

## A Visit to Leh, Ladakh

**Date :** December 6, 2015

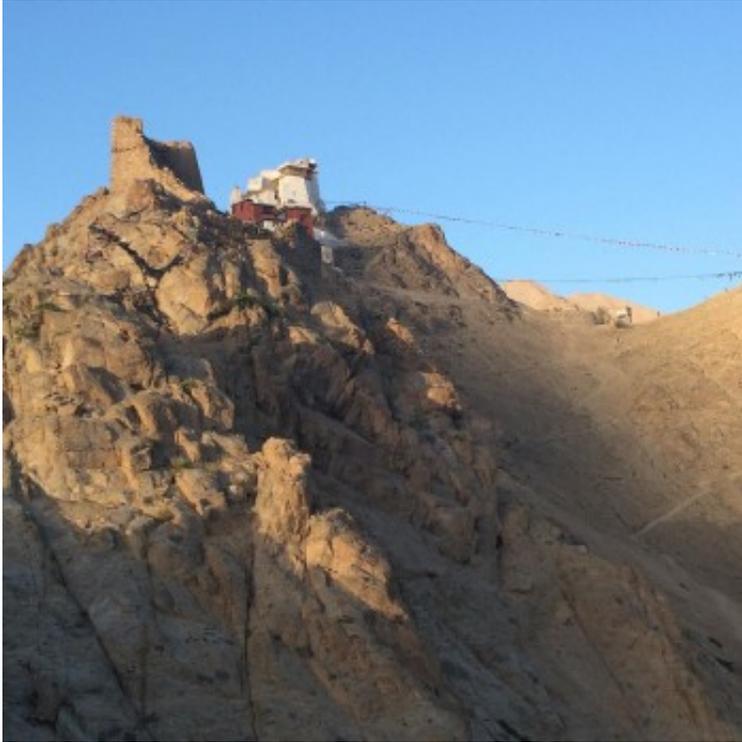
*by Jamyang Oliphant and Maria Jimena Navarra*



View of Leh. Photo by Maria Margherita Maglietti

Ladakh's stunning landscapes and the spirituality of its people left an indelible mark on my first visit in 2010 so I decided to organize a trip on behalf of Shang Shung UK's *Insight Tours*, our travel agency that specializes in visits to Buddhist sites. Joining forces with the formidable Dr. Sonam Wangchok, a highly regarded expert on Ladakh's Buddhist heritage and culture, we drew up a packed week-long program for a trip in August 2015.

Sixteen brave explorers responded to the call to adventure. Greece, Italy, Ukraine, North America, Colombia, Spain and France united, all eager for an in depth discovery of Buddhist history and culture in the towns, monasteries and retreat centers cradled in remote valleys on the highest plateau to be found along the Silk Route.



Tsemo Gonpa, Leh. Photo by Maria Margherita Maglietti

Leh, a windswept town nestled in the Himalayan mountains, was our point of arrival. Perched at 3500 meters, temperatures can reach -30 degrees Celsius in winter. This isolated community is connected to the rest of the world by just two roads, both of which are closed in winter due to the extreme weather conditions. One can understand how this geographic isolation has led to the development of a unique culture and heritage. The region was closed to foreigners until 1974 and this has helped, along with the natural barriers, to create and preserve something unique. Several mountain passes, some at over 5000 meters, must be crossed to reach Leh, making it one of the most remote places on earth. Despite its inaccessibility, Leh was for centuries a pivotal trading point on the Silk Road. In Ladakh the people, philosophies, arts and crafts of Kashmir, the Indian plains, Tibet and Mongolia all fused.

The region's history was turbulent. There were glorious moments when the Ladakhi kings of the Namgyal dynasty conquered parts of Nepal and western Tibet and some very low points such as the disastrous war with the Mughal king Aurangzeb who, upon victory, interestingly chose to marry one of his daughters to the king of Ladakh and to build mosques, thereby opting for a more peaceful cultural invasion. His policy's enduring success is demonstrated by the high numbers of Ladakhi Muslims, statistically set to become a majority in the near future. It is to be hoped that this will not threaten Ladakh's unique Buddhist heritage.

Monastic affiliations and murals also testify to the historical intermingling; wonderful exotic murals,

with Kashmiri influences, are the legacy of the famous Tibetan translator Rinchen Zangpo. He was instrumental in the second propagation of dharma in Tibet, translating several important tantras and bringing their practice to Tibet, as well as bringing over Indian artists who helped create icons and murals in his new temples. The stunning Alchi and Lamayuru monasteries, amongst the most beautiful in Ladakh, are attributed (subject to the inevitable ensuing academic debates) to Rinchen Zangpo.

Besides the surviving temples and paintings, the millenary yogic tradition lives on in Ladakh's windswept mountainous expanses. Yogis like those described in James Low's *The Yogins of Ladakh* are still alive and practicing. We had the good fortune to meet Kagyupa meditators who had spent several decades in retreat, at the hermitage of Khaspang.

It was a true blessing to visit a monastery off the beaten track, far away from tourists and institutional politics. The atmosphere was magical, with yaks grazing on the hill sides and eagles gliding in the sky above us. Natural life was everywhere, large marmots smelled our lunches, appearing from holes under the ground. They were very approachable and we could even pet and feed them biscuits!



Kagyupa monks performing a puja praising Lord Naropa. Photo by Jamyang Oliphant

We were allowed into the puja hall where the hermits who were performing a puja dedicated to Naropa. It was a memorable spectacle to encounter yogis in this magical atmosphere, some of

whom have been in retreat for over forty years, as they sang, blew longhorns and played cymbals. After the puja they explained that in Khaspang they practice the Six Yogas of Naropa, as well as practices from the lineage of TokdenShakya Shri and esoteric forms of Yantra Yoga. They showed us the spacious room where they practiced secret yoga, which needs very high ceilings because of their leaps in the air.

On our trip we admired the murals, statues and thangkas of several monasteries. We went to several centres in a single day, as it is said that by seeing the three monasteries of Sumda Chun, Alchi and Mangyu in one day one will go to the Buddha land after one's life. Despite the destruction of a bridge in a recent flood, we managed to visit all the monasteries and to meet and chat with local monks, and hopefully to get on a fast track to the Buddha realms.

At Matho monastery, the only Sakyapa monastery in Ladakh, we were lucky enough to visit the French led conservation and restoration laboratory. They are restoring and safeguarding the monastery's art works and we saw how traditional tantric literary knowledge is being used, alongside the latest scientific advances in conservation, to preserve and reinterpret badly damaged ancient Buddhist artifacts.



Camel riding in Nubra Valley. Photo by Jamyang Oliphant

Every day we travelled extensively, battling the discomforts of altitude and soothing our jittery nerves caused by Indian mountain driving. We laughed and chatted across rugged landscapes,

canyons and some of the world's highest mountain passes. We travelled to Nubra valley and on the way we saw the Karakoram mountain range (known more popularly as K2), the second highest mountain in the world. We rode the Mongolian Bactrian camels, prized for their long, soft and warm hair, used to make shawls as well as their endurance as carriers in the mountains. Before carrying excited tourists snapping pictures, for centuries this mountain species carried silks and spices.

That night we sat around a bonfire under the starry Himalayans sky and were treated to many Ladakhi songs and dances, which we later joined in.

We also had a chance to witness other unique cultural practices, when we went to visit a very old woman shaman. She is connected to the deity Gyalpo Pehar; in her youth she was known for her strange behavior but later learned to use her wild wisdom through a lama's instructions and purification practices before finally being trained by other senior shamans. We visited her in her house, where she put on her ceremonial robe and a hat with the effigies of the Buddhas of the five families. After chanting mantras and ringing her bell for a long time, she went into a trance. At one point she also pulled out a long sword from its sheath and we were slightly worried but she was most gentle. We asked a wide range of questions, ranging from whether we had obstacles in our individual lives to whether and where and when we'd find true love. She cut through our fantasies and doubts with a simple and important lesson: "The answer to most of our questions is within ourselves, and we alone have the power to change the way we see the world."



Photo by Jamyang Oliphant

To conclude, I would like to relate an auspicious event that occurred when we reached Takthok monastery, a handful of buildings housing beautiful murals, built around a cave where Padmasambhava meditated. We visited the monastery on the tenth day of the lunar month, the day of Padmasambhava. As soon as we entered the cave, the local monks excitedly told us that after a dry spell lasting over a year, water came forth that very morning from the cave's rocks and we were offered some of the 'nectar water', that the local lama told us was imbued with blessings.

Ladakh caters to every desire, offering pure adrenalin rushes on the perilous drives on icy roads edging on deadly precipices as well as deep relaxation in the peaceful gardens of millenary monasteries. We shopped at a local Tibetan refugee market and went for a consultation at the Tibetan hospital mentsee-khang hospital. Some of us went to early morning yoga classes with a famous Indian yoga guru, and saw a Bhutanese princess practicing yoga!

This trip to a very unique part of the world marked every single one of us, enriching us culturally and spiritually.

At Insight Tours our intention is to offer tours to interesting destinations in Asia, focusing on art, history, literary, religious and popular culture, with expert guides, efficient services and comfortable accommodation – at an affordable cost. Any profit made goes to the Shang Shung UK institute, whose primary aim remains the preservation and dissemination of Tibetan culture.

Our next scheduled trip will be to Buddhist sites in India in March 2016.

More details will soon be posted on our website <http://www.shangshunguk.org/v1/>



Photo by Jamyang Oliphant