



View of Leh and the Indus Valley

Despite the unfamiliar surroundings but thoroughly at ease in a proper bed, I sleep soundly, awake refreshed and devour a badly-needed breakfast, which includes a hunk of tasty Ladakhi bread. Excited by the prospect of exploring Leh on my own, I set off on foot. Almost immediately I am set upon by traders, all intent on selling me something – one of them invites me to examine his carpets. I wave them aside and saunter up the main street, past little shops with dark interiors and people selling clothes by the roadside. I am immediately struck by the easy-going, friendly nature of the locals, who continually grin and salute me with '*Jullay!*' and '*Hello!*' Although many of the young girls are pretty and have beautiful, smooth skin, most people have weather-beaten faces, caused, no doubt, by the harsh climate of the region: scorching sun during the daytime, cold nights, sharp winds, and bitterly cold winters. Mixed with them are Indians, some of them colourfully dressed like the Ladakhis, and tourists, who should look out of place but do not.

The first thing I need to do is post some cards written in Srinagar, and buy some more. I set off along a narrow street that climbs uphill and find myself outside a shop that sells postcards. I am invited to enter a room, where I make my selection. Although the choice is very limited, I manage to select ten. I return to the main area of the shop in order to pay for them. The man asks for 20 rupees (about £1.25 sterling) and wonders if I will sell him my sun hat. I say no and hand him a 100 rupee note for the cards. He leaves, returns with the change and cheekily repeats his request to buy my hat. It is of very good quality, he tells me, far better than can be purchased locally. Although I again refuse his offer, he reaches out, snatches my hat,

plonks it on his head and hands me a 10 rupee note. I am so flabbergasted by this unexpected turn of events that I admit defeat and accept the money.



*Street traders, Leh*

Angry, and hatless under the burning sun, I wander back to the main street in search of another. The scoundrel is right – the hats on sale here are of inferior quality. I find a reasonably good one but the vendor demands 15 rupees and refuses to haggle. I leave and continue my search, wandering around the old quarter of the city. When I find myself at a gigantic, colourfully painted prayer wheel, I retrace my steps, and gradually climb towards the large palace that overlooks the motley collection of mud, stone and wooden buildings that make up the old quarter. The palace, built on the side of a hill, looks like a scaled-down version of the mighty Potala in Lhasa.



*Old Palace, Leh*



*Chenrezig gumpa*

Near the palace I find the small Chenrezig gumpa, to which some tourists are making their way. I follow them and meet two of my colleagues from the trekking group. A young novice, dressed in a maroon robe, accosts us and demands five rupees for a ticket. We pay and enter the old, slightly dilapidated monastery with its whitewashed stone walls, brown wooden windows, flat roofs, its courtyard and prayer wheels, and examine the various rooms. Soon most of the tourists depart, leaving just one young couple and me.

At this point, monks appear, file into the *dukhang* or assembly hall, seat themselves before their loose-leaved prayer books and begin a low-pitched, rhythmic chanting. I have heard this on the radio at home, but now I am thrilled to listen to it in its proper surroundings, for real. Banish all thoughts of the hushed piety of an elegant English church designed by Sir Christopher Wren or decorated by Grinling Gibbons; here the monks apply themselves to their devotions in a typically laid-back manner, clearing their throats, coughing, hawking, spitting, wiping their noses with the backs of their hands, yawning, scratching, talking, and occasionally coming and going. Now and then the young novice runs out to sell tickets to visiting tourists. The dark hall is dimly lit by rows of flickering butter lamps and sunlight filtering through the open door, and the walls are decorated with various paintings of deities and esoteric designs executed in strong colours, all now faded. The ceiling is supported by wooden beams and pillars that look as though they have once been painted vermillion. I sit myself down on the floor in a corner, beside one of the pillars.

After a little while, two of the monks pick up shawms known as *gyaling* (a distant relative of the modern oboe) and blow a couple of raspberries by way of a test. Then, with other monks crashing cymbals (*tingsha*), rattling small hour-glass shaped drums (*damaru*), and striking a large hanging drum (*lagna*) with two long curved sticks, they play some raucous music that sounds, to Western ears, like an infernal cacophony. It is like nothing else on earth; the shawms wail, the drums rattle and bang, and the cymbals punctuate the throbbing, primordial sound. These musical interludes are meant to create a terrible sense of urgency and a reminder that not a moment must

be lost in utilizing the precious opportunity of escaping from *samsāra*, the cycle of life, in which everything is transient. The rattling of the *damaru* and the sounding of a bell are used to mark separate stages of each rite. The sound of percussive instruments is believed to be conducive to the states of consciousness that a meditator wishes to enter.

Normally such an ensemble includes a pair of long telescopic horns (*dongchen*), which add long, deep notes like a foghorn to this eerie but highly-charged music. The musicians play as nonchalantly as the prayers are chanted; although a basic form of notation is printed in the prayer books that relates the music to the words of the texts, the musicians play it by heart – no doubt the technique of performing it is assimilated by listening to others.

Once one has become familiar with this strange and almost disturbing music, the effect is quite profound. I find that the only way to appreciate such exotic sounds (and sights) is to deliberately switch off all one's instinctive reactions to anything unfamiliar and accept it as normal. I sit in my corner, transfixed and almost swept away to a higher plane of existence. I can hardly believe that I am here, with the faint scent from the flickering butter lamps in my nostrils, watching this ceremony, listening to the monks chanting, and now experiencing this strange yet oddly uplifting music.

During the ritual, some young Ladakhi women, all of them dressed in black, enter, join their hands in prayer, prostrate themselves several times and file around, eventually disappearing behind the elaborate altar, complete with its sacred pictures (*thangkas*), statues and butter lamps.

After a while there is a pause while buttered tea (*gurgur cha*) in a big pot and a mound of *tsampa* (barley flour) is carried in by a youth wearing a filthy anorak and runners. I watch as the tea is poured into the monks' bowls and as they knead lumps of *tsampa* (known as *ngampe* here) in the tea to form a thick paste, which they eat with their fingers. Their bowls are then refilled with more tea and later an old pressure-cooker is carried in and thick vegetable *thukpa* soup is poured into the proffered bowls.

The refreshments over, the monks now resume their devotions, with more chanting and music. A Western couple appear and sit down to observe. Outside (probably on the roof), we hear a couple of *dongchen* – the long horns – being played. Two little girls and a small boy play nearby and smile at me.

Next, and quite unexpectedly, two drummers and a shawm player enter. They sit at the entrance and, after a short pause, launch into an elaborate, virtuoso performance. The two drummers bang out curious and intricate rhythms on two round-bottomed drums. The music is both loud and startling. What interests me is the way in which they do not wait for the monks' music to stop – the two separate performances overlap. However, the monks do cease playing when the newcomers' louder interruption takes precedence.

The new musicians stop as abruptly as they have started and, when the monks begin to play again, they make a hasty exit. Now one of the head monks, a large well-built fellow with a broad grin, comes forward with a lighted candle, places his fingers in his mouth, whistles very loudly a few times and then walks solemnly out of the door with the candle. Is he summoning and leading out evil spirits? Perhaps.



Now there is another pause and more tea. One of the two tourists is offered the beverage, which he accepts. I am not offered any. From where I am, I can detect a whiff of rancid butter – one of the ingredients. The monks yawn, laugh and chat. Refreshed, they return to their chanting. A tiny dog that belongs to the well-built monk runs outside and begins snapping at another dog; the monk rises to his feet and carries it back inside.

On goes the ceremony. I now move up to the edge of the dirty carpet on which the monks are seated, remove my sandals and sit in semi-lotus position. From this vantage point I can see everything more clearly. I notice that the monks are putting on and taking off red hats; they are therefore members of the Nyingmapa sect. The little boy who has been romping around now joins me and smiles cheerfully.

The ceremony finally runs out of steam at about half past twelve and, although nobody moves, I decide that it is time to leave. I have been in the cool of the monastery for a good hour and a half.

Outside, the heat strikes me as if I have walked into a furnace. Looking downwards, I have a fine aerial view of the old quarter – though everything looks grey from up here. I descend via the warren of narrow streets and alleyways, and find myself outside the Potala Hill Top Restaurant, where my companions dined yesterday evening. They reported that it was very clean and that the food was good.

Upstairs I study the menu, drink a cup of black tea and finally decide on chicken *thukpa* soup, followed by one of the many Chinese dishes: 'vegetable rice'. As the soup is so filling, I feel full up before I finish it. I ask the waiter if I can cancel the main course, but it has already been cooked. A moment later it arrives. All I can do is pick at it and finally admit defeat.

Refreshed, I wander outside and set about walking off the meal. I pass the postcard shop, intending to tackle the rogue inside. I see him without my hat on his head – no doubt he has already sold it at double the price. Deciding that any effort to retrieve my hat would now be pointless, I continue walking in the same direction. The street now becomes a pleasant road that leads me out into the countryside, where the sun beats down mercilessly from a cloudless blue sky.

I pass the old palace high on my right, with Leh gompa behind it, and turn left, passing irrigated fields. Here I can see small houses, stone walls and trees with bands of tin cans tied around the trunks. As I amble past a cottage, two lovely Ladakhi women emerge, smile and greet me. They look spotlessly clean, have beautiful complexions and wear newly-laundered traditional clothes. If I had brought my camera, I would not have hesitated to ask them for a photo. They are the loveliest Ladakhi women I have seen so far.

I wander on, admiring the fine panorama of fields and mountains. When I finally become weary, mainly because of the heat, I turn back and make my way to the town centre. Thirsty by now, I stop outside an establishment called the Royal Restaurant. Goodness – I should have brought my dinner jacket! 'I would highly recommend our Saint-Emilion Grand Cru Classé 1982, sir. Or perhaps a bottle of Clos de Bèze, Grand Cru, Domaine Prieuré Roch...?' Sadly the vision fades as I sit down in the shade on a hard wooden chair at the one and only table outside, order some tea and watch the world go by.

And what a fascinating world it is: Ladakhis of all sorts strolling past, laughing and greeting one another. In a tiny bakery across the street, a man is busily baking fluffy

naan bread, as he has been doing all day. Children play around a narrow rivulet that runs along the road, and people wash their pots and pans in the water, chatting and laughing among themselves. Pressure-cookers seem to be quite popular here. A young girl, squatting by the stream, has Ladakhi features but blonde hair. Is this, I wonder, an accident of nature or the result of a liaison between some local girl and a blond westerner? A small, mangy animal, which I suppose must be a baby donkey, stands listlessly nearby, with hardly enough energy to move; the children tease it playfully. I order another tea and finally ask for the bill. One rupee, please. 'Jullay!' I say – the word means a variety of things, including 'thank you' and 'goodbye' – and wander off.



*Shoppers, Leh*

I now return to the hotel, keeping an eye out for the post office, which I have not managed to find. In my room, I spruce myself up and apply myself to my diary, which has got far behind. It is still not up to date by the time we all meet downstairs in order to go out for dinner. We now meet our guide Rajiv, who briefs us on what to expect tomorrow when the trek begins.

We then leave and walk around the corner to the Potala Hill Top Restaurant, where we are shown into a room that has been reserved for us. Here we sit at a long table and order our dishes. As I am still not very hungry, I opt for a bowl of 'Potala Special Chowmein'. We have a pleasant evening and leave a couple of hours later. We return to our hotel and then Sarah and I go for a short moonlit walk, hand in hand – a pleasant way to end such a wonderful day.

Back in my room, I set about organizing myself for tomorrow's trek. We have all been given a so-called Trekkpack, which contains a sleeping bag, a sheet, a foam mattress, a day pack and a water flask. I repack everything and am still at it by eleven o'clock, when the electricity generator is switched off. I continue by torchlight. It

seems strange that in this day and age a city can operate during the daytime without electricity and only need it from about seven to eleven in the evening.

I finally retire to bed. Peter comes in much later; he has been out drinking with Geraldine (not her real name), one of our companions. I am looking forward to a good night's sleep, but sadly I am denied this. I am probably too excited and a little apprehensive about the following day's trek.