated by a monk, and the region fell to turmoil and split into smaller kingdoms.

The 'Second Advancement of Buddhism', from the 10th century onwards, is attributed to King Khorre (988-996 AD). A spiritually-inclined man, Khorre gave up his throne to follow the life of a monk under the name Yeshe-Od. As such, he met Rinchen Zangpo, also known as the Great Translator, and both monks ensured the firm establishment of Buddhism

566 BC	Siddhartha Gautama is born in Lumbini
531 BC	Siddhartha Gautama achieves Enlightenment and becomes Buddha
486 BC	Buddha's final departure, or <i>parinirvana</i>
c. 200 -100 BC	Buddhism reaches Samarkand in Central Asia
c. 20 AD	Buddhist monks reach China by the Silk Route, and sea-trade carries Buddhism to Southeast Asia
747 AD	Guru Padmasambhava reaches Tibet
975 AD	Lotsava Rinchen Zangpo travels to India and begins translating Buddhist texts and building monasteries across the western Himalayas
c. 9th-12th centuries	Early period monasteries like Alchi and Lamayuru built
c. 16th century onwards	Late period monasteries like Hemis are built
16th century	Buddhism reaches Mongolia via Tibet

❖ GOMPA ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Breaking the monotony of the barren landscape, gompas stand out and from a distance and seem to recede into the lofty clouds.

(David Snellgrove, Cultural Heritage of Ladakh)

The gompa, literally 'solitary place' in Tibetan, is the fulcrum of the Lamaist Buddhism that is followed in Ladakh. Gompas had their origin in the spartan, rock-cut *viharas* ('dwellings') that monks inhabited during the early stages of Buddhism. Buddhist texts specified that, ideally, a monastery should be set on a hill with a waterbody nearby and not too far from a human settlement. As Buddhism spread and patronage increased, so monastic establishments expanded. Indeed, in Ladakh, monasteries have long been the main source of employment for locals.

The monasteries of the western Himalayas can be roughly divided into two periods, though there is little clarity regarding the exact dates. Scholars claim that the first phase spans the 9th-12th centuries AD, and includes the 108 gompas built by Rinchen Zangpo. In Ladakh, the best known of these is Alchi (see pp 62-66).

These early monasteries were usually built on flat

land, away from human settlements, and follow a simple construction plan. In fact, scarcity of material means that most buildings in Ladakh long continued to follow a similar model. Thus, 'every building... from the humblest stable to the monasteries, is made from materials which are immediately to hand – earth, stone and trees – and follows the same construction principles: massive external masonry walls enclosing a timber framework of posts and beams carrying earth floors and roofs' (John Harrison 'Traditional Building in Buddhist Ladakh').

A second phase of gompas were built from the 14th century onwards. These years saw the decline and destruction of monasteries across India because of Islamic invasions and the rise of local Hindu kingdoms. At the same time, cultural links between Tibet and India also weakened. It was only in the 17th century that invasions by the newly-converted Buddhist Mongols revitalised the religion in the high Himalayas.

The subsequent rise of the Geluk-pa sect led to a fusion of religious and secular authority, and culminated in the institution of the Dalai Lama as the religious and temporal ruler of Tibet.

Given the troubled times in which the gompas of the second period were built, their main feature is a strategic shift from flat ground to hill tops, since height gave these monasteries a military advantage. Some important gompas of this period are at Phyang, Thiksey and Hemis (see pp 43-47).

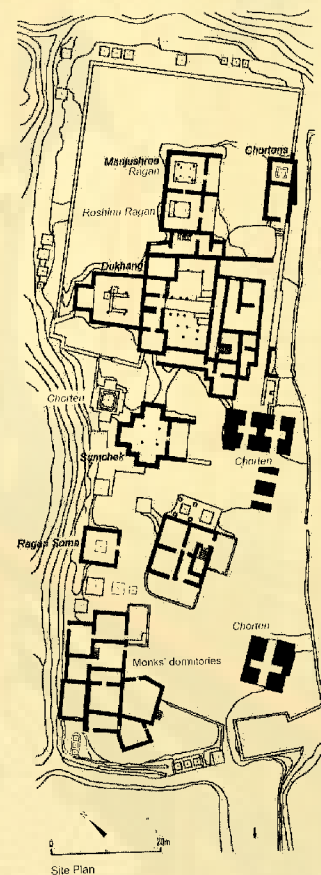
In gompas of both periods, the central feature is the courtyard – the flat space used for communal gatherings and ritual dance performances. Next to the courtyard is the circumambulation corridor that is lined with prayer wheels. From there, one proceeds to the *lha-khang* (chapel), and the *du-khang* (prayer room or assembly hall) through the portico, which symbolises the link between the material and the divine. The main image of the gompa's presiding deity is always placed at the centre of the *du-khang*, flanked by images of attendant deities. Usually, the head lama's room (called the *zimchhung*) is located above the *du-khang*, indicating his high status.

These rooms are decorated with richly painted *thangkas*, wooden sculptures and intricate murals.

Geluk-pa monasteries also have a *gon-khang* (chamber of deities), a 'secret' chamber, where the chief protector deity,

Mahakala Vajrabhairava, is enshrined. Masks, weapons and skulls, all used for protective rituals, are kept here. Only the head-priest is allowed within, that too after a special meditation to shield himself from wrathful deities.

Monks usually live in small cells and, given the icy winds that blow here, windows are rarely built, and light is let in through skylights high up in the wall.



Site plan of Alchi, an early-period monastery (Takeo Kamiya, Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent)

LEH

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View of Leh town from Leh Palace

Leh, the largest settlement in Ladakh, is a town of modest bazaars and winding streets, hemmed by rugged hills. Whitewashed buildings surrounded by poplar-lined gardens fringe its outskirts. Threaded by slender lanes and stepped paths, its mud-brick, cheek-by-jowl houses huddle picturesquely beneath Leh palace, which remains largely empty since Ladakh's royal family moved to Stok (see pp 29-31) in the 1830s.

In recent years, the town has been transformed by its

growing popularity on national and international tourist circuits. Small, makeshift hotels crowd its lanes, particularly during the four brief months of summer (June-September), when almost every spare room in town is available for rent. All a tourist might need – travel agents, internet cafés, souvenir shops – is available in the main town square. Restaurants feature eclectic menus, with everything from soupy *thukpas* to chilled frappuccinos.

But Leh is no stranger to the bustle of crowds. For centuries,

it was a hub for traders from Kashmir, the lower Himalayas and Central Asia. Raw pashmina (or cashmere), for which Kashmir is renowned across the world, would traverse Leh on its way to Srinagar, where it was woven.

The town was built in the 14th century by Khri-gstug-Lde, though it attained renown and prosperity under the Namgyal dynasty, when Tashi Namgyal (1555-75) declared Leh his capital.

Just 6 kms north of the Indus and 3,500 m high, Leh is best

known for its 9-storeyed **Leh Palace**. This attractive edifice was built in the first half of the 16th century by Singge Namgyal, and may have been modelled on Lhasa's 13-storeyed Potala Palace.

Such 'royal' architecture shares similar features across the region, though Leh Palace is the grandest of all the neighbouring palaces such as Shey and Stok. Like most buildings in Ladakh, Leh Palace is built of stone, mud and poplar wood (a rare commodity and used minimally in construction).



Buddhist deities in Leh Palace

Its pure white façade is flecked with shades of green and blue; while carved wooden and stone decorations, arched windows and its elegant dome create a pleasing air. Jama Masjid was built by King Deldan Namgyal after the 1680s, as part of an agreement with the rulers of Kashmir, who asked for a mosque in return for helping Ladakh fight off a Tibetan attack. The present structure is relatively new.

Left: *Buddhist deities in Leh Palace*

Below: *Leh town has a long, bustling history of trade*

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The palace is built along the sides of a low hill and has a flat terrace – also typical of the rain shadow region of Ladakh, where the weather is so dry that sloping roofs are unnecessary. Visitors can climb up to the terrace for beautiful views of the town and surrounding landscape. A small prayer room inside enshrines an image of Du-kar, a protector deity usually identified by a white parasol. Leh Palace is being restored by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Just above and behind the palace, the small **Namgyal Tsemo monastery** was also built by Tashi Namgyal and contains a Buddha idol made of pure gold!

Another of Leh's historical treasures is the **Jama Masjid** in the town's main bazaar.



Leh town has a long, bustling history of trade

More modern attractions in Leh include the **Shanti Stupa** and the **War Museum**. The Shanti Stupa on Changspa hill, facing Leh Palace, is a little outside town. Visitors can drive up, or climb the 500 steps to the peak, where they will find a white and gold stupa, built by Japanese monks in the 1980s and inaugurated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Shanti Stupa is best seen at sunset, though its panoramic views of Leh town below are beautiful at any time of day.

Just before the ascent to Shanti Stupa are the mud-brick ruins of **Tisuru gompa**, dated to the 11th century.



The **War Museum** looks a bit like a stupa itself, and is maintained by the Indian Army. With fighter jets, tanks and artillery on display, the museum celebrates the strength and heroism of the Indian armed forces with a particular focus on the battlefield of Siachen.

Patthar Sahib Gurudwara, 25 kms before Leh on the Leh-Kargil road, is popular with tourists and army convoys. Legend has it that Guru Nanak Dev, who came here in 1516, greatly agitated a local demon. One day, the demon threw a huge boulder at the Guru, but was unable to harm him. Furious, the demon kicked the boulder, only to realise that the rock had turned to soft wax, which sucked his feet in. Trapped, and realising that the person he had attacked was very powerful, he asked for

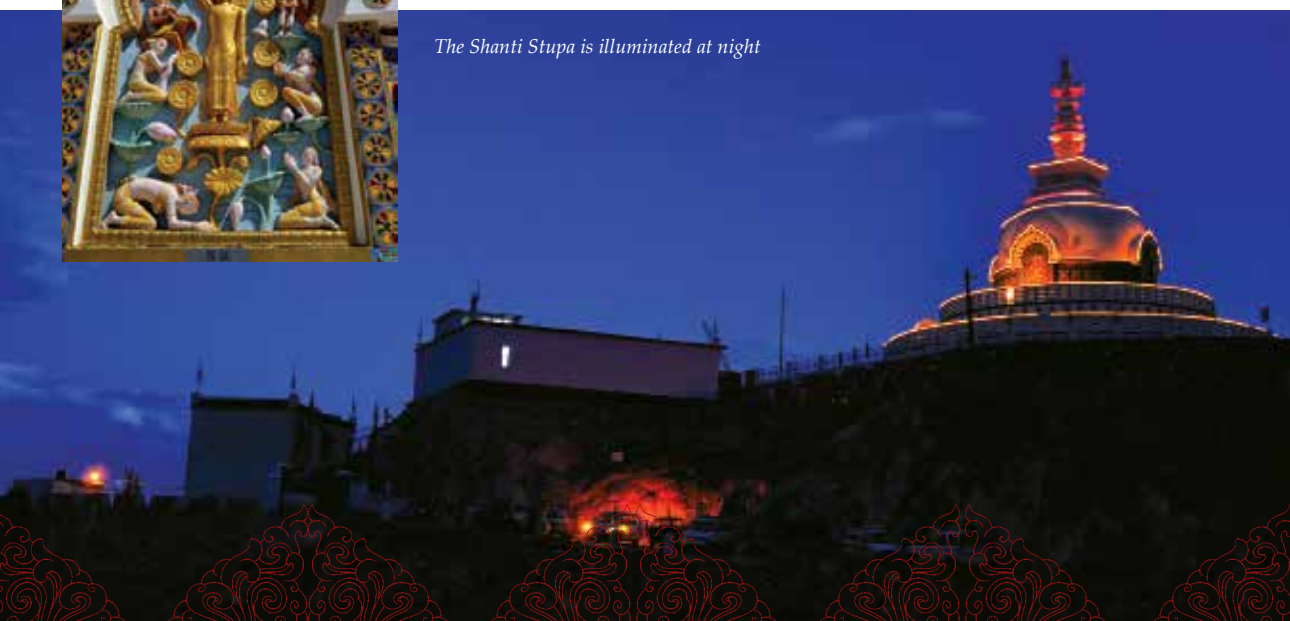
forgiveness, reformed his ways and began to serve the villagers. The Patthar (or 'rock') Sahib Gurudwara is said to have been built on the very spot where Guru Nanak Dev meditated.

Two other attractions near the Gurudwara are **Magnetic Hill** and the **Indus-Zaskar confluence**. At the Hill, vehicles apparently propel themselves forward without the engine being turned on, though some believe this is merely an optical illusion. Barely a kilometre or so ahead of the hill is the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers.

Top: Inside Patthar Sahib Gurdwara



The Shanti Stupa is illuminated at night



THE MANY ROADS TO LEH

You can fly all year round from New Delhi to Leh, in about an hour. Landing in Leh is a memorable experience, vividly described by Wendy Driver in the *Daily Mail*, 'This is like landing on the Moon... I gaze up at walls of rust red scree encircling a massive, scorched dustbowl. But then the clouds gradually disperse to reveal the glittering, icy peaks of the Himalayas all around us.'

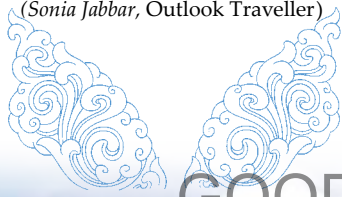
In the summers, you can always be more adventurous and plan a road trip. Leh is connected to northern India by two high-altitude roads: the Leh-Manali NH-21 and the Leh-Srinagar NH-1A via Kargil. Since 1989 when it was opened, the 473-km Manali-Leh road has served as a popular entry to Ladakh. Open from mid-June to late October, this road traverses the upland desert plateaus of Rupsho (southeast of Ladakh), where altitudes range from 3,660 m to 4,570 m. There are several high passes en route, including Tanglang La, at 5,325 m.

The 434-km Srinagar-Leh road is open from May to November. The most dramatic part of this journey is the ascent up the tortuous, 3,505-m high Zoji-La Pass. The highway also has a historical connection: it traverses the old Central Asian trade route between Srinagar, Leh and Yarkand, also dubbed the Treaty Road, after a commercial treaty signed in 1870 between the Dogra king Ranbir Singh and British administrator Thomas Douglas Forsyth.

FROM LEH TO HEMIS

'In summer it is a sullen grey, silt-laden, sometimes turning to violet. In autumn, the Indus is at its most graceful: turquoise and aquamarine waters weaving through golden banks of tall poplars and tumbling willows. Crumbling old monasteries perched on rocky promontories command the barren, empty vistas.'

(Sonia Jabbar, Outlook Traveller)



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Of the several possible excursions from Leh, the one to Hemis is, arguably, most popular. Under 50 kms from Leh on the Leh-Manali highway, which runs southeast along the crystal waters of the Indus river, Hemis is one of the region's most famous monasteries, and has the added advantage of including many interesting sights en route. The usual circuit includes Shey and Thiksey, both within 5 kms of each other and under 20 kms from Leh. In fact, many visitors – particularly during the peak summer season – find that Thiksey provides a more 'monastic' ambience than the relatively crowded Hemis.

The trail below details these well-known stops, but also includes diversions along the way, to intrigue both the adventurous traveller and the avid student of Buddhism.

So we have Stok – almost across the river from Shey – which not only has a palace and monastery, but is also the starting point for the Stok Kangri trek. Even more off the beaten track are the monasteries of Matho, Chemrey and Takthok.

Matho, about 5 kms off the Stakna road, southwest of the Indus, is home to some unique Buddhist art (and a fascinating festival of oracles!). For those who want to continue exploring beyond Hemis, Chemrey and Takthok are beautiful, isolated villages with charming hilltop gompas. Within 10 kms of each other, both monasteries are on a road that winds northeast from Karu, a village on the Leh-Manali highway. It is from Karu, too, that a small road goes west to Hemis.

*Like a mirror, the water
body before Shey palace
reflects this magical world*

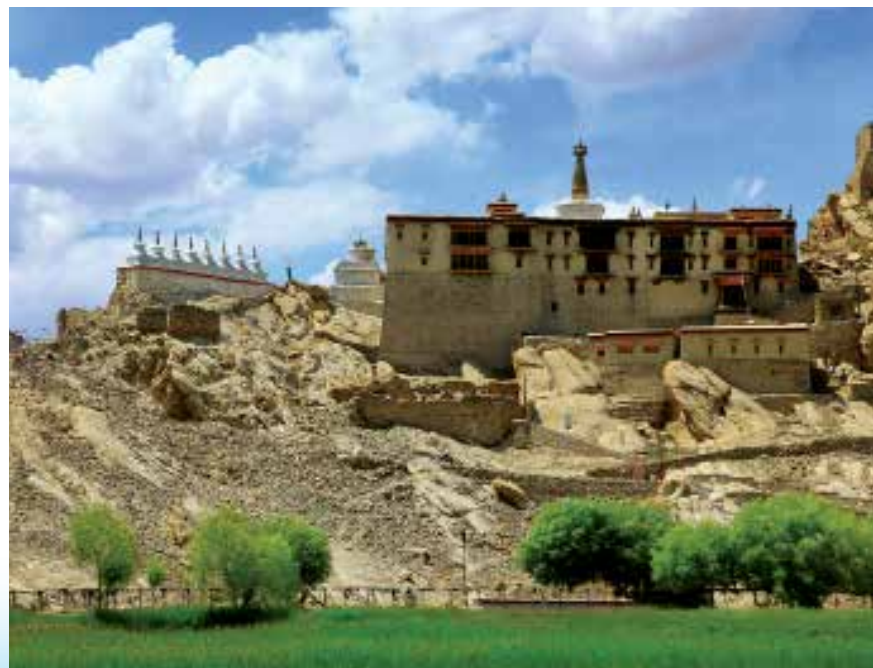
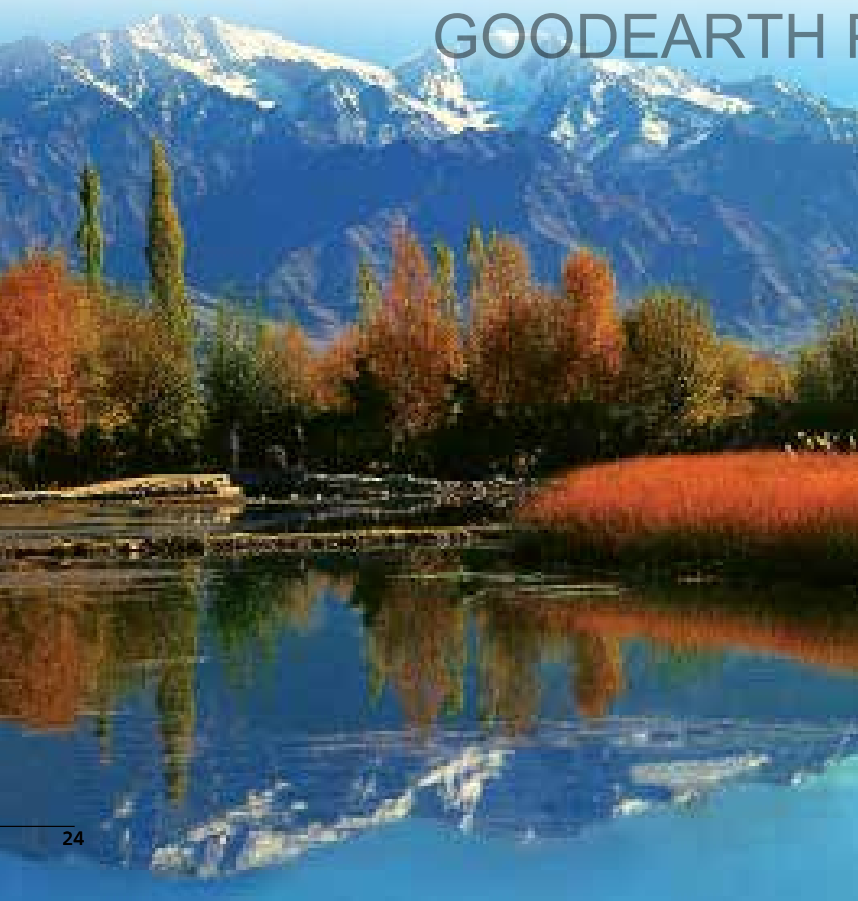
SHEY

3,415 M ◀▶ 15 KMS FROM LEH

The beautifully located Shey village is enlivened with patches of green fields that contrast beautifully with the barren, snow-capped mountains that form its backdrop and are reflected in the mirror-like waters of the Indus flowing alongside. Like many villages in Ladakh, Shey is dotted with *chortens*, rock-engravings of the Buddha, and fluttering prayer flags. However, this charming little hamlet is distinguished by the **Shey Palace**, a remnant of its glory as the erstwhile summer capital of Ladakh.

The palace was built by Deldan Namgyal in the early 17th century, and it includes a monastery and a *chorten*. The *chorten*, one of the largest in Ladakh, stands in the palace courtyard and boasts a spire made of pure gold.

Poplar trees along the banks of the Indus, flowing by Shey village



Shey monastery

The palace temple meanwhile, contains an incredible three-storey – over 12 m – high statue of Sakyamuni Buddha, made of gilded copper. This magnificent image, with its elongated ears, beautifully-shaped eyes and benevolent expression is flanked by smaller images of Sariputra and Maudgalayana, two of the Buddha's chief disciples.

The giant Buddha can be seen from three levels; the lowest level shows his huge feet and soles pointing upwards and a mural of Shambunath, an important leader of the Druk-pa sect. The middle floor, containing the Buddha's torso, has murals of the Buddha in different postures, while the upper floor is illuminated by butter lamps that burn day and night before the head of the gently-smiling Buddha.

The palace was recently restored and boasts stunning views from its rooftop. Those willing to brave a small trek further uphill will find the ruined bastion of an old fortress, accessible by a winding and stony path.

Shey Palace
Admission ₹ 20
Timings 8 am - 7 pm
(May - Oct)



On the road at the foot of the hill are images of five Dhyani (or 'celestial') Buddhas carved on the surface of tall, flat rocks.

Just outside the Shey palace is another monastery called **Dresthang**. This gompa has a gigantic, two-storey, rock-carved statue of a seated Buddha, which was installed during the reign of King Singge Namgyal. Its walls have some fine mural paintings of Guru Padmasambhava, Atisa, Tsong-kha-pa and other Buddhist saints.

Dresthang
Timings 8 am - 6 pm

Also in Shey is the revered **Shah Hamdan** mosque, said to have been built by Mir Syed Ali Hamdani (or Shah Hamdan), the great Sufi saint-scholar who visited Ladakh in 1381.

Legend has it that Hamdani was invited to Shey by the queen of Ladakh, who wanted to be blessed with a child. When, indeed, her first child was born after the saint's visit, the queen gifted Hamdani a piece of land in Shey. Another story goes that Shey was once flooded; Hamdani touched the water with his stick and it receded, which pleased the queen and she gave him land.

Though the Shah Hamdan mosque is the first mosque in Ladakh, the current building is quite recent: a single-storeyed, flat-roofed, mud-and-stone structure with a little garden outside. It is busiest during the month of Ramadan.

The **Druk Padma Karpo Institute** in Shey became a tourist attraction recently, after it featured in the blockbuster *3 Idiots*. Unfortunately, flash floods in 2010 greatly damaged the school, though it is now being rebuilt.

Above: Sakyamuni Buddha in Shey palace

Left: The ruins of Shey fort and castle



Fields of barley and wheat
surround Choglamsar



Only 10 kms from Leh on the way to Shey is the pretty little village of **Choglamsar**, boasting a rare greenery in this otherwise stark landscape. Look out for the two long stretches of *mani* stones, carved with the Buddhist incantation to peace, *Om Mani Padme Hum*. These *mani* 'walls', are dated to the 17th century. As you near

Choglamsar, fields of barley and wheat appear before you, dotted with low, whitewashed houses and poplar trees.

Choglamsar is home to the **Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS)**, established in 1962 to enable advanced research in Buddhist art and philosophy, and give students the opportunity to study a range of subjects,

from Sanskrit to Mathematics. Travellers may like to visit the small museum at CIBS, with its collection of Buddhist sculpture, *thangkas*, archival photographs and more.

Golfers may like to try out the nine-hole, 3,350-m golf course here, reputedly the second-highest in the world, and called the 'dragon' course.

❖ STOK

3,560 M ◀▶ 17 KMS FROM LEH

Across the Indus, almost opposite Shey and in the shadow of the mighty Stok range, stands the sparsely populated village of Stok, with a palace and monastery. In 1834, when Leh was annexed by the armies of Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu, the royal Namgyal family abandoned their palace at Leh and moved to Stok, where their descendents continue to live.

The four-storey **Stok palace**, has 80-odd rooms, most of which are open to the public and display a treasure of *thangkas*, costumes and jewels, including the Namgyal queen's turquoise-and-gold *yub-jhur* (crown). A small café outside the palace offers hot drinks and lovely views (though you may find it's closed early if there aren't enough visitors!)

Stok Palace • Admission ₹ 50
Timings 9 am - 1 pm & 2 - 7 pm

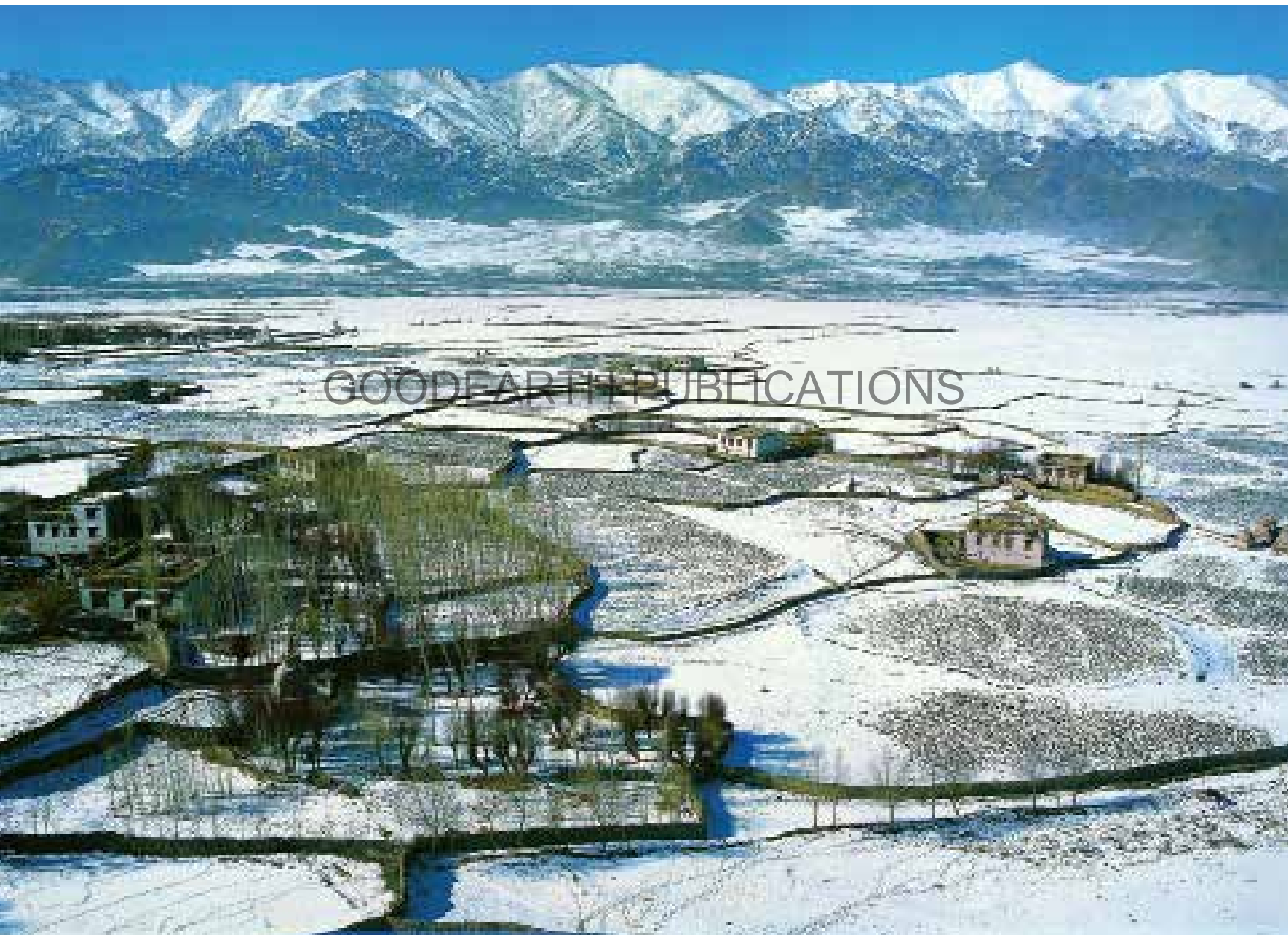
Near the palace is the 14th-century **Stok monastery**, founded by Lama Lhawang Lotus of the Geluk-pa sect. Though some of the original construction remains, the monastery's main assembly hall is relatively recent – it was renovated about 50 years ago, and freshly painted with murals of Vajrapani, Avalokitesvara, Sakyamuni and Amchi (the Medicine Buddha), and more. A throne in this hall is reserved for the Dalai Lama.

*The Ladakh range
watches over Stok
village*

**Stok Kangri (6,153 m), the highest peak
in the Ladakh range, is a popular trek.**

**Both amateurs and skilled mountaineers
can easily scale its heights in summer;**

**but only skilled mountaineers should
attempt the trek in winters.** Foreigners will
need permits (₹ 2,000 / person) from the
Indian Mountaineering Foundation
(see *Practical Information*).



THIKSEY

3,600 M ◀ ▶ 20 KMS FROM LEH

Only a few kilometres from Shey on the Leh-Manali highway is Thiksey, a relatively large village, with small shops, a school, hotels and eating places, besides its picturesque gompa – all of which make this the most popular fixture for tourists on the Leh-Hemis circuit.

A motorable road leads uphill to the magnificent Thiksey monastery, one of the most-visited monasteries in Ladakh, not only for its proximity to Leh, but also because of its stunning location and architecture.

The gompa was built in ascending levels on a low hill in 1430; and, like the Leh Palace, its distinctive, 'terraced' style of architecture has earned it comparisons with the 13-storeyed Potala Palace in Tibet. In fact, Thiksey gompa is often called 'mini-Potala'.

An enormous, 15-m tall statue of Maitreya Buddha, coloured with gold paint, is the gompa's main attraction. Crafted as recently as 1970 under the supervision of the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (*see p 28*), it took many years to complete. The gem-studded jewels on its earlobes and around its neck, the elaborately carved crown and the enigmatic half-smile reflecting the

The 'terraced' Thiksey monastery

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

Thiksey gompa

Admission ₹ 30 ; Video ₹ 100

Timings 6 am - 1 pm, 2 pm - 6 pm

Museum admission ₹ 30

Museum timings 8 am - 1 pm, 2 - 7 pm

deity's divinity – these are both a worshipper's and a photographer's delight.

Besides, the gompa's assembly hall has murals of protector deities and some musical instruments.

Those who want to enrich their visit to Thiksey – and don't mind an early start – should try and arrive in time for the early morning prayers, which begin at 6.00 am, and feature ethereal music and chants. In the words of one traveller:

'This is the strangest music I know. It's hardly music at all. ... The way the drum rattles in the middle of a prayer ... the long roll of cymbals that brings everything to a climax. It is as if the rock were singing; it is as if the wind and the rain were singing. It is not music; it is sound, essential sound.'

(Andrew Harvey, *A Journey in Ladakh*)

Below Left: This gilded Maitreya Buddha is Thiksey's main attraction
Below Right: Thiksey's prayer hall



Equally otherworldly are the panoramic views of the Indus valley below, with its small plots of earth and green stretching into the horizon, where the cloud-flecked sky of deep blue meets grey mountains, the highest of which is Stok Kangri (see pp 30-31).

Thiksey's **Museum** displays Buddhist artefacts, including Tantric ritual objects, some carved from human bones. The monastery also runs a school, which provides free education to any child who needs it; as well as an excellent

restaurant, located at the foot of the hill, that serves sumptuous Tibetan food.

Thiksey's annual Gustor festival in October/November is a crowd puller. Gustor, meaning 'sacrifice', is a two-day celebration that concludes with the head lama ritually cutting a *torma* (dough cake) and scattering it in the four cardinal directions. The assassination of the Tibetan apostate King Lang Darma by a Buddhist monk in the mid-9th century is also enacted during this festival (see Box).

King Lang Darma was a devout follower of the Bon religion, so much so that it was believed he was possessed by a demon. Prompted by its evil influence, he closed monasteries and forced their monks and nuns out. Eventually, unable to bear any more of Lang Darma's persecution, a Buddhist monk called Belgyi Dorje assassinated him – rather dramatically, during a theatrical performance! Traditional sources characterise this euphemistically as a 'liberation' rather than 'killing', since the monk is said to have been driven by compassion (for the king's demon-possessed soul) and not anger.



Those in the mood for a little adventure might like to visit **Nyarma** monastery, southeast of Thiksey and about 1 km north of the highway, along an unpaved road, from Rambipur village. Though entirely in ruins now, Nyarma is one of the monasteries built by the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo, and those willing to climb through the rubble will be rewarded with fragments of paintings from that time.

STAKNA

25 KMS FROM LEH ◀

Only a few kilometres beyond Thiksey, on the western bank of the Indus, Stakna village is accessible by a narrow bridge lined with colourful prayer flags. Perched right on top of an isolated hill, a little removed from the village, is **Stakna gumpa**. Its name, meaning 'Tiger's Nose', derives from the shape of the hill which resembles – for those with the imagination to see it, of course – a tiger leaping skywards.

This quiet, peaceful monastery has Bhutanese roots – it was built on land granted to a Bhutanese scholar by the then Namgyal king, *circa* 1580. Its most valuable possession is a statue of Avalokitesvara said to have been brought from Kamrup in Assam, which is kept in the prayer hall. There is also a new 2-m high silver *chorten*. Another chapel houses a revered Bhutanese deity called Shabdrung Nawang Namgyal, while smaller shrines house many works of art, including newly-painted murals and 400-year old sandalwood statues.

The hill-top Stakna monastery

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS



Stakna gumpa • Admission ₹ 20

❖ MATHO

4,850 M ◀ ▶ 26 KMS FROM LEH

Perched on a hill west of the Indus, Matho gompa is off the main highway from Leh and thus not part of the Thiksey-Hemis circuit. Beautifully located, the monastery is fringed by poplar trees. In the summer months, these shine green like emeralds set in the otherwise rocky coronet of mountains.

The monastery is precious in other ways too: this is the only gompa of the Sakya-pa sect of Buddhism in Ladakh. Founded in 1410 by Dorje Palzang, a Tibetan pilgrim, Matho is also known for its rather unique 'oracle festival' called Matho Nagrang. During the festival, two lamas are made receptacles for receiving oracular wisdom. These blindfolded monk-oracles then perform death-defying feats, engage in ritually cutting themselves with swords – and also make predictions for the future of Matho and Ladakh.

Though much of the building is rather dilapidated, it contains some beautiful and valuable examples of Buddhist art. The monastery's *du-khang*, for example, was recently renovated and enshrines a clay sculpture of Sakyamuni Buddha, gold-and-rust-coloured, sitting cross-legged on a lotus base. Besides its beauty, this image is also notable for its size: it is tiny, weighing only a few grams. In fact, Matho is known for its rather unusual collection of miniature sculptures, which stand in stark contrast to the enormous, larger-than-life figures housed in other monasteries in Ladakh.

An international collaboration between two art institutions in Britain and France has founded the Matho Museum Project to preserve the most precious of the monastery's sculptures, *thankgas* (dating from the 14th to 21st centuries) and ritual objects such as brass horns, ornaments made of bone, and the masks worn during Matho Nagrang. The museum is currently being built.

The gompa's *gon-khang* (chamber of protector deities, and here prohibited to women) is a windowless room with images of two oracle gods, the White and Red Rong-bstan, looming in the dark opposite the entrance. Ancient weapons, including ceremonial daggers, hang from pegs on the pillars here.

Matho gompa • Admission ₹ 20

❖ TAKTHOK GOMPA

46 KMS FROM LEH ◀

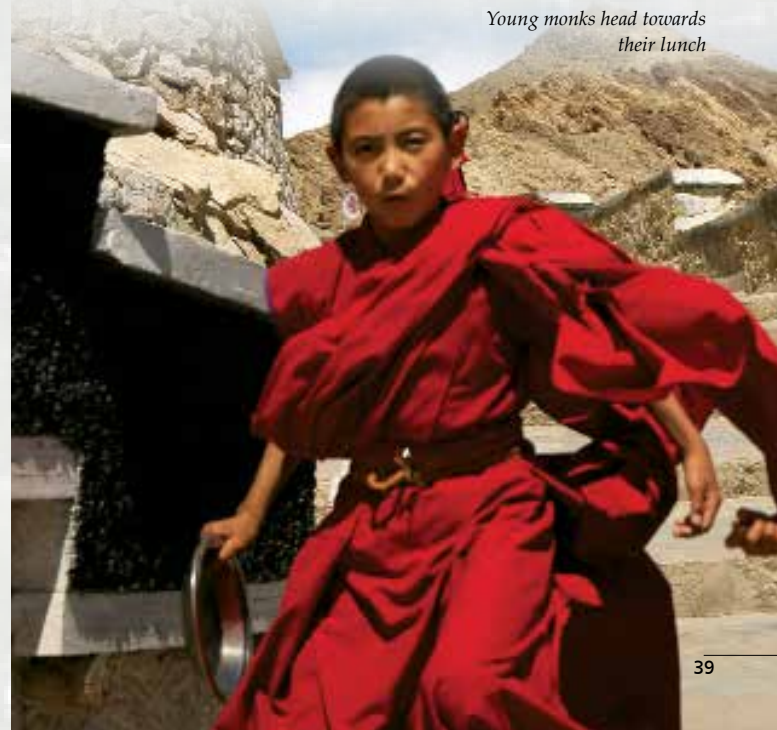
About 20 kms off the Leh-Manali highway to the northeast, a little beyond the village of Sakti is Takthok gompa, the only surviving monastery of the Nyingma sect founded by Guru Padmasambhava in Ladakh. Literally 'rock-roof', Takthok

was thus named because its roof and walls are made of rock – an unusual feature in Ladakh, where construction is commonly done with mud.

In fact, the anomaly is easily explained, since the monastery is actually built around a rock cave. Guru Padmasambhava himself is said to have meditated here. The cave, called *duphug lha-khang*, is a popular pilgrimage with Buddhists who come to be blessed by the sacred water that drips from its ceiling. Called *dubchu*, the water performs the miraculous feat of flowing in winter, when temperatures in the region plummet far below zero and the world is ice.

The cave also contains eight gilded statues of Padmasambhava; while more recent murals of the Guru decorate a new temple nearby, consecrated in 1980.

Young monks head towards their lunch





Rapeseed blossoms spark colour around the stark surroundings of Chemrey gumpa (below)



Chemrey gumpa • Admission ₹ 20

❖ CHEMREY

3,817 M ◀ ▶ 40 KMS FROM LEH

Sprawling along a low hill against a backdrop of vast, dream-like mountains, Chemrey gumpa is best known for the fields of mustard blossoms that stretch below. When these flower, it is to create a veritable carpet of gold, reminiscent of the mustard fields of Punjab and a truly remarkable oddity in the otherwise barren Ladakh landscape.

About 10 kms off the Leh-Manali highway to the north-east, on the Pangong road, Chemrey is a monastery of the Druk-pa Kargyutpa order, founded by Lama Tagsang Raschen and dedicated to King Singge Namgyal. Like many others in the region, the gumpa was besieged and conquered by Mongol warriors in the late 17th century. Legend has it, however, that as the victorious Mongol king sat sipping a cup of tea, Chemrey's head lama, hiding in a dark corner, shot a

bullet through the king's cup, which exploded in his hand – as if by magic! The king was stunned, and convinced that Goddess Kali ruled over this gumpa. Not wanting to test the goddess's patience, he made peace with the monks. So, even today, a Kali temple stands below the gumpa's hill.

From here, a maze of pathways leads up to the gumpa's main buildings. Its assembly hall boasts a silver *chorten* and a set of ancient Tibetan texts with their title pages inscribed in silver and gold. The highlight of the monastery, however, is a giant, one-storey brass statue of Guru Padmasambhava, housed in the revamped *lha-khang*.

Housing medieval Mongol costumes, weapons and Tibetan manuscripts, the gumpa's **museum** is a must-see. The monastery's annual festival, Chemrey Angchok, with its colourful masked dances and parades, is also well worth a visit, even though it usually falls in bitterly-cold November.



❖ HEMIS

3,657 M ◀▶ 43 KM FROM LEH

Hidden behind the pretty village of Hemis, on the banks of the clear blue Indus just off the Leh-Manali highway, and arguably the most popular day-trip from Leh, is Hemis. Unlike most other monasteries in this region – havens of seclusion in an already distant land – Hemis brims with tourists throughout the peak season, and is especially crowded during its annual festival (*see below*). The richest, largest and most well-known monastery in Ladakh, Hemis was built in the 1630s by Ngawang Gyatso, a monk of the Druk-pa (Red Hat) sect; and today, it has over 200 branches and 1,000 monks spread across Ladakh.

Set in a gorge below azure skies, Hemis gompa covers almost every inch of the hilltop on which it is built, an imposing, fortress-like construction, its entrance flanked by fluttering prayer flags and *mani* walls. From here, you walk into a spacious courtyard with magnificent views of the mountains that tower all around. This is also the venue for the Hemis Tsechu festival – greatly popular with both locals and tourists.

Hemis gompa

Admission ₹ 50

Museum ₹ 30

Timings 8 am - 1 pm,
2 - 6 pm

*Hemis monastery and
scenes from its famous
Tsechu festival*





GOOD EARTH PUBLICATIONS

The courtyard in Hemis gomba, and a site plan of the monastery (Takeo Kamiya, Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent)



Hemis comprises seven temples, including the *tshogs-khang*, *du-khang*, *gon-khang* and *lha-khang*. The *tshogs-khang* has an image of a blue-haired Sakyamuni Buddha at the centre with a large silver *chorten* next to it. There is also a life-size image of the Red Tara here. A lacquered throne in this hall is said to have been a gift from an erstwhile ruler of Kashmir.

The *du-khang* is supported by three vast tree trunks, which too are believed to have been brought here – no doubt with great labour – all the way from Kashmir. It has an image of the founder of Hemis gumpa, Stangs-stang-ras-pa, with a large *chorten* next to it containing his relics.

Top: A mural shows blue-haired Sakyamuni Buddha flanked by deities
Above: Guru Padmasambhava

In 1890s, Hemis gumpa sprang to public view when the Russian nobleman, journalist (and possibly, spy) Nicholas Notovitch published a book called *The Unknown Life of Christ*, in which he argued that the Christian messiah had travelled to Ladakh. Specifically, he claimed to have seen manuscripts preserved in the Hemis library that proved his theory. Predictably, the book sparked controversy and furore, and eventually, under the glare of examination, Notovitch confessed that the whole affair was an elaborate hoax!

The gumpa is known for its beautifully preserved *thangkas*, of which the massive, pearl-studded *thangka* of Guru Padmasambhava is the most sacred. In fact, this *thangka* is only brought out on every 12th occurrence of Hemis Tsechu, an annual festival that celebrates the birth of the Guru.

Hemis Tsechu is best-known for its wonderful masked or *chham* dance performances, a sacred element of Buddhist-Tantric ritual (see pp 94-96). The celebrations take place in the gumpa's large courtyard, which has two raised square platforms for the purpose, 1 m high with sacred poles at their centre. A third platform has a cushioned seat and a small, finely-painted table arranged with ceremonial items such as cups full of holy water, uncooked rice, and *tormas* – colourful ritual figurines made of dough and butter – and incense sticks.

Since the dates of the festival are set according to the lunar calendar, they change every year, and visitors should make enquiries before confirming their plans. Even if you cannot coordinate your visit with the festival, it's still possible to get a sense of Ladakh's unique spirituality by attending the morning prayers at Hemis. To do so, though, it is best to spend the night in the village, which has many small guesthouses. Terrace restaurants are popular here, since they allow patrons to soak up spectacular views of the surrounding valley, while sipping on salty *gur gur* tea and biting into fluffy *momos*.

Hemis monastery also has a **museum**, housing stone and copper-gilt Buddha miniatures, gold and silver *chortens* embellished with precious gems and an exquisite collection of sacred *thangka* paintings. A small souvenir shop outside the museum is a good place to pick up gifts, or books on Buddhism, Ladakh and more.

A gentle and picturesque walk of about 3 kms along the Hemis hill leads to a cave where a Tibetan saint is said to have meditated, well before Hemis was founded. You may still see his foot- and hand-prints outside the cave.

Hemis also gives its name to the sprawling **Hemis National Park**, the highest in India and home to the elusive snow leopard (see pp 102).



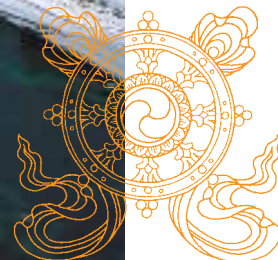


FROM LEH TO LAMAYURU



The National Highway 1A that charts a fairly straight route north-westwards along the Indus from Leh to Kargil contains some of the oldest and most beautifully located monasteries of Ladakh Alchi, of course, with its miraculously preserved murals, is a favourite with historians and photographers as well as tourists. Being under 70 kms from Leh, it is easily visited in a day-trip, and you may even want to take in one or two more sights en route, such as the uniquely built Spituk (only 9 kms from Leh), or the mud castle at Basgo (about 30 kms before Alchi).

Those with the time and inclination to venture beyond should certainly not miss the extensive – and extensively renovated – Lamayuru gompa, built in ‘terraced’ levels along a mountainside. A short diversion leads to the more isolated Wanla gompa, built about the same time as Lamayuru, and one that those with an explorer’s streak will enjoy discovering. Since Lamayuru is almost 130 kms from Leh – indeed, half-way to Kargil! – it is a good idea to spend the night here at one of the many small guesthouses before either returning to Leh or proceeding to Kargil, from where it is another day’s drive to the lonely treasures of the Zaskar valley.



The Indus in winter



SPITUK

3,307 M ◀ ▶ 9 KMS FROM LEH

Spituk Gumpa
Admission ₹ 30

Spituk, on the western outskirts of Leh, is a village of crystal clear waters shimmering like a thousand suns under the blue sky, and Buddhas painted in vivid colours on rocks infusing a spark of divinity to the old settlement. Most eye-catching, though, is its 14th-century Geluk-pa monastery, perched on the peak of a low hill, as if it had grown out of the very rocks on which it was built, its walls a seeming extension of the craggy slopes beneath.

Although Spituk is not one of the monasteries built by Rinchen Zangpo, it is said that Changsem Shesrab Zangpo, chief disciple of Tsong-kha-pa, had prophesised that an exemplary community of monks would be established here, which is how the gompa acquired its name: *spituk*, or 'exemplary'. Certainly, it is a friendly place; its monks in traditional yellow hats welcome visitors with the cheerful Ladakhi greeting '*Juley*'!

Built by the monk Od-de, the monastery contains a large, gilded statue of Sakyamuni Buddha along with a relatively tiny image of Amitabha. Unlike the usually massive statues that grace Ladakh's monasteries, this image of Amitabha is just a finger high. A large bowl of wax with a central flame, symbolising divinity and purity, is placed before the Sakyamuni, and, according to the traditions of this gompa, must burn a whole year before it is replaced.



Like many monasteries of the region, Spituk's main assembly hall has a high throne at one end, which is reserved for the Dalai Lama. The door next to the throne leads to a dark chapel, which houses an awe-inspiring image of Mahakala with 35 pairs of arms and eight pairs of legs. The *gon-khang* is adorned with brightly-coloured murals of protector deities.

Spituk also boasts an impressive collection of *thangkas*, masks and antique arms, many displayed in the assembly hall.

When visiting, do climb up to the gompa's rooftop, where you will be treated to a bird's eye view of the landscape that stretches as far as Leh airport.

Spituk's annual Gustor festival usually falls in January, the depths of winter, and features elaborate dance-dramas.

Above: Inside Spituk gompa
Right: Traditionally, the head monk of any gompa is a reincarnation of the same holy spirit. Here is Kushok Bakula, the head lama of Spituk



PHYANG

16 KMS FROM LEH ◀

The picturesque settlement of Phyang is set in an arid mountainscape, broken by splashes of emerald-green barley fields. Often, you see *dzos* (a cross-breed of the yak and cow) grazing lazily along the banks of gurgling streams.

Perched atop a commanding hill, the white-and-ochre Phyang gompa dominates the scene. Established by Chosje Damma Kunga in 1515, this monastery has been extensively renovated in recent years, and belongs to a sub-division of the Kargyu-pa sect called Dyong Kangyut.

It is said that once King Tashi Namgyal was afflicted with leprosy, and the monk Kunga cured him of the disease. Pleased with Kunga, the grateful king granted him this site and generously contributed to the construction of the gompa.

The entrance to Phyang is flanked by poplar trees and white-domed *chortens*. There are several access points to the main monastic complex, the most conspicuous being the one from the north. Here, concrete steps along the slope of the hill lead to the upper portion of the monastery, which has two buildings. The smaller of these contains two main halls, as well as a small *gon-khang* and *tso-khang*.

The larger of the two structures houses various sacred chambers, along with the *zimchhung* (living quarters reserved for the head lama and senior visiting monks). A door leads to a small courtyard here, which is believed to have been the original congregation space. There is a basement below the courtyard, which was once the meditation chamber of the gompa's founder, but is now permanently closed.

The courtyard also leads to a windowless *du-khang* on the first floor. This chamber has a verandah recently painted with murals of the Four Lords. Next to the *du-khang* is a small *abchi-khang*, dedicated to protector deities. At the same

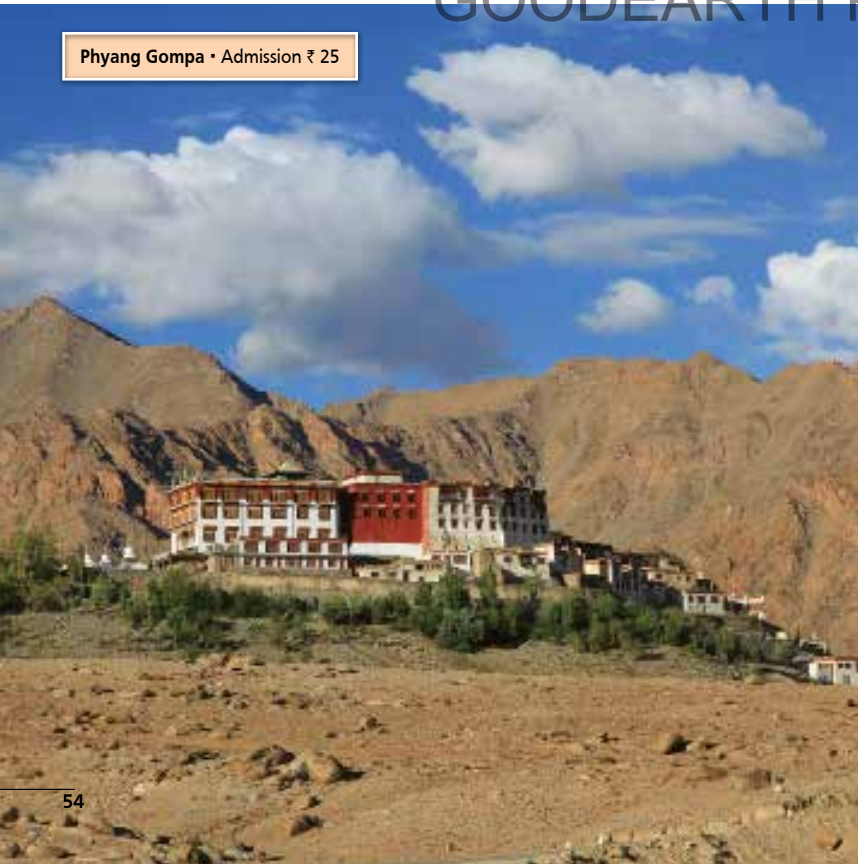
level are two other chambers called *kangyur-khang* and *padmagyapo-khang*.

Phyang has one of the finest collections of wall paintings and *thangkas* in Ladakh, many of which are on display. In fact, there is a newly-built 'tower' just outside the gompa which is used to unfurl the largest *thangkas* in the monastery's possession, which can be several storeys tall. Phyang also has some beautiful frescoes, and a museum with an extensive collection of medieval idols *thangkas*, Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian firearms and other weapons.

Below: A young monk outside Phyang gompa

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

Phyang Gompa • Admission ₹ 25



 BASGO

3,292 M ◀ ▶ 40 KMS FROM LEH

Cradled amidst jagged mountains, Basgo village was once the capital of Ladakh. Remnants of citadel walls, a derelict mud-brick palace and an age-old monastery whisper secrets of its antiquity.

Basgo castle is one of the few examples of 'secular' architecture in Ladakh. Known as the 'Divine Peak of Great Stability', it was built by Jamyang and Singge Namgyal, father and son, in the 16th century. A century later, Basgo castle withstood a three-year-long siege by Mongol and Tibetan armies.

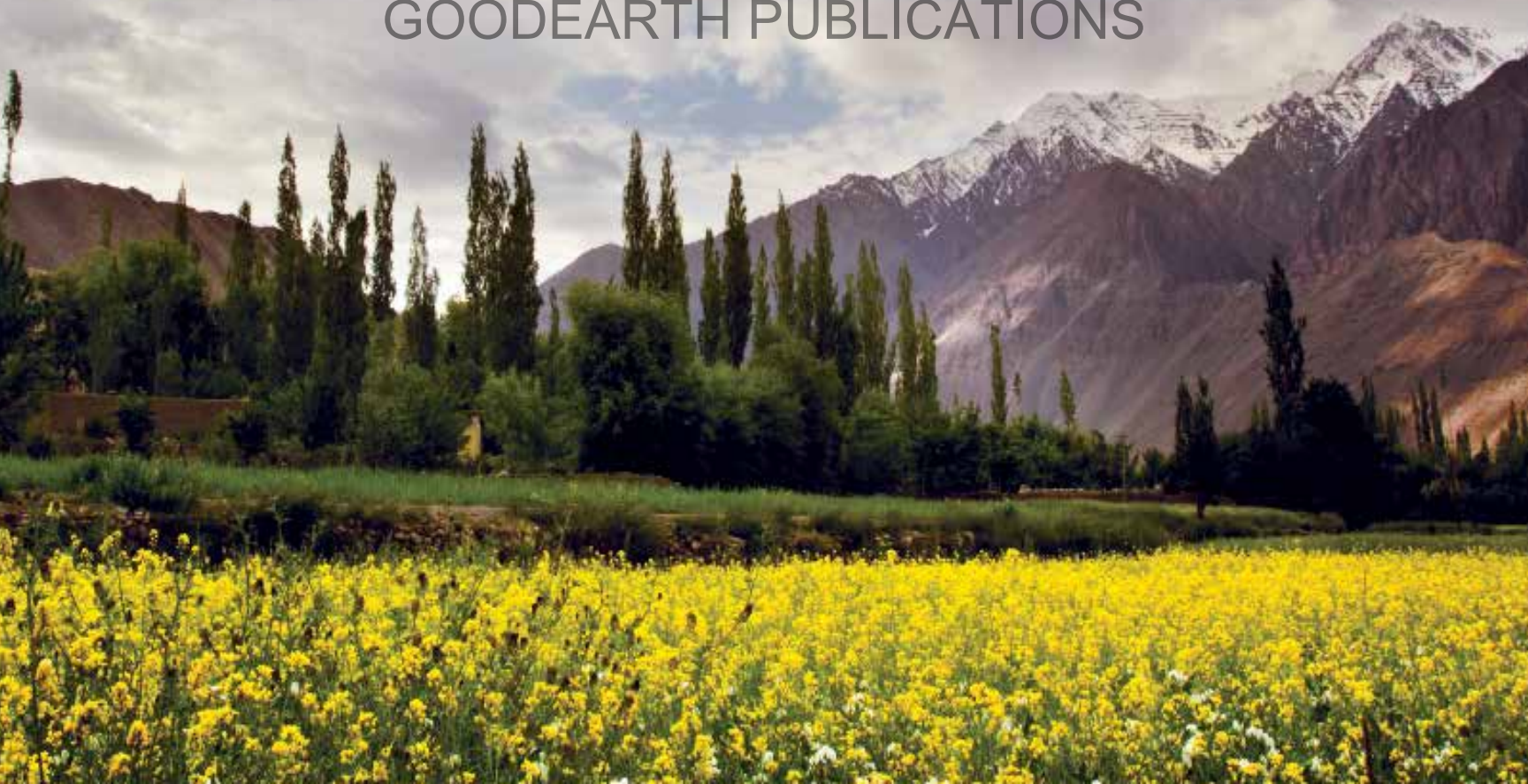
Basgo in summertime

The castle and monastery are made of mud-brick that matches the colour of the clay hill on which they stand almost exactly. From a distance, this creates an optical illusion of sorts – it is hard to tell where the hill stops and the buildings begin.

Basgo's three temples – *chamba lha-khang serzang*, and *chamchung* (admission ₹ 20) – house many monks, some of whom are from Hemis monastery, the 'mother gumpa' (see pp 43-47).

The most significant feature of Basgo is its three-storey high clay statue of the Maitreya Buddha along with many detailed murals, some of which have faded with time. Besides this impressive Maitreya Buddha, Basgo preserves the Tibetan canon of *kangyur* texts, some of which are beautifully inscribed in gold, silver and copper letters.

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS





Above: Basgo's mud-brick architecture blends with the landscape

A little further up is the ruined bastion of an old fortress, accessible by a winding and stony path.

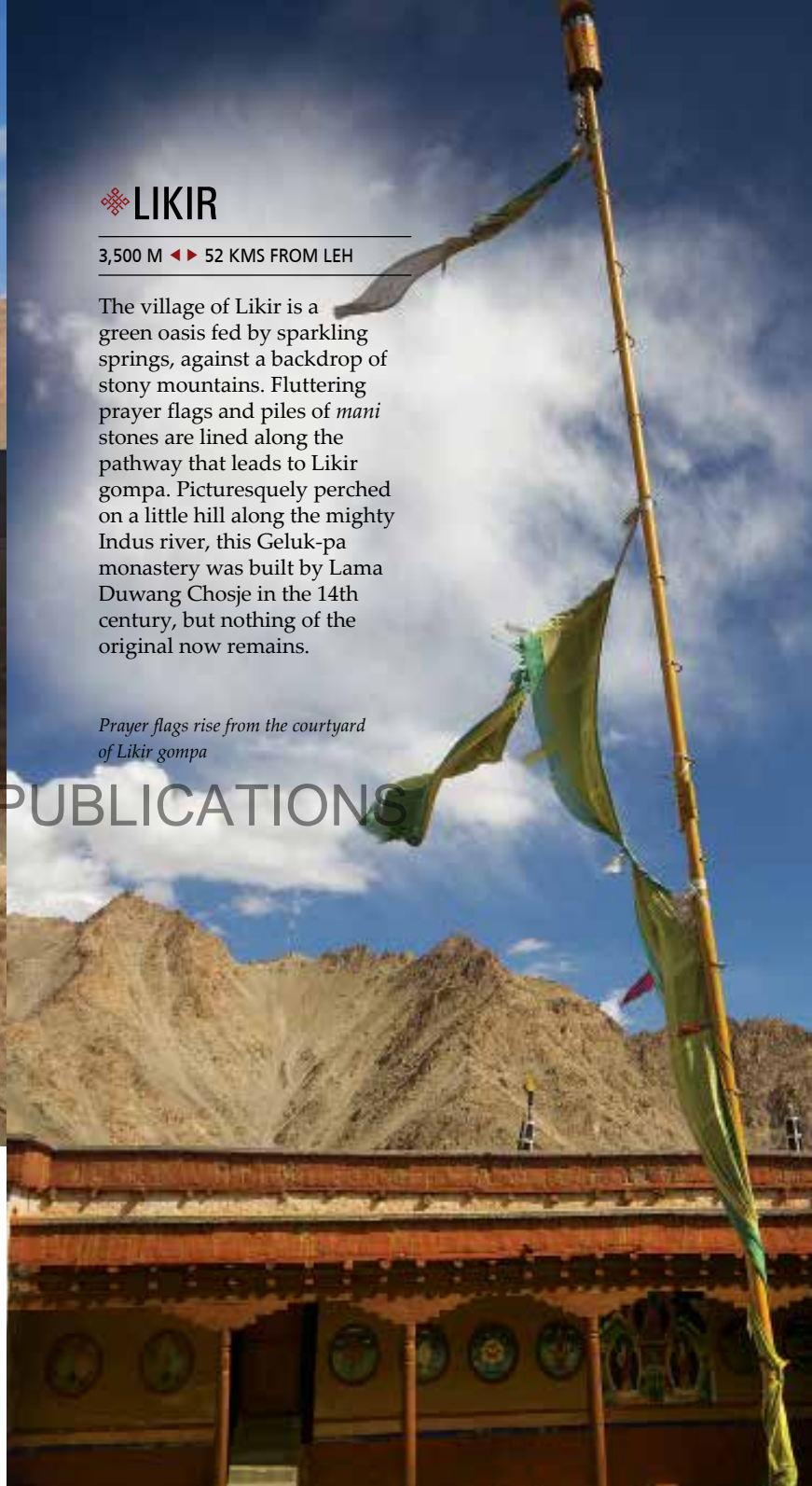
Basgo's fragile mud structures with flat terraces are greatly susceptible to ecological changes in this normally desert region. In 2000, the World Monuments Fund included Basgo among the world's 100 most endangered sites, and a great deal of conservation work has happened in recent years, led by INTACH and local communities.

LIKIR

3,500 M ◀ ▶ 52 KMS FROM LEH

The village of Likir is a green oasis fed by sparkling springs, against a backdrop of stony mountains. Fluttering prayer flags and piles of *mani* stones are lined along the pathway that leads to Likir gompa. Picturesquely perched on a little hill along the mighty Indus river, this Geluk-pa monastery was built by Lama Duwang Chosje in the 14th century, but nothing of the original now remains.

Prayer flags rise from the courtyard of Likir gompa



The name Likir means 'Naga Encircled', and the gumpa has over 120 resident monks as well as a school, run by the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (see p 28).

The prime attraction of the gumpa is a 23-m high golden statue of Maitreya Buddha, outside the main building and visible from a great distance. The idol with eyes half-closed, an enigmatic smile and hands showing *mudras*, is seated on a colourful base.

The monastery has two *du-khangs*, or assembly halls. The older of the two is located

on the right of the central courtyard and has statues of Amitabha Buddha, Sakyamuni, Maitreya and Tsong-kha-pa. The verandah has a wall painting of the Four Lords and a Wheel of Life *mandala* held by Yama.

The newer *du-khang* is about two centuries old, and contains a statue of Avalokiteshvara with 1,000 arms and 11 heads. According to legend, when Avalokiteshvara first realised the suffering of the world, his head burst from pain. Amitabha, his teacher, took these shattered pieces and remoulded eleven heads in the place of one. Then, Amitabha

gave Avalokiteshvara a thousand arms to aid him in easing the world's pain; and Avalokiteshvara vowed that should he ever stop helping sentient beings, his whole body would shatter into a thousand pieces.

One of the newest additions to Likir is its chamber dedicated to protector deities, which was built in 1983-84 when the gumpa underwent renovation.

Outside the monastery is a large *chorten* and painted above the chorten's door is a distinctive

figure, wearing a pointed white hat and carrying two leopard skins under his arms. Scholars have noted that the figure bears a slight resemblance to representations of Songtsan Gampo, a Buddhist sage.

The monastery is a repository of old manuscripts, and has *thangkas* and traditional Ladakhi costumes displayed in a one-room museum.

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

Likir Gumpa Admission ₹ 20

Likir Museum Timings

8 am - 1 pm, 2 pm - 6 pm (summers);

10 am - 1 pm, 2 pm - 4 pm (winters)



ALCHI

3,100 M ◀ ▶ 65 KMS FROM LEH

Alchi Gumpa
Admission ₹ 30
Photography restricted

Set along the banks of the turquoise blue Indus and teeming with apricot and ripe barley fields in summer, Alchi is a popular draw for tourists, with its combination of idyllic landscape and reputation as one of the largest and most beautiful monasteries of the region.

Also known as *choskhor*, this monastic complex is among those built by the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo and his team of 32 craftsmen in the 11th century. It is widely agreed that these craftsmen accompanied Rinchen Zangpo from Kashmir, which would explain why the gorgeous murals at Alchi include not just Buddhist themes such as a beautiful six-armed Tara painted in luminous green and dressed in rich, detailed garments, but also distinctively Islamic arabesque patterns. In fact, a surprising series of palm trees painted on some walls extend the possibilities of the artists' provenance even farther.

Indeed, the architectural details of Alchi gompa represent an array of artistic traditions—Indian, Tibetan and Central Asian. The overall structure of the buildings, built with stone and mud with flat roofs and whitewashed walls, corresponds to the Tibetan style. On the other hand, as the

scholar Monisha Ahmed notes, 'the wooden elements of the open porch... the lions serving as brackets and the three figures of Maitreya, Akshobhaya and a Bodhisattva placed inside a tri-lobed frame – are clearly derived from Kashmiri prototypes, that probably have their roots in Gandhara art' (*Mural paintings of Alchi*).

What is certain, however, is that the monastery contains some of the most beautiful and ancient Buddhist art in the world. In the words of one traveller:

'Mesmerising coloured patterns scroll across the wood beams overhead; the temple's walls are covered with hundreds of small seated Buddhas, finely painted in ochre, black, green, azurite and gold. At the far end of the room, towering more than 5 m high stands an unblinking figure, naked to the waist, with four arms and a gilded head topped with a spiked crown. It's a painted statue of the Bodhisattva Maitreya.... Two hulking statues, one embodying compassion and the other wisdom, stand in niches on side walls.... Each massive figure wears a dhoti... embellished with minutely rendered scenes from the life of Buddha' (Jeremy Kahn, Smithsonian).

The gompa has two *chortens* and five temples; the most important of which is the *lotsa lha-khang*, dedicated to Rinchen Zangpo. When you enter this temple and adjust your eyes to the dark interiors, your focus would gradually shift to the beauty and vibrancy of the paintings on its walls. The most significant of these is a depiction of Vairochana. There is also a depiction of Mahakala, the protector deity of Buddhists, positioned over the door of this temple, with Palden Lhamo (said to be a Tibetan form of an ancient Hindu goddess called Shridevi) riding a mule on his left, and goddess Remati on his right, draped in a dazzling robe of peacock feathers.

To the left of this *du-khang* is the *Sumstek* temple, its walls dominated by rich reds and blues. There are three huge sculptures of Bodhisattvas, particularly impressive for



Above: Carved wooden panel at Alchi

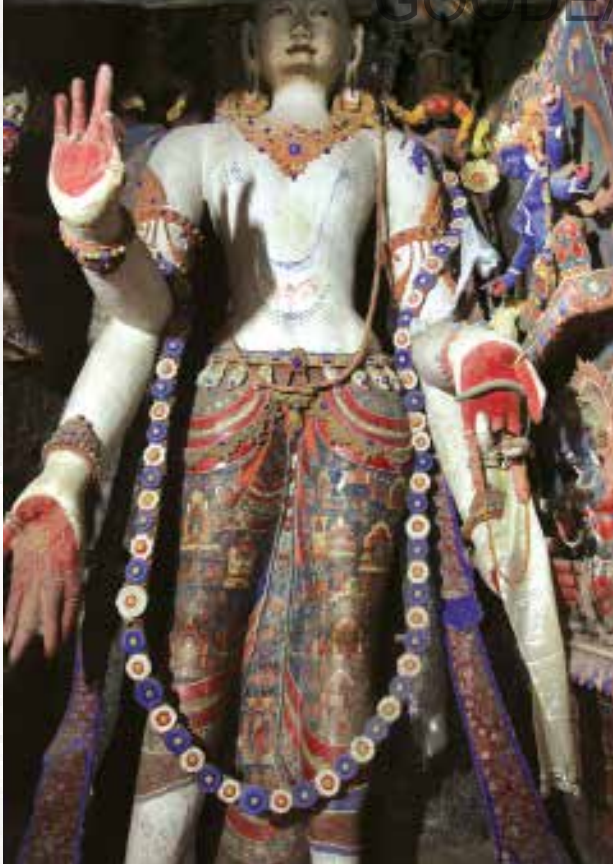


the exquisite detail with which their *dhotis* have been decorated. These clay figures are supported by wooden frames and soar up to the second storey of the temple. Of these, the Avalokiteshvara figure, to the left, is painted entirely in white except for his palms, which are coloured a deep red.

The heart of this shrine is the gilded, bright yellow statue of Maitreya Buddha, flanked by four attendant deities. His *dhoti* depicts figures of the Mahasiddhas, devotees of Buddha. The Mahasiddhas are shown conversing, some are accompanied by consorts and a few stand alone. On the right wall is Manjushri: his face is red and he wears a five-pointed crown, while his '*dhoti* is covered with roundels, each chronologically depicting the stages of Buddha Sakyamuni's life.' (Monisha Ahmed)

The remaining walls are resplendent with figures of Bodhisattvas, Buddha and even common folk. One wall depicts

Left: The Bodhisattva Maitreya, over 5 m tall
Below: Alchi's world-renowned Green Tara



Avalokiteshvara covered with 814 small figures of Amitabha Buddha, seated on a throne with peacocks on the side. There is also a larger figure of Amitabha on the centre of the two walls.

A chorten in Alchi gomba



The *Jamyang lha-khang* (Manjusri Temple) has wood carvings on its doors and pillars, and a central image of Manjusri seated on a lion throne, his *dhoti* embellished with a string of pearls and his crown made of flowers.

The greatest highlight of Alchi gomba, however, is its painting of a Green Tara seated cross-legged on a lotus base, 'clad in a *dhoti* ornamented with mounted bowmen and overlapping animals, wearing an extremely rich crown and jewellery' (Monisha Ahmed). She has six arms, of which four hold a staff, a rosary a book and a decorated vase, while the remaining two form graceful *mudras*.

The ever-increasing tourist population in Alchi has led to the establishment of many guest houses in Alchi village, besides small eateries serving Tibetan food, and souvenir shops – one of which is in the gomba itself.

Alchi is protected by the Archaeological Survey of India.



RIZONG

3,500 M ◀ ▶ 73 KMS FROM LEH

Rizong Gomba
Admission ₹ 20

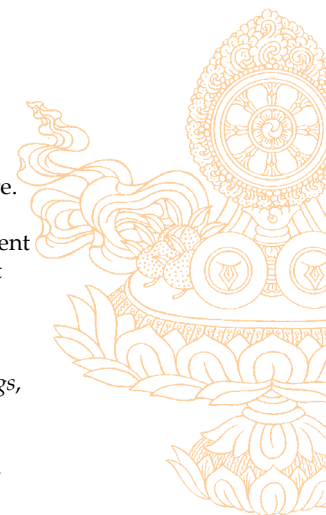
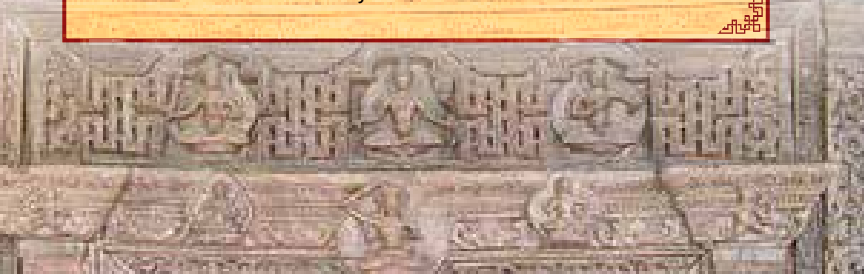
At first glance, Rizong gomba appears to be a large whitewashed mass protruding out of rock, punctuated by windows and their red wooden awnings. Sometimes called a 'paradise for meditation', this Geluk-pa monastery was founded in 1831 by Lama Tsultim Nima, on the site of an older Buddhist hermitage, and is the only monastery in Ladakh still practising the austere Vinaya principles. Its resident lamas lead a disciplined life and are only allowed access to monastic robes and religious literature. Stringent rules require that the monks repent even inadvertently treading on an insect or cutting a blade of grass.

Besides its stringent guidelines, the monastery is also known for its architecture. Various building blocks have been erected after flattening portions of the hill at different levels. There is a small pathway etched out of the rock, in a zigzag fashion, which reaches the lower part of the monastery.

The uppermost level includes two *du-khangs*, of which the older *du-khang* is larger and has a raised platform to accommodate stucco images of Sakyamuni and Maitreya. The central deity, Sakyamuni, is flanked

SUMDA CHUN, ALCHI AND MANGYU PILGRIMAGE

Sumda Chun and Mangyu are both monasteries contemporary with Alchi, and believed to have been built by Rinchen Zangpo. In fact, it is said he built all three in one night. Today, Sumda Chun and Mangyu are far less accessible than Alchi, requiring strenuous treks of several hours to reach. Those who attempt the journey are either adventurers or pilgrims, since Sumda Chun, Alchi and Mangyu form a holy pilgrimage. It is considered auspicious, in fact, to visit all three monasteries on the same day.





by other idols, including Avalokiteshvara and Mahakala.

The newer *du-khang* has beautiful *thangkas* and wall paintings of protector deities. There are three thrones in this hall, reserved for the gampa's three senior-most lamas. Printing blocks telling the story of Lama Tsultim Nima, ancient bells and drums, and Tibetan scriptures are housed here.

Next to this chamber is a three-storey structure, with a small enclosed courtyard. On its third floor is a large silver *chorten* and a *mandala*. A shrine, locally known as *sku-dung*, enshrines the relics of Lama Tsultim Nima.

Tourists are often interested to visit the Julichen nunnery nearby, which is subordinate to the monastery. While more educated nuns dedicate themselves to meditation and Tibetan philosophy, many also toil in the fields for the monastery. In fact, Kim Gutschow, in *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*, has called Buddhist nuns of this region the 'the worker bees in the monastic hive', since monks are usually considered superior in the spiritual hierarchy.

TINGMOSGANG

90 KMS FROM LEH ◀

Situated in a secluded valley of apricot groves, the beautiful and prosperous village of Tingmosgang is renowned for its 16th-century castle, housing a particularly sacred image of Avalokiteshvara, believed to confer great blessings on the worshipper.

Built atop a hill, this two-storey structure houses a *chamba lha-khang*, a *guru lha-khang*, a newly-built *du-khang*, and a structure which is said to be the abode of *chandazig* (all forms of the Buddha). These structures are connected to each other by

narrow pathways and a passage for circumambulation.

The *chamba lha-khang* is built over a high plinth and accessible only by a small flight of steps. Its ceiling, colourfully painted with floral and geometric patterns, enlivens the small, dark chamber. The most attractive feature of the *lha-khang* is a two-storey stucco image of Chamba.

The *chandazig* and the *guru lha-khang* ('temple of the Guru', that is Padmasambhava) are also built on a raised platform, which is preceded by a small, open courtyard. Both contain sacred images of deities of the Buddhist pantheon.

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

Ladakh offers a magnificent landscape at every turn

LAMAYURU

3,420 M ◀▶ 127 KMS FROM LEH

Tucked in a bowl-shaped valley, surrounded by dusty mountains on all sides, Lamayuru leaves most travellers awestruck by its beauty. About half-way between Leh and Kargil, the village also has one of the oldest and most spectacular monasteries in

Ladakh, precariously positioned on a high, craggy spur.

The monastery is sometimes called 'Yun-dung' (or 'swastika') following a story that tells of how there was once a big lake here, whose water was drained by a greatly spiritual monk, who formed grains of corn into this shape in a libation performed here.

In its architecture, the gompa 'adheres to the traditional *mandala* plan, of a central temple surrounded by four temples in the cardinal directions' (M N Rajesh, *The Buddhist Monastery*). Little of the original, however, remains today.

While Lamayuru town was long an important stop on the Silk Route, the monastery was

established in the 11-century by the sage Naropa. The Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo, too, is said to have contributed to its construction.

Though much of the gompa is newly-built, some of its ancient heritage survives in the murals along the walls of the *Senge-Sgang*, which may date to Rinchen Zangpo's arrival.

Lamayuru Gompa • Admission ₹ 20

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS



GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

The *Senge-Sgang's* antiquity is further proved by a central stucco image of Vairochana seated on a lion throne, with Garuda and a pair of sea monsters on either side.

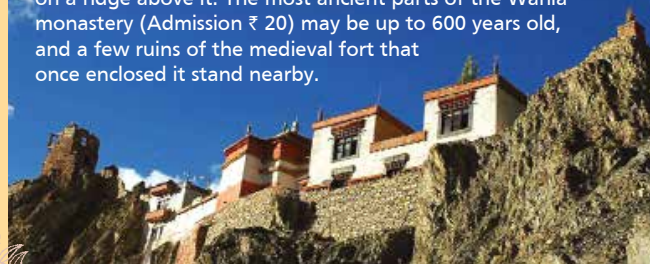
Lamayuru's newer buildings include a *du-khang*, *gon-khang* and two *zimchhungs*. The *du-khang* has wall paintings of Avalokiteshvara and other deities, and a *mandala* of Vairochana. The *gon-khang's* walls are brightly painted with murals and dancing skeletons.

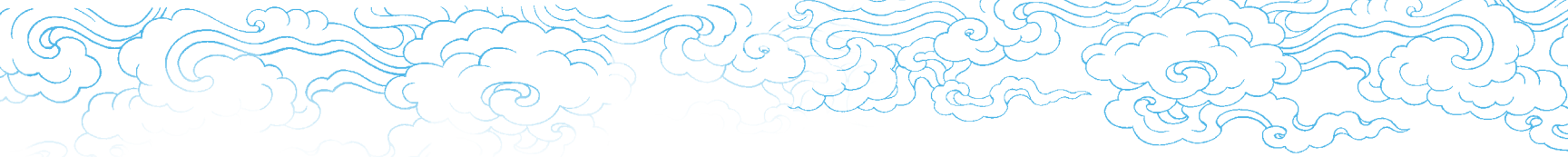
Lamayuru hosts two annual masked dance festivals, when all the resident monks and monks from the surrounding gompas gather together to pray and participate in the esoteric *chham* dance. Those who plan their trip to coincide with the festivals will also see a unique chorten made of coloured butter!

Above: Newly-made murals in
Lamayuru gompa

Wanla

Less than 10 kms before you reach Lamayuru, a 7-km diversion off the Leh-Srinagar highway goes south to Wanla village, which has a gompa dedicated to Avalokiteshwara perched on a ridge above it. The most ancient parts of the Wanla monastery (Admission ₹ 20) may be up to 600 years old, and a few ruins of the medieval fort that once enclosed it stand nearby.





NUBRA



*'Hearken, my sons! If you want
To climb the mountain peak
You should hold the self-mind's light,
Tie it with a great Knot,
And catch it with a firm Hook.
If you practice thus
You can climb the mountain peak
To enjoy the view.'*

*(From 'Song on Reaching the Mountain Peak'
by Milarepa, Buddhist mystic (1052-1135 AD),
translated by Garma C. C. Chang)*

Hemmed in by the sky-high Himalayan and Karakoram ranges, the Nubra region in northern Ladakh has three valleys: one along the Nubra river, the second along the Shyok river and the third after the Siachin river joins the Shyok in Lakjung, thereafter flowing northwest to join the Indus at Keris in Pakistan. The Nubra originates in the Siachen glacier, the highest battlefield in the world and the site of intermittent hostilities between India and Pakistan.

The relatively warm expanse of the Nubra region is much more fertile than most of Ladakh. In fact, its gentle slopes covered in thick grass during the summer months, give the valley its name, 'Idumra' or 'Nubra', which means 'orchard'.

The road to Nubra

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

THE ROAD TO NUBRA

The 150-km journey from Leh to the Nubra region includes some of the most diverse and exhilarating topography in the world, and its high point (both literally and metaphorically) is the Khardung La pass. About an hour and a half from Leh (39 kms), and at a height of 5,359 m (18,380 feet), Khardung La is known for having the world's highest motorable road. Maintained by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), the road is open to tourists all year round, but

even in the summer months, one can see sharp icicles hanging along the sides from the rock faces, or mounds of snow being cleared by the BRO.

Khardung La was opened to vehicular traffic only in 1974, and has since become a great favourite with mountain biking enthusiasts. But the history of this road is much more ancient. Traders of the Silk Route, which developed in the pre-Christian era (*see p 81*) used the pass to travel between Leh and Kashgar in Xinjiang province of China.

An hour's drive downhill from Khardung La leads to the first stop in Nubra called Khardung,

a small village in a sandy flatland. Soon after, at Tirit, the road bifurcates: one takes you to the valley of the Shyok river which has the towns of Diskit and Hunder, with a magnificent high-altitude desert between them; and the other to the green valley of the Nubra river, where Sumur and Panamik are most popular with tourists.

Note that all travelers to Nubra (Indians and foreigners) need an Inner Line Permit, and may only travel as far as Turtuk in the Shyok valley and Panamik in the Nubra valley. Permits are issued for a maximum of seven days by the Deputy Commissioner's office in Leh (*see Practical Information*).



Above and Below: Khardung La is a biker's delight, lined with icicles even in the summer and even boasting the world's highest cafeteria (Top)

❖ THE VALLEY ALONG THE SHYOK

Diskit

Diskit Gompa
Admission ₹ 20
Timings 7 am - 4 pm

Diskit, the biggest town on the sharply sloping left bank of the Shyok river, is spectacular. The town's main monastery belongs to the Geluk-pa sect, and was founded in 14th century by Changzem Tserab Zangpo, a disciple of Tsong-kha-pa. Today, it is under the aegis of Thiksey monastery (see pp 32-36).

You can drive up to **Diskit gompa**, though more energetic visitors could also attempt the steep trek. At the foot of the hill, there is

a massive 32-m-tall statue of Maitreya Buddha, decorated with several kilograms of pure gold. The deity was consecrated by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in 2010. The massive statue is placed such that it faces Pakistan, over the Shyok river, in the hope that it will bring peace between the two countries.

There are many old paintings and statues inside the monastery, some a little worse for wear. The monastery has a museum, which includes the relic of the hand of Galden Tsewang, a Mongolian warlord who invaded the valley centuries ago but was slain by local inhabitants.

Just behind the hill on which the monastery is located is a small wetland, which is frequented by migratory birds. It is a little difficult to make your way past seabuckthorn bushes to the wetland, but nonetheless, it is a bird watcher's delight!

The monastery's main festival is called Domosche, the Festival of the Scapegoat.

Hunder

The charming little village of Hunder is a 7-km trek from Diskit. Historically, traders travelling along the Silk Route from the Nubra valley to Skardu (now in POK) would pass via the Shyok valley, and halt at Hunder.

Hunder was the capital of the erstwhile Nubra kingdom in the 17th century and is home to the **Hunder gompa**. Perched on a hill, the monastery overlooks the ruins of a citadel on another hill to its left, and presents a spectacular view of the valley.

Hunder Gompa, Admission ₹ 20

The monaster is largely in ruins and only the main building is accessible. The weathered stairs leading up to the gompa have been restored and so have some of the murals that adorn its walls. In a small ante-chamber within is a two-storey statue of Maitreya Buddha. The solemn expression on its face radiates a spirit of detachment.

The ruins of **Hunder fort** comprise little more than a broken bastion today. King Singge Namgyal had a grave constructed here for his Muslim mother. It once had a grand *roza* (low surrounding wall) which was washed away by floods in 1929.

Facing page: *Diskit gompa*;
and its 32-m-tall Maitreya
Buddha (left)



SAND DUNES ON THE SILK ROUTE

'A huge flat plain extended toward snowcaps on every side, and dry riverbeds bisected the emptiness like tears. In a few places, fortress-like, two-storey white buildings were clustered together in patches of green, silent amid apricot trees and willow...'

(Sudha Ramalingam, Hindu Frontline)

Nubra lies along the ancient Silk Route, a traders' trail that flourished for almost a millennium, from c. 200 BC to c. 760 AD and, at its peak, stretched across half the world, from China to Europe. Caravans trundled across mountains and deserts, through verdant valleys and crowded cities, setting up profitable camps along the ways. Of course, no caravan could ever traverse the entire Silk Route, so each would halt at fixed points and sell their goods to the next group of traders, thus creating a chain of valuable merchandise. Indeed, silk was just one of the items traded along the route –

equally popular were Indian ivory, spices and textiles, horses, precious stones and more.

In Nubra, between Hunder and Diskit, these ancient traders would have encountered a vast and fascinating anomaly that continues to fascinate visitors today. This is the massive expanse of sandy riverbed that creates a desertscape in this cold, high-altitude land of rocky peaks. High winds create rows upon rows of sand dunes and, to complete this strange picture, double-humped Bactrian camels (*see Box*) tramp along the silver grey dunes.

Travellers on the Silk Route would refer to Shyok as the 'river of death', since its upper reaches are treacherous and many a merchant perished trying to cross its waters

Those caravans of the Silk Route that travelled through the Himalayas depended greatly on the hardy, cold-desert camels named after the region of their origin, Bactria. These double-humped Bactrian camels have bushy eyebrows, two rows of long eyelashes and hair inside their ears to protect them from the harsh cold. They are believed to be able to 'seal' their nostrils and mouths to keep the sand out. The camels' double hump stores fat, which is converted to water and helps them go without food and water for long periods.

The Bactrian camel is slow, traveling only two-and-a-half miles per hour, but its life-saving skills as storm-detector and water-diviner are famous. As a 5th-century chronicler noted: 'Occasionally, the old camels would roar, huddle together in a group and bury in the sand. This gave warning of fierce, sudden winds which were dreaded along the northern route. They would whip up the sands and although over in a matter of minutes, those without protection over their faces might be left for dead.'

In 2007, the Bactrian camel was identified by the Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered (EDGE) project as a threatened species needing protection. Today, visitors can enjoy camel safaris (about ₹150 for 15 mins) when they visit Nubra.

❖ THE VALLEY ALONG THE NUBRA

Travellers who drive northwards from Tirit into the valley of the Nubra river will pass through a series of small, charming villages like **Sumur**, **Teggar** and **Tirsa**, many of which have well-preserved examples of primitive rock art – including engravings of human figures and animals – on boulders nearby.

About 6 kms from Sumur village is the gompa at **Samstanling**, on the road to Panamik. This monastery was built in the 19th century by a monk called Tsultim Nima, and is thus quite modern. However, the gompa is also one of the most puritanical in Ladakh; it allows women visitors only during the day. A rock-carved, two-storey high statue of Maitreya Buddha is the prime attraction of this gompa.

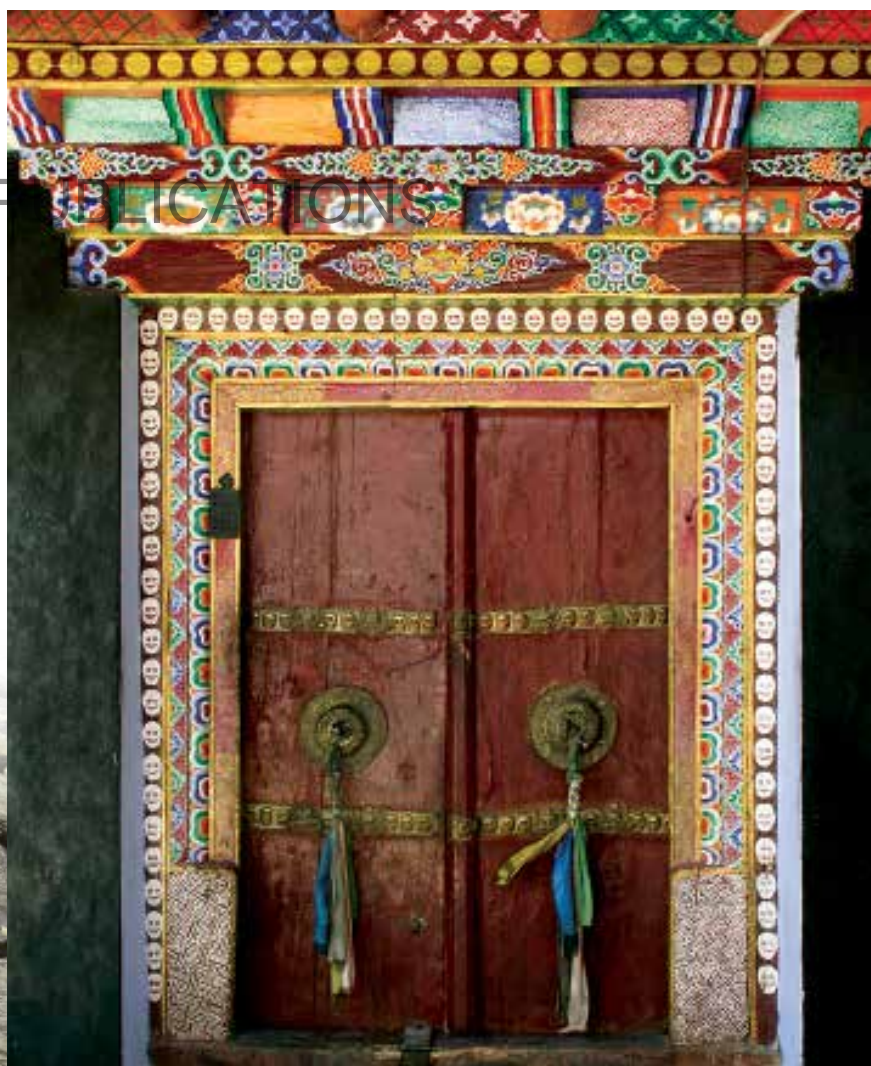
The last halt for civilians along this route is **Panamik** (20 kms from Samstanling). Panamik has long been known for its reserves of edible soda, which were traditionally exported by the villagers to other parts of Ladakh.

Panamik is famed for its hot sulphur springs, which are known to possess curative powers. It is said that the temperature of water at the source is close to boiling!

A three to four-hour trek from Panamik leads to the tiny, mid-18th-century **Ensa gompa**, which ‘somehow clings to a foliage-covered ledge on the raw red rock of the cliff face’ (Snellgrove).

Right: *Samstanling gompa*

Below: *Mani stones, carved with the chant Om Mani Padme Hum, are ubiquitous in Ladakh*





ZANSKAR VALLEY



*This lonely spot where stands my hut
Is a place pleasing to the Buddhas,
A place where accomplished beings dwell,
A refuge where I dwell alone*

*(Milarepa, Buddhist mystic (1052-1135 AD),
translated by Garma C. C. Chang)*

Famed for its splendid isolation, the Zaskar Valley, perched at over 3,500 m is southwest of Leh, and among the highest and most remote regions in the world. Nestled between the peaks of the Zaskar range, the valley is drained by the Stod and Lungnak rivers (also called Doda Chu and Tsarap Chu locally), both of which are tributaries of the Zaskar, which itself flows northwards to join the Indus.

Despite these rivers, this 'hidden kingdom', is a land of barren mountains surrounded by precipitous gorges, so rare patches of irrigated fields appear like jewels in a desolate crown of thorns.

Travellers come to Zaskar via either Leh or Kargil. The 'gateway' to Zaskar is Penzi La. Two small, high-altitude lakes with camping sites and views of permafrost mountains are the highlights of this pass, which is the highest point on the Kargil-Zaskar road. A few hundred metres from Penzi La is the enormous Drang Drung glacier, source of the Stod river.

Just 20 kms before Penzi La, you will pass **Rangdum**. Set in a wild, big-sky valley, the village is home to the 250-year old Rangdum gumpa (Admission ₹ 50), built on a low plateau. Its museum has a collection of *thangkas*, masks and manuscripts.

From Penzi La, a spectacular drive along unpaved roads leads through villages like **Abran, Aksho, Hamiling, Shagam** and **Phey**, all within 12 kms of one another and about 50 kms from Padum. Those who care to stop may admire the view, as well as the many boulders engraved with ancient rock art in and around these settlements.

A little further, **Sani village** (8 km before Padum) has one of Zaskar's few gompas built on flat land. The Sani gumpa has the famous Kanika *chorten*, which may date to the rule of the Kushan emperor Kanishka.

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

*The spectacular Drang
Drung glacier*

GETTING THERE

To get to Padum, Zaskar's largest town, you can fly to either Srinagar or Leh, and take a taxi or bus thereafter.

From Srinagar it is a 7-hour drive to Kargil, where travellers usually halt overnight before proceeding into the Zaskar valley via Penzi La pass (160 kms from Kargil, 4,200 m). Note that you will have to change taxis at Kargil since the Kargil Taxi Union does not allow 'non-local' taxis to ply on the Kargil-Padum route.

The 450-km journey from Leh to Padum also passes via Kargil, where it is advisable to halt for the night. You will encounter the dramatic Suru Valley as you drive south from Kargil, crossing the Penzi-la pass.

When it snows – as it does for seven months a year – Penzi La is blocked, locking the land and its people in an unchanging world that only the most adventurous travellers have glimpsed.

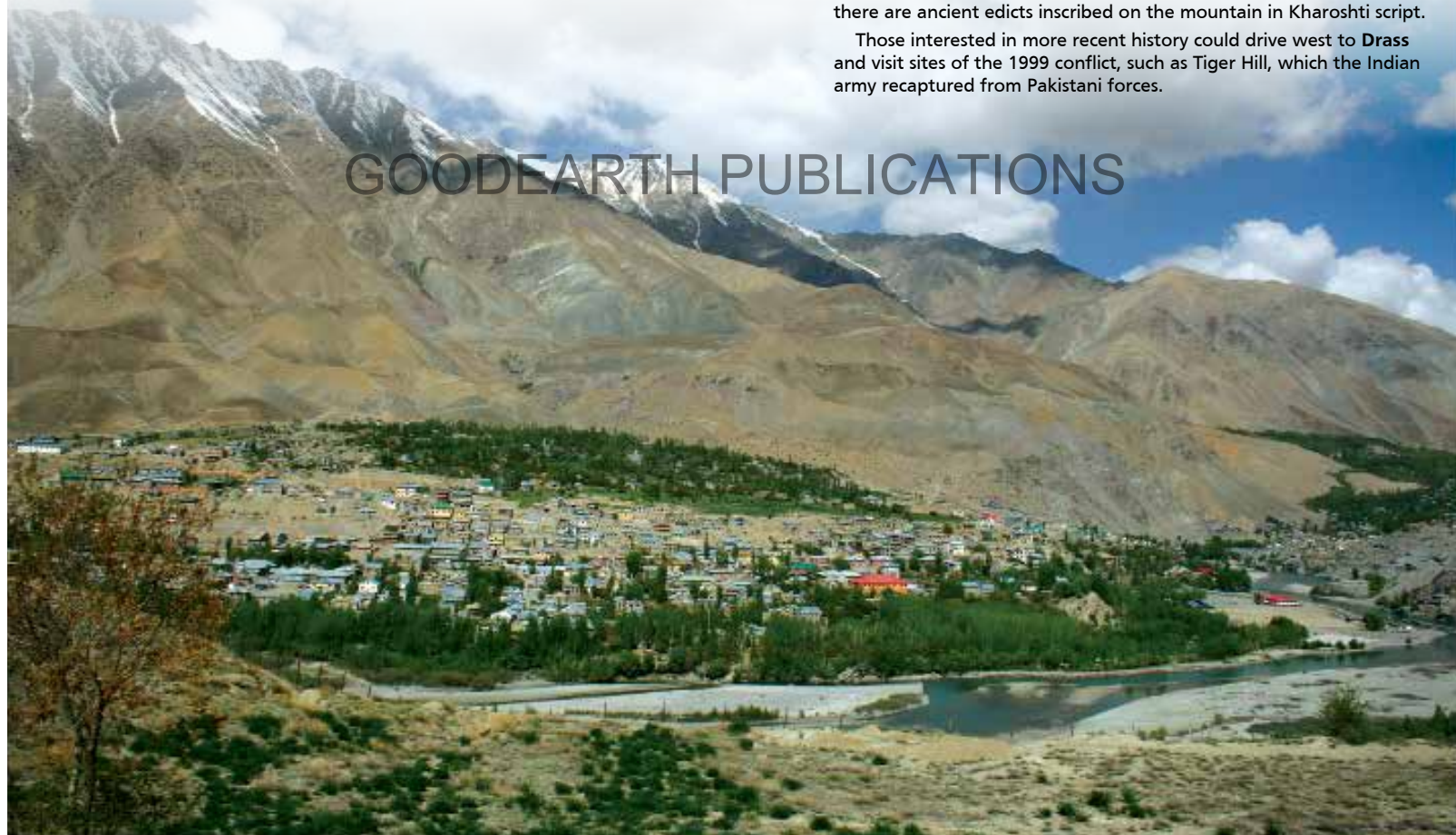
KARGIL: GATEWAY TO THE ZASKAR VALLEY

The western district of Ladakh is unfortunately associated in the popular imagination with the 1999 Kargil War between India and Pakistan. Kargil has a much longer history, however, of bustling, peaceful trade along the Silk Route, which fostered the mingling of cultures from China, Tibet and India. Located almost exactly halfway between Srinagar (204 kms) and Leh (230 kms), Kargil town remains a hub for traders – its bazaar pulsates with life – and also travellers, who can base themselves here and undertake trips to surrounding regions.

The **Mulbek** and **Suru** valleys are popular trekking destinations nearby, offering breathtaking views. These are fertile regions, with fruit orchards and poplar and willow trees creating a greener, softer landscape than Ladakh is known for. Mulbek (45 kms from Kargil) has two gompas, one belonging to the Druk-pa and the other to the Geluk-pa sect. Also here is a 9-m tall Maitreya Buddha carved in relief on a single rock. Popularly known as the Chamba statue, this carving has been dated to between the 2nd and 8th centuries AD. Nearby, there are ancient edicts inscribed on the mountain in Kharoshti script.

Those interested in more recent history could drive west to **Drass** and visit sites of the 1999 conflict, such as Tiger Hill, which the Indian army recaptured from Pakistani forces.

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS



❖ PADUM

3505 M ◀▶ 80 KMS FROM PENZI LA

Set on the banks of Lungnak river, Padum is Zaskar's only 'town', with a marketplace, small guesthouses and camping facilities. Its oldest part is also its most crowded, with houses sitting cheek-by-jowl with *chortens*.

Now in ruins, Padum fort was the seat of the kings of ancient and medieval Zaskar. Some historians believe that the Central Asian army of Mirza Haidar captured the fort briefly.

There are two gompas near Padum, in **Pipiting** and **Stagrimo**. Perched on a hilltop, Stagrimo is among the oldest structures in Zaskar and governed by the well-known Stakna monastery (see p 37). In the 17th century, King Dechok Namgyal requested the villagers of Zaskar to donate land for this gumpa, which today contains many *thangkas* and statues, including a beautiful Vajravara and Avalokitesvara.

❖ STONDE

18 KMS FROM PADUM ◀

Colourful *chortens* and fluttering prayer flags welcome you as you make your way up to the newly-restored 11th-century Stonde gumpa, north of Padum. A footpath leads uphill to the monastery's two assembly halls, one of which is relatively new.

At one end of the courtyard is a temple dedicated to



eleven-headed Avalokitesvara; at the opposite end is a complex of temples. One of these, the *tshogs-khang*, has a badly-damaged, indecipherable inscription at its entrance, and a statue of Sakyamuni Buddha in the *bhumisparsha mudra* (earth-witness posture). It also has murals of Atisa and Amitabha. The *tshogs-khang*

itself leads to a small temple, with a 2.5-m high statue of Maitreya Buddha within, surrounded by scriptures and *thangkas*. Strangely, a helmet with the insignia of the British Horse Artillery hangs from the ceiling!

Outside the monastery, on the northwestern side of the hill,

is a temple called Dzom-skyid. Its newly-painted murals include protector deities of the Geluk-pa sect.

Not too far is a cave where, it is said, the Tibetan Yogi Marpa once lived and meditated.

Above: An intricate, thousand-armed Avalokitesvara in Stagrimo monastery



A monk at Karsha gumpa

KARSHA

17 KMS FROM PADUM;
4-6 KMS BY FOOT ◀

Arguably the best-known monastery in Zaskar, the white-washed and well-maintained Karsha gumpa stands out in the barren landscape. Karsha's main hall and library were both destroyed by fire and, though the library could not be salvaged, the renovated assembly hall is newly-decorated with paintings. The *gon-khang* (temple of guardian divinities) is also newly-painted, with beautiful

murals of Vijaya, Four-Armed Mahakala and Vajrapani. The lower assembly hall, which was not affected by the fire, is larger, and its walls are adorned with older murals of a crowned Sakyamuni and Amitabha.

Two smaller temples in the gumpa are: the Kangyur temple, housing scriptures, and another dedicated to Tsong-kha-pa and his two disciples.

West of the monastery are the ruins of a hilltop fort, believed to have been destroyed by invasions in the 18th century.

THE CHADAR TREK

The Zaskar river, which leads from Padum to Zangla (35 kms from Padum) and then to Leh, freezes so hard in winter that for a few weeks one can walk on it as if it were solid ground. This is known as the *chadar* ('sheet' in Hindi). Constantly shaped by the wind, sun and clouds, the *chadar* is a dynamic living thing. The ice crunches and cracks under your feet, the wind feels like a knife, while the mild roar of the river deep below keeps you company.

Local merchants have been walking the *chadar* for centuries, and now adventure enthusiasts are discovering the rewards of undertaking this daunting 14-day, 105-km trek. The adventure begins in **Chiling** and follows a canyon landscape till **Hanumil**. Camping stops are in rock caves on the riverbank.

Upsides? Glimpsing ibexes, dipper birds and, if you are really lucky, the elusive snow leopard. Getting an insight into a fascinating ancient culture divorced from modern life; visiting Buddhist monasteries built into cliffs; basking in the beauty of the landscape. And, of course, after it's all over, having the satisfaction of completing one of the world's most challenging treks. Downsides? Minus-30 degree nights, and thin ice and the risk of frostbite.



❧ ZONGKHUL

35 KMS FROM PADUM ◀

Zongkhul is tucked so deeply in the folds of the Great Himalayan range that even taxi drivers balk at the suggestion of a trip here – the route falls along a trekking trail and is considered rocky and dangerous even by Zanskar standards. It takes considerable lung power to climb the jagged, rock-hewn steps in the Ating gorge that lead to the cave monastery.

Still, those who brave the trip, will be rewarded with a truly ethereal sight, as butter lamps fill the darkness with light and fragrance, illuminating 300-year-old frescoes and beautiful *thangkas*. In an alcove at the back is a statue of eleven-headed Avalokitesvara.

In fact, Zongkhul comprises two caves, and is associated with the sage Naropa, whose footprint is preserved on the rock at the lower cave's entrance.

❧ MUNI

This little monastery of the Geluk-pa sect has a 2.5-m statue of Maitreya Buddha in its assembly hall, flanked by

smaller images of Sakyamuni Buddha, Tsong-kha-pa and Avalokitesvara.

A little away from the main complex is a temple dedicated to Maitreya Buddha, with images of Tsong-kha-pa, Padmasambhava, Sakyamuni and Avalokitesvara.

❧ BARDAN

12 KMS SOUTH FROM PADUM ◀

Bardan is a 17th-century monastery of the Dugpa-Kargyud order. Among the oldest monasteries in Zanskar, it is known for its delicately-made miniature stupas of wood, clay, copper and bronze.

Unfortunately, the monastery is in need of immediate repair, though it remains active, with about 40 resident monks. The high façade of the Assembly Hall dominates the courtyard. Within are paintings of the fierce divinity Kagya, the sage Marpa, and four Bodhisattvas – Vajradhara, Samvara, Amitabha and Akshobhaya – drawn on *mandalas*.

Above: *The Naropa cave monastery at Zongkhul*



❧ PHUGTAL

34 KMS FROM PADUM ◀

The only way to get to Phugtal is on foot or horseback, and to get there and back can take the better part of a week. The Phugtal cave monastery is reputedly the most picturesque in all Zanskar. A small cluster of white-washed buildings seem impossibly balanced on a sheer cliff face. At their heart, a deep, hole in the dark mountain leads into the monastery.

Overlooking the Lungnak river, this Geluk-pa gompa has been visited by sages and scholars ever since it was established in the early 14th century by

Jangsem Sherap Zangpo, a disciple of Geluk-pa founder Tsong-kha-pa. Legend says that the spiritually gifted Zangpo caused a spring to spout in the cave, a tree to grow above it, and the cave itself to expand. Today, the monastery has a main prayer hall, temples, library, and residential quarters

for monks – and the sacred spring continues to flow.

Images of the 16 Arhats, the first disciples of Buddha, are painted on the cave's walls, which also preserves a collection of old weapons. The assembly hall has several old *thangkas* and murals. From here, one can access a smaller temple, which has a 2-m high image of Maitreya Buddha.

Above: *An unusual mural in Bardan gompa*

FESTIVALS OF LADAKH

❖ MONASTIC FESTIVALS

Almost every gumpa in Ladakh is a treasure trove of age-old traditions and practices, many of which are on vibrant display during annual monastic festivals held across the year and feature an array of well-known dance-dramas. These 1,300-year old Tantric dances called *chham* have their roots in the ancient Bon religion.

Around 760-770 AD, the then King of Tibet, Trisong Detsen formally adopted Buddhism and invited Guru Padmasambhava to preach the doctrine to his people. Padmasambhava, an accomplished tantric, was skilled in warding off evil spirits through dance *mudras*. He used this power in the battle between the old, animistic Bon and Buddhism. Today, traces of that ancient acrimony are discernible in the *chham* dances, which depicts the battle between Buddhist gods and wrathful deities. Some religious scholars have also seen in *chham* a metaphor for the conquering of the ego, the ultimate aim of Buddhism.

An integral part of all important Tibetan monasteries, *chham* dances are usually performed by monks in a gumpa's courtyard, and have incorporated many scenes from local fables into their portrayal of the triumph of good over evil. Monks wear colourful brocade costumes, with huge and bizarre masks, and sway to the sound of blaring horns and trumpets in a dance that is intense, energetic – and, for the viewer, often mesmerising.

The *chham* begins with the heraldic call of *kangling* trumpets from within the gumpa. As the atmosphere echoes the shrill note of the clarinets, with the drums forming a muffled undertone, richly attired lamas swirl to the beat while incense-bearers circulate in the audience, purifying the atmosphere.

Festivals last two or three days and usually end with a climax in which the evil forces are trapped in an effigy

– a human-like figure made of dough – which is then ritually cut into pieces and scattered in the four cardinal directions. This ritual, called *Dao Tulva*, re-enacts the assassination of the Tibetan apostate king Lang Darma by a Buddhist monk in 842 AD (see p 36).

The *Rinpoche*, or head lama, of the monastery presides over all the rituals during a festival, sitting on a high throne, placed at the centre of the gumpa's courtyard and facing the

Names of the Festival	Monastery / Venue	Usually held in*
Spituk Gustor	Spituk	January
Dosmoche	Leh, Likir & Diskit Monasteries	February
Stok Guru Tsechu	Stok Monastery	February–March
Matho Nagrang	Matho Monastery	February–March
Buddha Purnima	Leh	May–June
Hemis Tsechu	Hemis Monastery	June
Yuru Kabgyat	Lamayuru Monastery	June
Zanskar Karsha Gustor	Karsha Monastery	July
Phyang Tsedup	Phyang Monastery	July
Korzok Gustor (Tsomoriri Lake)	Korzok Monastery	July
Takthok Tsechu	Takthok Monastery	July–August
Sani Naro Nasjal (Zanskar)	Sani Monastery, Zanskar	July–August
Shachukul Gustor	Shachukul Monastery	June–July
Thiksey Gustor	Thiksey Monastery	November
Chemrey Angchok	Chemrey Monastery	November–December
Galdan Namchot	All Over Ladakh	December
Losar	All over Ladakh	January–December

* Since the dates of these festivals are governed by the lunar Tibetan calendar, they vary from year to year. Visit leh.nic.in for exact dates before making your plans.



du-khang, or main assembly hall. Lamas in ceremonial attire sit on either side of the throne.

Makeshift markets selling chunky jewellery, *thangkas* and other artefacts spring up overnight near monasteries during festivals. Valuable and rare musical instruments, weapons and religious objects are brought out during these performances, often for the only time in the year.

Perhaps the best known monastic festival, at least among tourists, is the Hemis Tsechu, usually held in June (see p 47).

❖ LADAKH FESTIVAL

A week-long extravaganza organised by the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department in Leh and Kargil from 20-26 September, the Ladakh Festival is a bouquet of local customs, suffusing the region in frenzied bursts of activity. Ladakhi men in long silk robes and leather hats, women wearing Goncha robes that touch their toes, their headgear

embellished with topaz and turquoise, showcase the various facets of the region's distinct identity.

At the inauguration, hundreds of local artistes, belting out popular Ladakhi numbers, are accompanied by dancers in a long-winding procession. Each dance begins with a prayer and gradually gains pace.

Such street processions are followed by days of local dances, and unlimited flow of the local brew called *chang*. Don't miss out on craft stalls selling exquisite Ladakhi handicrafts.

A spectacular display of daredevilry, the motorcycle expedition from Leh to Khardung La, said to be the world's highest motorable road, is the high point of this festival.



Evenings are marked for polo matches, a popular sport in Ladakh. Locals say that polo came to Ladakh from neighbouring Baltistan, and historians confirm that polo was brought here by King Jamyang Namgyal in the 15th century, after he married Gyal Khatun, a princess from Baltistan.

Participants in different local costumes during the Ladakh festival





In the words of one traveller who witnessed a game of polo in 1906, 'everybody holds their breath while the ball is tossed up and is dropping to meet the unerring aim of the club that sends it flying. Helter-skelter follow the players... 'Tis both hot and fast, is polo at Leh'.

Archery too is a popular community event, for which long-haired young men attired in traditional *gonchhas* travel from their villages to Leh.

Polo in Ladakh is not just a rich man's sport. Almost every village in Ladakh has its own polo ground, which hosts tournaments and exhibition matches regularly. Polo certainly adds a dash of colour and excitement to this stark, rugged land. The Ladakh Festival Cup, a major polo tournament part of the Ladakh Festival, witnesses participation by teams from all across the region.



GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

WILDLIFE IN LADAKH

Formidable mountain ranges, sub-zero temperatures and sparse vegetation – any wildlife that inhabits this region must brave harsh conditions to survive. And yet, Ladakh has an enviable and exotic variety of fauna and avifauna: snow leopard, ibex, Tibetan wild ass or *kiang*, black-necked crane and brown-headed gull. Blessed with warm, shaggy coats, and other protective evolutions, these animals and birds have adjusted to the biting cold, insignificant greenery and lack of shelter; but even so, almost all the region's mammals descend to lower altitudes for winter. Only a few exceptions, hibernating species like marmots and brown bears, are able to cope with the temperatures in the upper reaches then.

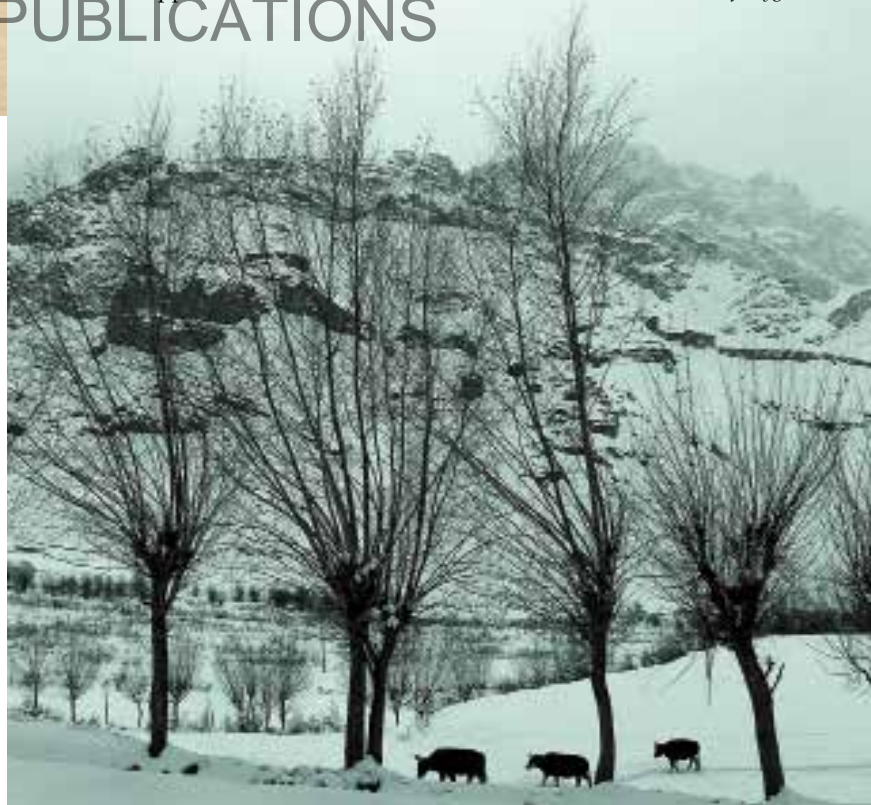
Even the animals of Ladakh, such as yaks (below), experience 'mountain sickness', because of the paucity of oxygen!



SINDHU FESTIVAL

The Ladakh Singhey Khababs Sindhu Festival (12-14 June) a government-sponsored festival, is held on the banks of the Indus or Sindhu river. The festival, which began in 1997, aims to project the Indus as a symbol of communal harmony and unity in India. Participants from across India bring water from the rivers of their own state and immerse it into the Indus. On the first day of the festival, 50 senior lamas conduct prayers on the banks of the river. The second day features a special riverside *puja*.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then Prime Minister of India, laid the foundation stone of the Sindhu Cultural Center in 2000. The complex boasts an open air theatre, an exhibition room, a library and a music room.



ANIMALS OF LADAKH

When a snow leopard stalks prey among the mountain walls, it moves... softly, slowly, 'like snow slipping off a ledge as it melts'.

(Douglas H. Chadwick, National Geographic)

Snow leopard

The snow leopard (*Uncia Uncia*), also called the white leopard, is an elusive animal. This endangered species with fur like mist, big tail and pale golden-green eyes seems to melt into the landscape, making it almost impossible for explorers – or, indeed, its prey – to see it coming. Only about 200 of these animals survive in Ladakh today, eating goats, ibex and blue sheep – and hunted, in turn, by human poachers who seek profit in its skin.

Kiang

The *Equus kiang*, largest of the wild asses, was mistaken for a 'wild variety of horse' by

the English explorer William Moorcroft (*Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*), who also noted that the *kiang*'s 'activity and strength render its capture difficult'. Most often sighted near Pangong and Tso Moriri lakes, and in the More plains south of Tanglang-la, the *kiang* lives in herds, which can have over 40 members. To see a group of wild asses galloping across an alpine meadow is a mesmerising sight.

Blue sheep (or *Bharal*)

Bharal, locally called *Napo*, resemble both goats and sheep. Their blue coats camouflage them against the Himalayan rocks that they clamber across with remarkable grace. This ability to climb and hide in rugged cliffs helps them escape snow leopards, who prey upon the *bharal*.

Yak

Though the majority of the world's yaks are now domesticated, the shaggy, black-haired wild yak still survives in the highest altitudes of Ladakh and Tibet. Weighing up to a tonne, this species of ox is today an endangered animal.

BIRDS OF LADAKH

Ladakh is located on the 'flyway route' of birds migrating from Siberia to the Indian plains, so much so that 421 species including Turkoman rock pigeons, desert wheaters, buntings, larks, kites, kestrels, finches, ducks, geese and hundreds of other rare Himalayan birds have been sighted in the region.

Besides being the sole breeding ground in India for black-necked cranes (see *Box*), Ladakh's many wetlands of glacial origin are used by exotic birds like bar-headed geese, brown-headed gulls, great-crested grebes, ruddy shelducks, and lesser sand plover for breeding.

Facing page: *Kiangs are the largest wild asses in the world*
Below: *Brown-headed gulls on Pangong lake*



NATIONAL PARKS

The Hemis High Altitude National Park

Established in 1981 in eastern Ladakh, the Hemis High Altitude National Park covers an area of 600 sq km, making it the second-largest protected area in India after Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (Uttarakhand). The park, ranging from 3,140 m to 5,854 m in altitude, is only 10 kms from Leh. It has vast tracts of barren land with sparse vegetation, and is also known as the 'snow leopard capital of India', as this elusive animal is the park's most prized inhabitant. The other dozen-odd

species that live here include the ibex, Tibetan sheep, red fox, Himalayan marmot, *bharal* and mountain weasel.

The park is also home to exotic birds like the golden eagle, and the lammergeier and Himalayan griffon vultures, making it a birdwatcher's delight. The streaked rose finch, Tibetan snow finch, Himalayan snowcock and fork-tailed swift are a few bird species that are not found anywhere in India, except in this high-altitude park.

Changthang Cold Desert Wildlife Sanctuary

Part of the Tibetan plateau, the Changthang Cold Desert Wildlife Sanctuary stretches

over 4,000 sq km, from eastern Ladakh into Tibet, and encompasses the lakes of Pangong, Tso Moriri, and Tso Kar. At elevations ranging from 4,000 m to 5,791 m, the cold desert region has short summers and Arctic winters.

Its spectacular wetlands – which were only opened to tourists in 1994 – host the rare black-necked crane, besides bar-headed geese, great crested grebes, sand plovers and redshanks. You may also see wild animals like Tibetan gazelles, Tibetan sheep, herds of *bharal* and *kiang*, and marmots – as well as over 700 species of plants, mostly low thorny scrub, Tibetan furze and grasses.

The **black-necked crane**, the state bird of Jammu & Kashmir, is an endangered species and Ladakh is one of the few places in the world where you have some chance of sighting them. Count Nikolay Przhevalsky, a great Russian explorer and ornithologist, was the first to study this bird in 1876, but even today it remains woefully under-researched.

Among the few things known about the bird is that it likes to build its nest at very great heights. Besides, it is an enormous eater and consumes all kinds of berries, fruits, worms, insects and sometimes even small reptiles!

You need **permits** to visit the **Hemis National Park**, for which you should contact the Chief Wildlife Warden in Leh (01982-252171; +91 9419049275).

To visit **Changthang Wildlife Sanctuary**, you need an Inner Line Permit, available at the Deputy Commissioner's office in Leh (01982-252010)

When to visit

Hemis NP: Mid-June to mid-October (the very adventurous could try their luck in winter, when the snow leopard is most likely to be spotted)

Changthang WS: June to September

Accommodation

Hemis NP: There are no hotels inside the Park. Homestay options are available in the villages that come under the park: Rumbak, Kaya, Sku, Shingo, Chiling, Urutse.

Changthang WS: Several tour operators offer packages for adventures into this area, complete with tented accommodation and other facilities (See *Practical Information*)

GOODEARTH PUBLICATIONS

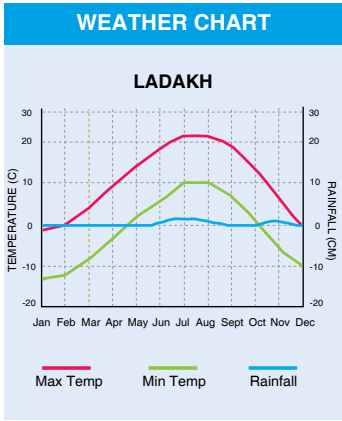
WHEN TO COME

India is a vast country, stretching across varied climatic zones. While the plains of north and central India experience extremes of climate, the south is more equatorial. Ladakh remains chilly throughout the year. Moreover, since this high altitude land lies in the rain shadow of the Great Himalayas, it receives hardly any rainfall. Highways to Ladakh, both from Srinagar and Manali, are open from mid-May to the end of October. However, the high passes along these roads may be closed subject to weather conditions, even in summer.

WHAT TO WEAR

Even in the summer months between June and August, temperatures in Ladakh rarely exceed 25° C, while the minimum can touch 10° C. In winters, the minimum plummets below -10°C and does not rise much above 0°C. Whatever season you visit Ladakh, therefore, make sure you carry plenty of warm clothing, closed shoes, woolen hats and gloves.

WEATHER CHART: LEH



TIME ZONE

Indian Standard Time (IST) is 5½ hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time and 10½ hours ahead of US Eastern Standard Time. IST is 4½ hours behind Australian Eastern Standard Time, 3½ hours behind Japanese Standard Time and 1½ hours behind Thai Standard Time. Despite its vast geographical territory, India has just one time zone and no daylight saving time in winters.

BEFORE COMING TO INDIA

There are a few things you need to take care of before travelling to India.

Passport

Foreign travellers to India must always carry their valid passport with them. If your passport is lost or stolen, you should immediately contact the embassy or consulate of your country.

Visa

A tourist visa is normally given for six months. The 15-day single/ double entry visa is issued only to bona fide transit passengers. Tourist groups of not less than four people travelling under the auspices of a recognised travel agency may be considered for a collective tourist visa. Tourist visas are valid for 180 days from the date of issue and not from the date of entry into India, unless specified otherwise.

Visa Extension

The 180-day tourist visa is technically non-extendable but can be extended for a maximum of 15 days in case of emergencies. A valid departure ticket must, however, be produced as proof of the intention to depart India. The 15-day extension on the 6-month stay is issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, the local State Government and the Foreigner's Regional Registration Office (FRRO). The FRRO is open on weekdays, 9.30 am to 1.30 pm and 2 pm to 4 pm.

Registration for foreigners in towns where there are no FRRO offices can be done in the local police commissioners' offices.

To travel to the many 'inner line' areas in Ladakh, including popular tourist destinations like Nubra, Pangong Tso, Tso Moriri and Changthang Wildlife Sanctuary, both Indian and foreign travellers need permits from the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. **The permits are issued at: Deputy Commissioner's Office, Polo Ground, Leh Ph: (01982) 252010**

Travel Insurance

It is advisable to purchase a travel insurance policy covering theft and loss before coming to India. Also buy medical insurance. There are several kinds of insurance policies and a suitable choice can be made after consulting a reliable travel agent in your country.

TRAVEL WITHIN INDIA

Travelling by Air

Leh is well-connected by air to Delhi, Jammu and Srinagar. Airlines that fly to the region include the state-owned Air India, and private carriers such as Jet Airways and GoAir.

The reporting time for flights departing Jammu, Srinagar and Leh is two hours prior to departure, due to stringent security checks. Moreover, on flights departing from Srinagar and Leh, passengers are not allowed any cabin luggage, except for a camera or laptop bag, and a small handbag for women.

In all other domestic flights, passengers are allowed one piece of hand baggage each. All baggage is subject to security checks whether carried by hand or booked in the hold. Excess baggage is charged as per the fee available at each airline's counter.

Travelling by Rail

There is no rail network in Ladakh, but to travel elsewhere across India, log on to www.irctc.in for booking tickets and www.indianrail.gov.in for latest information on train schedules and booking status. International travellers should note that online bookings can only be made by registering Indian mobile numbers.



FRRO

New Delhi
East Block 8, Level-II
Sector-1, R K Puram
Ph: (011) 26711443/
3843

Chennai
Shastry Bhawan
26 Haddows Road
Ph: (044) 23454977

Kolkata
237 Acharya
Jagadish Chandra
Bose Road
Ph: (033) 22837034

Mumbai
Annexe-II,
Crawford Market
(near Police
Commissioner's
Office)
Ph: (022) 22621169/
0046

Jammu
SP (CID), Canal Road
Ph: (0191) 2542676

Leh
SP
Ph: (01982) 252200

Kargil
SP
Ph: (01985) 232545

Srinagar
SP, CID Special
Branch
Residency (Shervani)
Road
Ph: (0194) 2483588



Air India
1800 227722
www.airindia.in

SpiceJet
1800 180 3333
www.spicejet.com

Jet Airways
1800 225522

Indigo
9910383838
<http://book.goindigo.in>

GoAir
1800 222111
www.goair.in

Travelling by Road

NH 1A connects Srinagar to Ladakh, via Kargil. The other road that connects Ladakh to the rest of the country is the Leh-Manali highway (a part of NH 21), which passes through Baralacha-La and Tanglang-La. Both highways are maintained by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO).

Buses run frequently from Jammu, Srinagar and Manali to Leh and are a popular mode of transport with tourists. J&K State Road Transport Corporation runs regular buses between Srinagar and Leh, with an overnight halt at Kargil.

For other details, log on to www.jksrtc.co.in

Due to heavy snowfall from October to May, many roads in Kashmir and Ladakh are closed. So make sure to check before finalising your travel plans.

Local Travel

Within Ladakh, roads are the only way to explore. They are largely well-maintained, though inclement weather can often make travel difficult. If you are travelling in your own vehicle, carry extra petrol or diesel, as petrol pumps in the area are few and far between.

Buses ply across Ladakh, but hired vehicles or taxis – though more expensive – allow greater flexibility. Please approach your hotel desk for information for reliable car or bike rentals and taxi charges. Local J & K Tourism offices will be happy to book a car for you. You can also hire taxis from the Leh Taxi Stand.

Those who hire taxis at Srinagar or Leh will have to change into a local one at Kargil, as the Kargil Taxi Union does not permit 'non-local' taxis to ply in and around Kargil.

For a comprehensive chart of taxi-hire rates in Ladakh, visit leh.nic.in

Bikes on Hire

Ladakh is extremely popular with biking enthusiasts – its rugged terrain, hairpin bends and high mountain passes provide a truly exhilarating experience.

To hire Royal Enfield and other bikes visit:
www.enfieldpoint.com
(Ph: +91 9906971009)
www.bikerentalsmanali.com
www.visitmanali.com/bikes.html
www.lallisingh.com
www.ladakhbikereental.com

Tourists are required to give a refundable deposit when hiring a bike.

Bike rental rates (₹ / day)		
Royal Enfield Electra		1500
Royal Enfield Classic		1600
Royal Enfield Desert Storm		1800
Bajaj Avenger		1200
Bajaj Pulsar		1000
Honda Activa Automatic		1400

Indians looking to hire bikes in Ladakh must have their driving licence handy. International tourists need a copy of their passport and an International Driving Permit to ride through the rugged terrain.

DRIVING LICENCE

A valid International Driving Licence is necessary if you wish to drive a car or a motorcycle in India and it is advisable to get one before coming. The Automobile Association of Upper India (AAUI), C-8, Qutub Institutional Area, New Delhi (Ph: 011 26965397), extends help to AA members from all countries. If you do not have an International Driving Licence and wish to drive in India, you can get a Temporary Driving Licence, provided you are carrying a valid driving licence of your country. You may still be required to give a test to check your knowledge of road signs. The AAUI can arrange this.



COMMUNICATIONS

Post Offices

The main post offices in large towns provide a range of facilities like fax and a courier service which operates under the name EMS Speed Post. If you need to dispatch a letter or document urgently, it is advisable to send it by the government-run Speed Post. Parcels by mail should not exceed 35 kgs. Books and printed material can be sent by Book Post which costs less. Post Offices are open from 10 am to 5.30 pm from Monday to Saturday.
Leh Post Office Ph: (01982) 252015
Kargil Post Office Ph: (01982) 252056

Email

Leh has many cyber cafés that charge a nominal fee for internet access. The bigger hotels here offer wi-fi connections to their guests.

Telephone

ISD (international), STD (domestic long distance), and local telephone booths are available all over India. The pre-paid SIM card, offered by various local telecom service providers, is the most popular and arguably the cheapest option for making and receiving calls in India. Note that registration is required to activate the SIM card.

HEALTH

No particular vaccination is required for coming to India. However, visitors from designated countries in Africa, South America and Papua New Guinea, even if they are in transit, are required to bring valid Yellow Fever vaccination certificates. Precautionary medication is the best bet against common ailments like diarrhoea, dysentery and malaria.

Travellers to Ladakh must allow their bodies to acclimatise to the low oxygen levels here, especially those flying into Leh (3,505 m). Altitude sickness or Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) can be fatal if ignored. Spend at least 24 hours resting after your arrival. If you feel any of the symptoms of AMS (headache, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, nosebleeds), consult a doctor immediately.

Oxygen from canisters and cylinders is used to treat mild to moderate AMS. If the symptoms do not abate, then contact your hotel administration immediately. The only reliable treatment for AMS is to descend to a lower altitude.

You may carry portable oxygen cylinders, available over the counter at pharmacies across the country. Acetazolamide salt is effective in the treatment of AMS.

STD Codes

Leh	01982
Kargil	01985
Nubra	01980
Zaskar	01983
Jammu	0191
Srinagar	0194
New Delhi	011
Mumbai	022
Kolkata	033
Bangalore	080
Chennai	044

POLICE EMERGENCIES

Police assistance booths are customarily located at airports, railway stations and near major bus stops.

Leh Police Station
Zangsti Road
Ph: (01982) 252018

Nubra Police Station
(01980) 220026

Kargil Police Station
Kargil
Ph: (01985) 232645

HOSPITALS

LEH
Sonam Norbu Memorial Hospital
Ph: (01982) 266186, 252014, +91 9622963381
Leh General Military Hospital
Ph: (01982) 257749, 253037, +91 9622951953

KARGIL
District Hospital
Ph: (01985) 232300, +91 9419176205

Useful Websites
www.leh.nic.in
www.jktourism.org
www.ladakh.com
www.bcmtouring.com
www.indiamike.com
www.kunzum.com

MONEY

The Indian currency is called the Rupee (₹). It is available in denominations of 1000, 500, 100, 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1. One rupee equals 100 paise. Coins in common use are ₹ 10, ₹ 5, ₹ 2, and ₹ 1. While the 50 and 25 paise coins have become redundant in bigger cities, they might still be in circulation in smaller towns. Credit cards are popular in most cities but it is advisable to carry enough cash when visiting small towns, where ATMs and card-swiping machines are hard to come by.

BANKS

Most international banks have branches in major cities, so encashing travellers' cheques or changing foreign currency is fairly simple. Indian state-run banks are open from 10 am to 2 pm, Monday to Friday and from 10 am to 12 pm on Saturdays. They are closed on Sundays and national holidays. Privately-run Indian banks and international banks have longer and more flexible hours.

While all major cities have many banks, small towns are less equipped in banking services. It is thus advised to complete financial transactions from larger cities.

FOREIGN EXCHANGE AGENTS

LEH

Vista Money Exchange
Changspa
Ph: +91 9419815897

Ladakh Travel Trade
Zangsti Road
Ph: (01982) 252188

Bodhi Travel
Ph: +91 9858809201

Ecological Footprint Travel
Samkar
Ph: +91 9906977846

Alps Adventure
Near Hotel Yak
Junction, Fort Road
Ph: (01982) 203077

BANKS (with foreign exchange counters)

LEH

State Bank of India
Old Leh Road

HDFC Bank
Ground Floor and Basement
Sky Abu Complex
Ph: 1800 1804333



TOUR OPERATORS

Contact these tour operators for trekking trips and adventure holidays:

Aquaterra Adventures
www.aquaterra.in
Ph: (011) 29212641

Reach Ladakh
www.reachladakh.com
Ph: +91 8803711111

Ladakh Tsomoriri
www.ladakhtsomori.com
Ph: (01982) 253622, 252271

Ladakh Tours
www.theladaktours.com
Ph: +91 9622975440, +91 9469569890

Yasmin Trek and Tours
www.yasminladakh.com
Ph: (01982) 251071, 255098

Himalayan Eco Adventures
www.wildhimalaya.com
Ph: (01982) 255832

The Great Global Expedition
www.thegreatglobalexpedition.com

Snow Leopard Adventures
Ph: (01982) 252355

Exotic Ladakh
www.exoticladakh.com
Ph: (01982) 255916

Shakti Himalayas
www.shaktihimalaya.com
Ph: (0124) 4563899

For other registered tour operators in Ladakh, log on to leh.nic.in/pages/agentlist.pdf.

ELECTRICITY

Electrical supply is not always reliable, especially in the small villages in the more remote areas of Ladakh. Travellers are advised to carry torches (with extra batteries).

The electric current in India is 220-240 volts AC. The sockets here are of the three-round-pin variety, similar to those in Europe or America, so three-pin electronic gadgets bought abroad can be used here.

WHERE TO STAY

LEH

Ladakh Sarai
Village Ayu
www.ladakh sarai.com
Ph: (01982) 244063

The Grand Dragon
Ladakh
Old Road, Sheynam
www.thegranddragonladakh.com
Ph: (01982) 257786, 255866, 255266

Hotel Lasermo
Chulung Old Road
www.hotellasermo.com
Ph: (01982) 252313

Hotel Chube
chube_leh@rediffmail.com
Ph: +91 9622972145

Hotel Caravan Centre
Skara
www.hotelcaravancentre.com
Ph: +91 9419181260

Ladakh Residency
Changspa
www.ladakhresidency.com
Ph: +91 9810421505

Lotus Hotel
Upper Karzoo
www.lotushotel.in
Ph: (01982) 257265

Hotel Holiday Ladakh
Fort Road, Lower Tukcha
Ph: +91 9320501211

Hotel Omasila
Changspa
www.hotelomasila.com
Ph: +91 9858060770

Hotel Lharimo
Fort Road
www.lharimo.com
Ph: +91 9818140530

West Ladakh Camp
Ulletokpo
Ph: +91 9419178555

KARGIL

D'Zojila
Ph: (01985) 232360

Kargil Continental
Ph: (01985) 232320

Siachen Hotel
Main Bazaar
www.hotelsiachen.com
Ph: (01985) 232221

Hotel Greenland Kargil
LAHDC Street, Town Centre
www.hotelgreenlandkargil.com
Ph: +91 9469357777

Hotel Caravan Sarai
Near BSNL Office
www.caravansarai kargil.com
Ph: (01985) 232278

NUBRA

Hotel Karma Inn
Hunder
karmaleh@yahoo.co.in
Ph: (01980) 221042, +91 9419612342

Nubra Organic Retreat
Hunder
nubraorganicretreat.com
Ph: (01980) 221070, 200118, +91 941213000

Hotel Stendel
Near Diskit Hospital, Diskit
www.hotelstendel.com
Ph: +91 9419348223

Olthang Guest House
Diskit
Ph: (01980) 220025

ZANSKAR VALLEY

Marq Hotel
Padum
www.marqinnzanskar.com
Ph: (01983) 245223, 245071

Hotel Ibex
Padum
(01985) 245012



For a list of other registered hotels in Ladakh, log on to www.leh.nic.in/pages/hotellist.pdf

HOMESTAYS IN LADAKH

Get a taste of the raw, rugged beauty of Ladakh by mingling with Ladakhi people, absorbing their culture and exploring their beautiful land. Homestays are offered along several trekking routes including the Hemis National Park and Zaskar valley.

For homestay options, log on to these websites:
www.himalayan-homestays.com/ladakpages/book.htm
www.wildhimalaya.com/home-stay-tours-ladakh-46
www.yamatreks.com/
www.reachladakh.com/ladakhi_home_stays.htm
www.ladakhwomenstravel.com/homestays.htm



J&K TOURISM OFFICES

Leh

Tourist Reception
Centre
Ph: (01982) 252094,
252297, 253462

Kargil

Tourist Office
Ph: (01985) 2372721,
232266

Srinagar

Tourist Reception
Centre
Ph: (0194) 2452690-91
dtk@jktourism.org

Jammu

Tourist Reception
Centre
Vir Marg
Ph: (0191) 2548172
dtj@jktourism.org

New Delhi

Room No 14&15
Hotel Janpath
Janpath
Ph: (011) 23744948
delhioffice@jktourism.
org

Ahmedabad

Airlines House
Lal Darwaza
Ph: (079) 25503551

Chennai

North Usman Road
Ph: (044) 28340958

Hyderabad

5th Floor, Chandra Vihar
Complex
MJ Road
Ph: (040) 24734806

Kolkata

12, Chowringhee
Ph: (033) 22285791

Mumbai

25, North Wing,
World Trade Centre
Cuffe Parade, Colaba
Ph: (022) 22189040
mumbaioffice@
jktourism.org



CUISINE

Ladakh's cuisine is distinctly different from that of the plains. The principal crop is barley, the mainstay of traditional Ladakhi food. The relatively green Nubra valley has fruit orchards, but up on the high pastures, where not even barley grows, people husband cattle, yak or sheep, which also make up their meat-rich diet.

Barley is fermented to make *chhang* (a potent brew!) and various kinds of breads such as *tain tain* – a thick but soft bread.

With the influx of tourists, Leh has acquired many restaurants and cafés serving an assortment of Indian, Tibetan and Continental cuisine. A favourite dish is *thukpa*, a big, steaming bowl of soup full of noodles, vegetables and meat, garnished with *chhurpe* (dried cottage cheese). It is accompanied by fluffy, steamed *momos*, or dumplings, stuffed with meat or vegetables, and served with a fiery chilli sauce.

Skyu, a traditional dish made of wheat flour and vegetable roots or mutton, is worth a shot. Travellers to Ladakh must also try the salty *gur gur* tea, prepared with butter, and an excellent antidote to the cold. In fact, a popular item on the Ladakhi palate is *tsampa*, roasted barley flour mixed with *gur gur* and kneaded into a dough. It is usually served with vegetables, yoghurt or *chatni*. A wild fruit, *chesta lulu* (seabuckthorn) is used for juices and jams.

RESTAURANTS IN LEH

Chopsticks Noodle Bar
Raku Complex,
Fort Road

Himalaya Café
Main Bazaar

La Pizzeria
Changspa Lane

Wonderland
Changspa

Summer Harvest
Fort Road

Lamayuru Restaurant
Fort Road

Gesmo
Fort Road

BAKERIES IN LEH

Pumpnickel German Bakery
Main Bazaar
For cakes and
croissants.

Ladakhi Bakeries
Old Town
Specialises in all kinds
of Tibetan bread.

Ladag Apricot Store
Fort Road
Great place for apricot
and seabuckthorn jams
and juices, and other
local produce.

SHOPPING

Shopping in Ladakh is largely limited to Leh. Try **HH The Dalai Lama's Charitable Trust Handicraft Emporium**; the **Ladakh Art Palace** in Akbar Shopping Complex; and the **Kashmir Government Arts Emporium** in the main bazaar. Popular purchases include *thangkas* (paintings on silk depicting a Buddhist deity or a *mandala*), jewellery of silver and precious and semi-precious stones, pashmina shawls and carpets.

Pashmina or cashmere evokes images of luxurious shawls, soft and delicately embroidered by Kashmiri weavers. pashmina shawls have become a fashion sensation across the world, with a fast-growing international market for this traditional fibre. The wool comes from a species of goat found at altitudes of 4,000 to 5,000 m in Ladakh, Nepal and Pakistan. In fact, the more harsh and windy the climate they inhabit, the softer grows their undercoat, the source of pashmina wool. One goat produces only 80 to 100 grams of fibre. Such is the demand for this textile, considered a diamond among fibres, that scientists even attempted cloning the animal in 2012!

Pashmina, Ladakhi carpets and other handicrafts are available at the **SOS Children's Village** in Choglamsar, and the **Handicraft Centre** in Leh.

The **Buddhist Thangka House** sells some wonderful souvenirs, from *thangkas* to turquoise jewellery and wooden *choktse* (small Tibetan-style tables intricately carved, painted and polished).

Tibetan silver jewellery, turquoise trinkets and beaded bracelets are particularly popular in this region. Women wear gorgeous necklaces, bracelets and earrings, complementing their costumes with headgear called *perak*.

Turquoise became popular here in the 7th century, when these precious stones were used as cash, or presented as gifts to appease wrathful deities. It is quite unique, in fact, as it changes colour with age. The older the stone, the more green or black it becomes, but in its 'youth', it is a bright blue.



BOOKSHOPS IN LEH

Ladakh Bookshop
Main Bazaar
For a wide range of
titles on the Himalayas
and Tibetan culture.

Leh Ling Bookshop
Main Bazaar
For a variety of books
on Ladakh and Tibet.

Book Worm
Old Fort Road
Sells second-hand
novels.

FURTHER READING

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- Ahmed, Monisha and Claire Harris (eds) *Ladakh-Culture at the Crossroads* (Mumbai, 2005)
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- Dewan, Parvez *Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, 3 Vols (New Delhi, 2004)
- Driver, Wendy 'A magical holiday to Ladakh in India' *Daily Mail London* (23 September 2012)
- Gebicki, Michael 'Ladakh, a Lama and a likely lad' *Sydney Morning Herald Traveller* (16 February 2013)
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- Jina, Prem Singh *Ladakh: The Land and the People* (New Delhi, 1996)
- Kahn, Jeremy 'Glimpses of the Lost World of Alchi' *Smithsonian* (2010)
- Kamiya, Takeo *Guide to the Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent* (1996)
- Kantak, Supriya 'A weekend with wild animals in Ladakh' *Hindustan Times Brunch* (22 March 2013)
- Khosla, Romi *Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalaya* (Kathmandu, 1979)
- Mingle, Jonathan 'A Himalayan Highway but Only in Winter' *The New York Times* (23 November 2011)
- Mitra, Swati ed., *Jammu and Kashmir Travel Guide* (New Delhi, 2013)
- Mitra Swati ed., *Buddhist Trail in Himachal Pradesh* (New Delhi, 2006)
- Pallis, Marco *Ladakh: Peaks and Lamas* (2002)
- Purkayastha, Prabir *Ladakh* (New Delhi, 2005)
- Rajesh, M.N. *The Buddhist monastery* (1998)
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GLOSSARY

- Avalokitesvara:** the Bodhisattva of compassion
- Bodhisattva:** an individual who delays his own Enlightenment in order to lead other sentient beings to deliverance
- Chham:** a masked dance performed by Buddhist monks, which ends with the symbolic destruction of evil
- Chorten:** Tibetan for stupa. Reliquary structures meant to house ashes or relics of saints and serve as memorials of special religious events or ceremonies
- Du-khang:** assembly hall at the centre of a gompa
- Dubchu:** holy water that drips from the ceiling of a monastery
- Druk-pa:** a branch of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, also known as the red-hat sect
- Gon-khang:** secret chamber where the chief protective deity of the Gelukpa sect, Mahakala Vajrabhairava, is enshrined and one finds elements used in protective rituals
- Kangyur texts:** collected editions of Buddha's teachings
- Lha-khang:** the main prayer hall in a monastery
- Lotsava:** translator monks, whose translations of Buddhist texts into Tibetan helped propagate Buddhism in Tibet
- Mahayana:** a school of Buddhism that lays emphasis on the deliverance of all sentient beings
- Maitreya:** The Future Buddha, successor of Sakyamuni Buddha
- Mandala:** ritual drawings which represent the cosmos
- Mani stones:** stones carved with the sacred chant *Om Mani Padme Hum*
- Mudra:** movements of the palm that mirror movements of the mind
- Thangka:** Tibetan religious paintings on fabric
- Tangyur texts:** commentaries on Buddha's teachings
- Vairochana:** one of the five Dhyani ('celestial') Buddhas
- Vajrayana:** literally, the vehicle of the vajra, the great movement in Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet. It is divided into four sects, Nyingmapa, Kagyupa, Sakyapa, Gelukpa
- Zimchung:** living quarters reserved for the head lama and senior visiting monks