

Leaving my luggage in the Hotel Ibex, and following Rajiv to the nearby Yak Tail Hotel, I am introduced to a rather taciturn cook, who has volunteered to conduct me to a guesthouse nearby. When I discover that it will only cost ten rupees per night, I express my satisfaction, shake hands with Rajiv, and wish him goodbye.

I follow the cook along a dusty road that brings us out of the city and into the surrounding countryside. The journey is long and tiring; I am hot and grimy after the morning's trek. At last we leave the road, clamber down to some fields, follow a rough track and at last approach a large Ladakhi house. This is the Long Snon Guesthouse. The place is deserted, except for an Australian fellow who is relaxing outside. Inside, everything is very basic, but the place looks clean. I am shown into a twin-bedded room with chipped whitewashed walls and a rough wooden ceiling. From the window can be seen an idyllic view of the surrounding countryside and the mountains beyond. Although not exactly 'A class', it will do fine.



*Long Snon Guesthouse, Leh*

After a few words with the Australian chap, who is now sunning himself on the flat roof, the cook and I leave and retrace our steps to the town centre. On the way we meet the man who owns the house; he proclaims that he is delighted to have me as his guest. In the market we meet his delightful and beautifully-dressed wife, and also his teenage daughter, both of whom are happy to welcome me. At the Hotel

Ibex I collect my luggage and struggle back towards the guesthouse with my heavy load. I meet the daughter, who insists on helping me. Together we carry my large bag, holding one handle each. The girl tells me that she is fifteen; she both charming and good humoured. She has a reasonably good command of English, which she learns at school along with Ladakhi and Urdu (spoken by the Kashmiris here).

Together we make our way along the road, laughing, talking and stopping for a rest every now and then. We eventually reach the house and I leave my luggage upstairs, in my room. I am then invited down to the quaint, dark kitchen for some tea. I remove my sandals and sit cross-legged on a carpeted dais in front of a low table. All around me are pots and pans, and an old stove. In addition, there are some modern conveniences, such as a small gas stove, a television set, and a large, ugly clock.



*Kitchen, Long Snon Guesthouse*

I find myself sitting beside a talkative Japanese lad, who is helping himself to *chang* and *tsampa*. He is quite unconventional: he has lived in Sweden for some time, has been married, is now divorced, and is spending his time travelling around the world. He is very enthusiastic about the guesthouse. He seems to be very interested to hear about my recent stay in Japan.

After tea, a rest and a chat, I set about washing myself. The shower is primitive but adequate. Refreshed, I return to my room, where I bring my diary up to date and write some postcards. 'Blue Max', the cook and the Sherpa then arrive, leave their luggage in my bedroom, and proceed to down a bottle of XXX rum. They pour me a glass and invite me to join them – soon I feel a little tipsy. They then disappear, leaving me to continue with my writing.



*View from Long Snon Guesthouse*

In the evening I am called down for dinner in the kitchen, where I join some young people. The girl brings us plates of a dish that she has cooked, called *skyu*: a traditional mixture of pasta and root vegetables. It is hot and quite tasty. We take second helpings and order drinks; as by now I have drunk enough alcohol, I request tea. We relax in this delightfully homely atmosphere, chat, and watch television. There are programmes in English and what I presume is Urdu, but I cannot bear to watch them as the reception is so bad and the colours are so distorted.

I eventually excuse myself and creep up to bed. As the electric bulbs are so dim, I am forced to use my torch. Soon I am in the land of dreams; I have no trouble falling asleep after all the recent exertion and this afternoon's glass of rum.

Because of the sharp coldness during the night, I have to unpack my sleeping bag and sleep in it. Looking out of the window, I can see a clear sky; I have never seen so many stars before. This, of course, is due to the thin air, the high altitude, and the lack of light pollution. Morning dawns and I rise, pleasantly refreshed, to a bright, clear day. I go down to a deserted kitchen, where I find the lady of the house, and ask her for some breakfast. I am given two circular hunks of homemade Ladakhi bread, still warm from the oven, butter, marmalade, and a glass of delicious curds. The lady is as cheerful and as friendly as ever.

Fed, I now set about washing some clothes. This I do outside, using a bucket of hot water. I then rinse them in a large barrel of fresh water in the garden, and hang them on the line to dry. Having tidied my room and written some postcards, I set off for the town centre. I now have the luxury of being able to take my time, observe everything to my satisfaction and savour the atmosphere. This is a place where nobody seems to be in any hurry. Some of the Ladakhi women are well dressed and wear tall, ornate hats (known as *perak*). Many wear traditional apparel, such as the



*kuntop* or thick woollen robe, over which a colourful shawl, the *bok*, is fastened. Originally the shawls were lined with yak or goat skin for warmth, though now they are mostly ornamental – especially those made of colourful Chinese brocade. The ladies' shoes, or *papu*, were traditionally made of woven yak-hair or wool, with soles of yak leather, though now runners and conventional Western shoes are commonly worn. The quality of the clothes, I notice, varies; many elderly women wear old and worn – and often grubby – garments, whereas younger and better-off women sport clean, new outfits. The traditional garb of the men is simpler: the *goucha*, a thick woollen robe fastened at the neck and under the armpit. It is tied at the waist with a colourful *skerag* or sash, which is some two metres long and about twenty centimetres wide. The sash serves as a kind of pocket for various objects, including the wearer's tea cup.

I find my way to the Tourist Information Centre and pick up a leaflet on the new Ladakhi Festival, and also a better map of the town. At the post office, I buy stamps and send off my postcards.



*Dancers at festival, Leh*

From here I wander through the narrow streets of old Leh and approach the Polo Ground. Nearby is the Archery Centre, where I discover that the festival is already in full swing with a display of traditional dancing. The dancers, mostly young people, wear all manner of colourful and unusual costumes, and they perform to live music amplified over loudspeakers. As far as I can make out, everything has a Tibetan flavour. Although pleasing to watch, most of the dancing and music lack energy; for me, observing the audience is more interesting. I sit behind some boys who are playing drums, and find myself surrounded by children who are rolling around, laughing and talking all the time. Nearby, an elderly man gravely spins a prayer wheel and fingers his beads. By contrast, a red-robed monk, who is obviously enjoying himself hugely, is more jolly. It feels wonderful to be here at such a colourful and informal festival, now on my own and without plans. Although it is



quite hot, I can see mountains topped with sparkling snow in the distance. I now realize that tourists (myself included) do look a little out of place, but everything and anything seems acceptable here.



*Dancers and drummers at festival, Leh*

I stay put, watching the dancing and soaking up the atmosphere until I feel hungry. I walk to the town centre and peep into the Tibetan Hotel, which, although dark and small, seems to be serving good food. I sit with some of the young people whom I have met in the guesthouse, and apply myself to some bread and salad. A couple of my companions leave and I am left with an Israeli girl, who humours me by writing the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and my name, in my notebook.

After I have browsed in a nearby bookshop, bought more postcards and peeped inside the elaborate and modern Jokhang gumpa, I amble back to the guesthouse, where I am greeted by the young girl. Once I have taken my clothes off the line and refreshed myself, I apply myself once again to my writing.

Dinner this evening consists of traditional and tasty steamed vegetable dumplings (*momo*) served with soup, which we eat by candlelight as the power has failed. The

dish is both filling and spicy. I spend the rest of the evening talking to a chap from Hong Kong, who, I am interested to discover, has visited Tibet the previous year.

Breakfast this morning is similar to yesterday's, though with the addition of an omelette; as I am hungry, I order this as an extra. By now I realize that the food here is vegetarian, as we have not been offered any meat since I have arrived. The lad from Hong Kong is seated in the kitchen, deep in a book, breathing deeply and oblivious to everyone. The Israeli girl comes down; this morning she is very quiet.

Back in my room, I finally finish the chore of writing postcards. After chatting to an English lad, with whom I will share a room, I walk to the town centre. Wandering around the main bazaar and shady back streets nearby, I set about observing the cheerful and friendly locals. In contrast to the Kashmiris and Indians, who tend to be surly and grasping, the Ladakhis laugh and joke. These are people, I reflect, who can laugh off delays, power cuts, breakdowns and anything that will make most Westerners fly off the handle. They are tolerant and patient, and accept the inevitable. Boredom, a concept dreaded in the West, does not seem to bother these people; waiting forever for something to happen or sitting through hours of prayers in a gompa is just accepted as being normal. Being in Ladakh is like stepping back in time, to a period when such acceptance was the norm in the West – a time when long sea and overland journeys had to be endured, and when lengthy church services were obligatory for everyone, young and old. Here in Ladakh, time is fluid – as it must have been for us in an age before watches and clocks were available to all.

Hungry by now, I slowly make my way to the little Tibetan Restaurant for lunch. The lady in charge greets me kindly and I sit down on one of the rickety chairs. Today I order a dish named 'vegetable chochow', washed down with tea, and finish with a bowl of rice pudding. During the meal, I chat with a brother and sister from the UK, and a lovely Indian girl who speaks perfect English.

Despite the intense heat, I leave the restaurant and wander around the old quarter, taking photographs. Slowly, I make my way up to the palace, from where I have a fine aerial view of the town.



*Archery contest, Leh*





*Archery contest, Leh*

I then return to the polo ground, where an archery contest is in full swing. Archery is a popular sport among the Tibetan peoples of the Himalayas. The contest is not as spectacular as I have anticipated: it mainly consists of groups of men in dark blue costumes sauntering over to a predetermined spot, firing a few shots at some tiny targets (which most of them miss), and ambling back to their low tables and carpets, where they proceed to drink more tea or *chang*, or both. All this is accompanied by a great deal of noisy drumming and shawm playing. The contestants are boisterous and friendly; when I produce my camera and begin to photograph them, they form themselves into groups, ask me to take snaps of them and make a note of their addresses so that I can send them copies of the photos. A French lady, who also has a camera, is also asked to take shots, and more addresses are exchanged. She and her friend ask me if I would like to join them for a trip to Shey, Thikse and Hemis gompas tomorrow, as they plan to hire a jeep, and I say yes, for I am planning to visit these places.



*Musicians at archery competition*



The archery competition finishes earlier than expected and everyone begins to pack up and leave. I go over to the musicians – the boy drummers and the exhausted, slightly tipsy shawm players – and watch them until they finish playing. The shawm players have put a terrific amount of energy into this strident but repetitious music; on the other hand, the young boys are not tired at all.

The spectators now move over to the polo ground, where a polo match has begun. This is accompanied by a lively commentary delivered over the loudspeakers, and more drumming and shawm playing to add excitement. As I lose interest fairly quickly – there are no traditional costumes to be seen here – I leave and wander back to the town centre. I find my way to the tiny Royal Restaurant, where I down two glasses of black tea and listen to three German girls chatting. Afterwards I peep into the Jokhang gumpa again, where I sit in the shade, watching the monks and people ambling around, turning the prayer wheels and mumbling their prayers.

My next stop is the Dreamland Restaurant, where I have arranged to meet the two French ladies. One of them appears and reports that they are having difficulty hiring a jeep. I explain that as I have already visited Hemis gumpa, I wish to opt out. Now that I am in the restaurant, which I have heard about, I decide to stay and eat. Joining two Australian couples from the guesthouse, I order a dish of *momo* (dumplings in soup), a hunk of bread and a cup of jasmine tea.

Fed, I leave soon after seven and march up to the Auditorium Hall, at one side of the polo ground, for this evening's much-talked-about concert. The hall is small and scruffy and has a limited amount of seats. Despite this, people continue to pile in until there are groups standing at the sides, at the back, and even in the middle. Pandemonium ensues and Kashmiri policemen wield big sticks at the unfortunate Ladakhis in order to control them. The enmity between the ruling Kashmiris and the long-suffering locals is blatantly obvious and upsetting to observe; I pity the unfortunate Ladakhis, who certainly do not deserve to be treated in such a brutal manner. Because of the noise of the audience, it is impossible to hear any of the announcements.

At last the flimsy black curtains are drawn back by two men to reveal a large group of singers and musicians, both male and female. A pretty young Ladakhi woman then appears and greets everyone in English, then announces each item; she is followed by a bored-looking man, who repeats everything in Ladakhi.

The concert begins with a performance of some Indian-sounding music, played by the group, using guitars and other instruments. The Ladakhi songs and dances that follow are far more interesting; the dances are performed by people in colourful exotic costumes and are accompanied by the ever-present drums and shawms. I can make no sense of the syncopated rhythms. Just as well the music is very loud and strident, for it rises above the noise of the audience and the shouting of the police. Although the Ladakhi dances consist of very slow shuffling movements, with little variation, I do find them interesting. The show is blatantly touristy, and the dancers, who are often unsure of the steps, are far from professional. Indeed, the amateurish nature of the performances makes them somewhat amusing. Several irritated foreign tourists leave after a while, but I decide to stick it out until the bitter end. After consuming tea and soup, I now badly needed to relieve myself, but I realize that if I manage to get out, it will be almost impossible to regain my seat when I return.

We hear songs and see dances from various regions of India and Tibet, tableaux depicting weddings, royal entertainments, harvesting and so forth – on and on it goes. Although the audience eventually settles down, the noise and chatter does not stop. As many people grow weary of the entertainment, they leave before the show has finished. As a result, there is no rush when it finally comes to an end.

I now have to find my way back to the guesthouse in the dark. For most of the journey this is no problem. However, once I have left the town centre, the street lighting disappears and I am left wandering around, trying to identify landmarks in the gloom. Fortunately a man bearing a torch, who knows the way, comes to my assistance and kindly escorts me to the door of the guesthouse.

Home again, I repair to my room, where I find that Niall, the English chap, has joined me, as arranged. When I creep down to the kitchen to get a glass of water, I discover that all the members of the family sleep there. There are no beds for them – just the mats on which we have sat.

On the following morning, an Australian couple and I set off on foot for the monastery of Spitok in the Indus valley. A little boy who lives in the guesthouse accompanies us to a nearby junction and indicates the way. Walking on the main road, past the military complex and airport, we can see Spitok clearly ahead. It does not seem to be far away; however, we soon discover it to be farther than we expect because of the optical illusion produced by the thin air. On we plod; it takes us an hour and a half to reach the hill on which the dazzling white gompa is located. It feels good to take a brisk walk once again; despite the filthy exhaust from passing army trucks, it is pleasant to be out at this hour of the morning.



*View from Spitok gompa*

On reaching Spitok, we climb the hill and enter the large complex of buildings that form the monastery. The flat roofs offer magnificent views of the mountains and the valley. When I enter one of the chapels, I am told to go down to the *dukhang* and

purchase a ticket. This I do, and am approached by a friendly monk who asks for thirteen rupees. I am given to understand that I will be allowed to see five chapels.



*Spitok gompa*

The *dukhang* is typically dark and mysterious. I duly admire the paintings, the rows of books and the images. As in other gompas, much of the décor includes generous applications of red paint; the other colours all tend to be gaudy. I thank the monk and, following his directions, wander to the next place of interest: another assembly hall, not unlike the first, though a little smaller. An elderly monk with bared arms and a wry grin shows me around. I discover that these monks belong to the Yellow Hat or reformed Gelugpa sect. They are a good-humoured, lively bunch of men.



*Dukhang entrance, Spitok*



*Prayer wheels, Spitok gompa*



In a small temple at the top of the hill I am surprised to discover a group of Indians praying, receiving blessings from one of the monks, and having red marks applied to their foreheads. They are also being given sweet popcorn, a small helping of which is offered to me.

On returning to the main building, I see a monk going to the roof with an elaborately decorated conch shell trumpet. I follow him and photograph him blowing it in order to call the monks to prayer. Back at the main building, a monk appears and opens several doors, allowing some tourists, a Ladakhi man with his son, and me, to enter various decorated rooms and chapels. After the tour of the rooms, I hurry to the *dukhang* but on the way pause to peep into a dark kitchen, where I can see many pots and pans, and large glowing ovens. Outside the assembly hall I find the monks seated on the ground preparing food: they are mixing flour (not *tsampa*) with water, kneading the dough into small balls, which they place in bowls of soup. It transpires that there will be a religious service, but foreigners are not permitted to attend or participate.

Disappointed to hear this, I stay for a little while and at midday make my way down to the village below. Although the houses are full of character – typical Ladakhi buildings shining brightly in the sun – there is nobody about. With the sun straight overhead and the heat being reflected from the bright stonework, it is extremely hot. As I have forgotten to bring my water bottle, I am parched.

Stumbling along, I finally reach the bottom of the hill and walk by a stream. I make my way to the main road, where I meet an Indian couple with their young child. I am delighted to learn that we may be able to travel to Leh in an army vehicle. Sure enough, a jeep soon appears and we flag it down. We clamber into the back and are driven off at speed.

We reach the capital in a very short time. When I see the Indian offering the driver some money, I offer him some too. Although what he asks for is more expensive than the bus fare, it is well worth it. The local jeep drivers obviously earn good pocket money on these roads.

I walk from the main bazaar to the Tibetan Restaurant, where once again I am greeted by the lady in charge. Today I order a 'fresh lemon' drink and a bowl of *thukpa* soup with meat. Over a relaxed lunch I chat to an Australian girl and the Indian girl whom I met yesterday.

Lunch over and a couple of teas later, I feel refreshed and ready to see the much publicized 'Marepa Show' in the Archery Stadium. This is advertised as a type of magic performance in which great stones will be broken over a man's stomach. This sounds rather improbable, and the show turns out to be rather disappointing. The place soon becomes packed; I end up being jammed in a spot where I can see very little. All around me, the local people talk, joke, laugh, and jostle in order to see the spectacle. Almost the entire performance seems to consist of preamble. I presume that an old, wizened man, who is tottering around to the rhythm of cymbals, is in a trance. The cymbals are played by an elaborately-attired man, who dances in twirling movements with the old man for some considerable time. Next come incantations with a prayer wheel, then a long chanted description of a painted *thangka*, which is produced and revealed for all to see. More dancing follows – on and on it goes. The old man retires and reappears dressed in fur, so that he resembles a fierce animal. He then lugubriously charges at the audience from different angles, as if trying to

catch somebody. This causes mock fright and great mirth – the audience clearly loves it. Although the Kashmiri police regulate the crowd with their long sticks, they too are shaking with laughter. Around me, people drink water and orangeade or chew nuts. Children squeal and clamber about, and I have to shift position in order to see what is happening.

At last, some type of climax is reached when the old man strips to the waist and, taking two swords, presses them under his belt against his stomach. He then prances around, bends over, places the handles of the swords on the ground and makes a brief attempt to balance on them. He does this several times and then varies the procedure with one blade under an armpit and another in his mouth. As the swords make absolutely no impression on his skin, I assume that they must be very blunt.

Now there is a pause, during which bags are passed around for donations. I take this opportunity to leave and buy a bottle of lemonade as I am hot and thirsty. Finally we are treated to the *pièce de résistance*: the business with the stones. As I decide that I might as well stay to see this, I fight my way back into the crowd. However, at the crucial moment, everyone surges forward so that I – and nearly everybody else – can see nothing. The show ends with general bedlam.

Unimpressed, I set off for the guesthouse. Dinner this evening consists of good, big helpings of noodles and vegetables, washed down with a bowl of *chang*. When one of the Australian girls asks for some *solja* (salted butter tea), I ask for a little; it tastes more like soup. We have newcomers: a couple of shy French fellows and two German ladies. I manage to chat to one of the French lads by speaking to him in his own language. This evening the television set is continually being switched on and off for some strange reason, which I find very distracting. I am glad to retire to bed at an early hour.