


[travel] LADAKH



# Little Tibet

Chortens, erected as acts of piety by Ladakhi nobles of old, litter the landscape

IN A DESOLATE STONE-STREWN LANDSCAPE, AS REMOTE AS THE MOON, **LAURA MILLER** DISCOVERS THE SURREAL AND OTHER MORE REAL PLEASURES OF LADAKH

Below, the churning waters of the Shayok River; above, a cloudless Himalayan sky, and all around, the soaring snow-capped peaks of the rugged Karakoram mountain range. I'm river rafting at 11,000 feet above sea level in the Nubra Valley in Ladakh; India's northernmost state, and the scenery is as breathtaking as the shock of icy glacier-melt water that slaps me back to the moment. We paddle hard and then we're through the rapids. Drifting on a calmer stretch of the broad, chocolate-coloured river, I take stock. Today is the second-last day of my week in Ladakh with Shakti, the first and only luxury tour operator in this isolated plateau state, and I don't want to go home.

Also known as 'Little Tibet' due to its proximity and similarities (both cultural and geographic), Ladakh is a corner of India that is anything but hot and crowded. Only accessible during the summer months (June to October) when temperatures are pleasantly warm during the day and nights are crisply chilly, the region is snowbound the rest of the year. It's sparsely populated and starkly beautiful, comprising 45,000 sq km of high altitude desert, dominated by deep azure lakes and the lofty peaks of the Kunlun and Greater Himalayan mountain ranges. While it may feel as remote as the moon, with a desolate stone-strewn landscape in parts which fuels this surreal illusion, Ladakh's village-like capital Leh is just an hour's flight from Delhi.

Flying into Leh at dawn is one of those pinch-yourself moments. Firstly, you need to pinch yourself to keep awake, as a 4 a.m. check-in time is ruder than a cock's crow. Secondly, you need to pinch yourself to prove you're not dreaming. Once you're powering above the endless peaks of the Himalayas, frozen like a great brown and white sea, gilded gold by the sun's first rays, you can't help but be awed by the sheer scale of these mountains. Leh is first glimpsed as a splash of





Kitchen of a Shakti village house; Phyang Monastery and picnic spot at Chilling (far right)

green on a barren plateau surrounded by mountains on all sides; contained as a verdant shimmer of paint on an artist's palette of dusky browns. As you drop towards the runway, you can't help but feel you're entering a realm where humans don't really belong. It's clear that nature rules the roost in this neck of the woods.

Due to the political situation in the late 1990s, Ladakh disappeared off the tourist map. But in the peace of recent years backpackers have rediscovered Leh, giving it a hippie 'Goa-in-the-mountains' feel. The markets are colourful and full of bargains, from exquisite turquoise jewellery to singing bowls, and the Tibetan Kitchen is a vibey spot at night to enjoy beers and steamed momos (Nepali dumplings). But the discerning traveller passes through this town, and heads out onto the dramatic, and otherwise inaccessible Ladakhi plains with Shakti. Catering to a maximum of six travellers per trip, Shakti offers accommodation in three authentic farmhouses in the Ladakhi villages of

Stok, Taru and Nimoo, and an unparalleled experience beyond Leh, without another tourist in sight.

### STOK

Dropping from the sky to find yourself 11,500 feet above sea level is the best reason in the world to take it easy. If you don't, altitude sickness takes its toll. But chilling in a place like Stok is anything but a hardship. An oasis of green fields dotted with spacious white-washed houses, it epitomises bucolic bliss. Boys herd goats from pasture to pasture and families stop harvesting apricots to wave from their orchards as you pass by. The air has a 3D quality to it, so clear that everything seems to be leaping joyously towards you. And there is so much more colour than I expected, from sunny yellow fields of mustard and the odd patch of lavender, to the bright fluttering of prayer flags on every rooftop.

Ladakh is one of the most intact Tantric Buddhist societies left on earth, and is as famed for its spectacular hill top monasteries as for the friendliness of its

gentle people. Its population—a unique blend of many different races, predominantly the Tibetans, the Mons and the Dards—is less than 300,000, and ancient traditions, dress and cultural mores are still intact. The natural joie-de-vivre of the people is given free rein during the region's socio-religious festivals, usually convivial gatherings celebrated with archery competitions and polo, not to mention singing and dancing.

On my first night in Stok, I'm lulled to sleep after a steaming hot shower by the distant music of such a celebration. Completely satisfied in body and mind after sunset drinks on the roof terrace and an exquisite three-course dinner with fine wines in the house's cosy kitchen, I dream strange high altitude dreams and wake before dawn. Alone on the rooftop, with just the snap of the prayer flags in the nippy wind to keep me company, the views are incredible; the horizon in every direction seems to swell with pride, puffing up its chest with snow-capped peaks. When day arrives,

not a breath of wind stirs the petals decorating our outdoor breakfast table overlooking Stok Kangri; at 6,137m, the tallest peak in the Zaskar range. The traditional beaten copper bowls containing oatmeal, chapattis, scrambled eggs and pomegranate rubies gleam in the sunlight. Later, we wander the village, cameras glued to our eyes.

You'd be hard pressed to find a more photogenic place on earth. The elegant Stok Palace, the official home of the Ladakhi royal family for the last 200 years, towers against the bluest sky. Whitewashed huts and wind-tortured trees on stony hillsides take you to Greece, then Cypress-lined avenues whisk you to Italy, before the ever-present snowy peaks try to convince you that you're actually in Switzerland. But none of these picturesque countries can compete with the grandeur and unbelievable contrast of Ladakh's natural scenery. And would you be invited into a local's home in any of these places to try salty butter tea after viewing the 200-year-old heritage home in their backyard? Unlikely.

On the way to our surprise picnic spot for lunch (a daily routine which yields a more striking site each time, and an even more sumptuous selection of salads), it strikes me that Ladakhi people share the same view on boundaries as the farmer in Robert Frost's poem, *Mending Walls*. Everywhere, carefully tended stone walls wend their way along lanes and around fields and homes. I comment, and it is Jamyang, our young Ladakhi guide who agrees, quoting, "Good fences make good neighbours". Personable and rather trendy, Jamyang





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represents the educated youth of Ladakh who've studied beyond the state's borders, worked in India's big cities, and now want to bring their expertise back to the place they call home.

Almost to emphasise the point that not all those who are native to this remote region have never left its borders, Cold Play's *Vida la Viva* kicks off the soundtrack for our drive to the 350-year-old Hemis Monastery after lunch. The region's most famous 'Gompa', Hemis is tucked into a steep mountain ravine about an hour's drive away. Cruising in comfortable 4x4 Scorpions, the drive takes us through desolate desert scenery punctuated by green ribbons along the banks of the placid Indus, and past the impressive 600-year-old Thiksey monastery. I find myself almost hypnotised by the boundless sense of space in Ladakh, and the spiritual peace enjoyed by red-robed monks in these monasteries that are so close to the heavens is tangible—and contagious.

Peace aside, it seems I was not the only one troubled by strange dreams the previous night, and the delightful Shakti staff decides it's due to the fact that the house has yet to be blessed. We are, therefore, invited to witness this event which takes place whenever a new home is built or renovated. As with every village house, a room is dedicated to ceremonial affairs and it is inside this room that we gather to quietly observe a young monk chant, while playing an incessant beat on a hanging drum and cymbal.

Candle-lit and trance-inducing, the ceremony takes on an almost pagan element when a figurine made of flour and water is led from the room and placed at crossroads beyond the house, supposedly drawing any evil spirits away. But then the monk pauses to sip from his cup of tea and the spell is broken; I sleep a dreamless sleep that night.

### TARU AND NIMOO

Heading yet further off the beaten track (although such a thing barely exists in Ladakh), we reach Taru after an enjoyable morning rafting on the Indus. Suitable for all ages, its Grade-1 rapids are fun rather than scary, and it leaves us excited for the Shayok River experience ahead which will offer more exhilarating white water; still a safe Grade-2). Taru is situated on the upper slopes of a deep ravine and its lush fields of rice undulate down the valley like a wide green waterfall. Similar to Stok in many ways, but different in a host of others, Taru makes one realise the variety of scenery this apparently barren land offers up.

Hiking to Nimoo the next day, this is even more obvious. A sandy plateau suddenly drops into a canyon which we follow for an hour or two. Suddenly, an underground stream emerges and floods the narrow canyon floor with green. We're alone, but for several cows, in a canyon which, when I ask, I'm told has no name. Following the stream onward, the towering canyon walls around us become castles rising from rocky



Bedrooms of all the village house offer comfort and great views (top); rafting on the Indus River (below)



walls before finally, we round a bend and future—as divined by the ancient astrologist who'd visited us that evening. One guest is particularly mirthful, having just 'discovered' he was of the bovine persuasion in his past life.

The following days seem to race by. We practice archery in an apricot orchard, drive through the spectacular Zaskar Canyon to the town of Chilling where we have a suitably chilled picnic. We visit the religious enclave at Alchi where a wealth of ancient wall paintings and wood sculpture have survived for over nine centuries within five tiny,

mud-walled temples, and we speak to a monk at sunset about Buddhism, before enjoying luxurious massages.

### NUBRA VALLEY

And then it's today, although this morning's drive into the Nubra Valley over the magnificent Khardung La Pass—one of the highest motorable roads at 18,380 feet—seems like an age ago. Stunningly beautiful and hair-raising in equal measure, the road winds up, then down with no barriers between you and sheer drops into eternity. Signs that remind drivers of the road's perils abound, and provide almost as much entertainment as the amazing views: 'Love thy neighbour, but not while driving', 'If you're married, divorce speed', 'Drinking whisky, very risky' and 'Don't gossip, let him drive' are just a few.

A sigh of relief and regret is mingled with a gasp of awe when we finally arrive at our picnic spot on the pebbled banks of the Shayok river. What started

### INFORMATION

**PLAN YOUR TRIP:** Shakti offers luxury 'Village Experiences' in Kumaon, Sikkim and Ladakh. [www.shaktihimalaya.com](http://www.shaktihimalaya.com)

**HOW TO GET THERE:** Jet Airways offers flights between Delhi and Leh daily. Reservations: [www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)

**EXTEND YOUR TRIP:** Banyan Tours & Travels provides high standards in luxury travel arrangements in India. Email: [info@banyantours.com](mailto:info@banyantours.com); [www.banyantours.com](http://www.banyantours.com)



high above in the snows of Khardung La pass is now a swift torrent of icy water hurtling unhindered across the broad valley floor. But before donning our wet suits and helmets, we sit down to a five star lunch. And then we're rushing through the same scenery carried on the back of the raging river—adrenaline pumping and spirits high. Can it get better than this, I ask myself.

It can, for awaiting us is a river camp of luxury tents and a Bactrian camel ride through dunes flushed with the sunset to a picnic site straight out of Arabian Nights. Cushions are arranged on mats in the sand amidst a ring of fires, lit as the last rose light fades from the surrounding mountains' icy faces. As I sip my Gin 'n' Tonic and count shooting stars after dinner, I accept that the basic tenet of Buddhism—that nothing is permanent—is true; this idyll must end. But I also know that these mountains aren't going anywhere for a good long while, and I'm definitely going to be back. 🌄

Prayer flags flapping colourfully on the roof of the Stok village house (above right)